The Class Strikes Back

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The Class Strikes Back

Self-Organised Workers' Struggles in the Twenty-First Century

Edited by

Dario Azzellini
Michael G. Kraft

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: A Return to the Shop-Floor or How to Confront Neoliberal Capitalism

Dario Azzellini and Michael G. Kraft

The last couple of years have seen an outburst in and a renewal of ideas and practices of radical democracy. From 2008 onwards, protests, riots and uprisings have erupted all over the world (from Tahrir to Taksim). As a direct response to neoliberal capitalism and post-democratic governance, new strategies and subjects of resistance have appeared. These new forms of workers' organisation and struggle have been precursors as well as part of these protest movements and have in turn been influenced by them. While traditional unionism based on a bureaucratic apparatus mediating between workers and capital is often no longer able even to defend past labour movement achievements against the generalised attack of capital, workers have shown all over the world how to wage offensive struggles. Their means of struggle range from innovative blockade and strike practices to workplace occupations and recuperations,[1] and their far-reaching effects include the initation of popular uprisings, as in Bosnia (see Milan, this volume), and decisive contributions to the toppling of government, as in Egypt (see Alexander and Bassiouny, this volume).[2]

The strength and ability of these movements to resist is grounded – despite all differences among them – mostly in being shop-floor based. They use horizontal forms of decision-making and direct action, and build networks and alliances with communities and other movements and struggles, as is pointed out by the contributions in this volume. Although a lot has been published on the recent insurrections and revolts since 2008 from a social-movements' perspective, little attention has been paid to new forms of labour struggle and organising within and around these movements. On the other hand debate and research on labour struggles have been overwhelmingly and unduly focused on conventional unionism in the framework of institutionalised labour conflict.[3]

1 See Azzellini 2015; Ness and Azzellini 2011.

2 See Alexander and Bassiouny 2014.

3 See Gall 2009; Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2013.

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Part of scholarly work has focused on new forms of labour struggle and a growing precariat, but most of it consists of single case studies without situating them in a broader and international social and political context.[4]

Hence, this volume draws attention to the vital yet neglected sphere of new democratic labour movements in the twenty-first century. *The Class Strikes Back* is a global and up-to-date collection of radical workers' struggles that show a different kind of unionism and solidarity, able to cope with new forms of labour conditions and social and economic marginalisation. The volume embeds different autonomous workers' struggles in a broader picture of resistance and emancipation in the context of the new global protest cycle. These forms of organisation developed by the workers on the shop-floor tell us a different story on workers' resistance than mainstream media and trade unions. As Gramsci has stated regarding unions and parties, even revolutionary ones:

> These organisations are born on the terrain of bourgeois democracy and political liberty, as developments of political freedom … During the economic and political predominance of the bourgeois class, the real unfolding of the revolutionary process happens underground, in the darkness of the factory, in the obscurity of the consciousness of the countless multitudes that capitalism subjugates to its laws.[5]

A story that is also recounted by the French philosopher Jacques Rancière in his studies on the formation of a working class in nineteenth-century France:

> The genuinely dangerous classes were perhaps less those savages supposedly undermining the basement of society than the migrants who moved on the boundaries between classes.[6]

In his vivid portrait of nineteenth-century workers who used the night to write verses, Rancière hints at the fact that, for these workers, engaging in intellectual pursuits meant a displacement from their worker identity. Such a disidentification demonstrated the urge to change their form of existence and the belief that 'another world is possible'. Although nineteenth-century workers' struggle had its contradictory aspects, it appears that the ideas, hopes and longings of a working class fighting against exploitation and capitalist domination

4 See Johnson 2014; Ness 2014.

5 Antonio Gramsci quoted in Giachetti 1972, pp. 157–8.

6 Rancière 2011, p. 181.

have long been discarded in the dustbin of history, while neoliberal advocates pave the way for capital's relentless, high-speed progress. However, any such statement as to the end of working-class politics either points in the wrong direction[7] or overlooks at least two important issues. First, we need to be aware that in these discussions the geographical focus is limited to industrialised countries, and thus analysis omits the mass-mobilising potential of the workers' movement in emerging economies (see Kumar and Samaddar; Sinwell; Olaya, this volume). Second, as mentioned above, a recomposition of struggles has taken place around the new global protest cycle. Non-representative organising is increasingly called for in opposition to the politics of representation,[8] which leads to present-day workers' struggles acquiring a new and different face.

Looking at the recent past, one is inclined to ask whether the development of the industrialised countries after World War II, with its moderation between the demands of labour and capital, has actually been the exception. Without any doubt, in the three decades following World War II – also known as the 'Golden Age of Capitalism' in Western societies – social-democratic policies helped to counter the harms of capitalism by implementing a comprehensive system of publicly funded social insurance as well as the provision of an expansive set of public goods – a vision spelled out in 1930 in a short essay by economist John Maynard Keynes called 'Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren'.[9] However, with Keynes turning a blind eye to power relations,[10] the journey towards a more humane economic system was short-lived and exclusive. From a critical perspective one could argue that the corporatist model of collective bargaining and trade unions attached to the big political parties was a comfortable framework for undermining any demands brought forward by the rank and file for the democratic control of production. Has the social democratic approach of taming capitalism by employing well-crafted, anti-cyclical state policies come to an end? If we look at recent figures one is inclined to subscribe to this view. Over the last 20 years we have seen a widening gap between wage and capital income. Even the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) – traditionally known for its neoliberal structural policy advice – has recently stated in a report that '[t]he rise of "the super-rich" has led to warnings about the risks of rent-seeking and political and economic

7 See Evens 1999; Crouch, 1999.

8 See Sitrin and Azzellini 2013.

9 Keynes 1930.

10 See Galbraith 1973.

"capture" by the economic elite'.[11] And regarding possible solutions, the report even goes on to say that '[b]ecause the rise in inequality is so deeply embedded in our economic structures, it will be hard to reverse it'.[12]

Given austerity politics and crisis management following the 2008 global economic collapse,[13] it can be rightfully assumed that any such change is unlikely to emerge from within the system of representative politics, since the ruling political caste is heavily entrenched, not to mention subverted by the interests of capital. Moreover, despite some successes in Latin America, recent history has shown that taming capitalist accumulation and redistributing some of its fruits to broader swaths of society is a rather temporary phenomenon based on higher prices for traditional exports. But in the end this does not bring along a structural change and – as pointed out in the chapter on Venezuela – '[t]he fruit of dependency can hence not be anything else than more dependency, and its abolition requires necessarily the suppression of the relations of production it entails'.[14] The left and centre-left governments in Latin America could not overcome the logic embedded in capitalist development and its power relations.

In order to understand these developments one has to enrich analysis with an inquiry into the establishment of an intellectual superstructure and a neoliberal hegemony that nowadays reach deeply into everyday lives as well as concrete developments and political decisions taken at a global level, and which have paved the way for structural reforms, the privatisation of public enterprises, deregulation of markets, the liberalisation of labour and financial markets, the reduction of public subsidies, etc.[15] We strongly believe that all these ingredients add to a new global resurgence of workers' protests and struggles worldwide.

The Deadlock of Traditional Unionism and the Search for a (New) Political Subject

Traditional unions are part of the institutional setting to maintain capitalism. They reached their highest peak of power during the Fordist decades. On the one hand, this is because the more radical workers' struggles and tendencies

11 OECD 2015, p. 21.
12 Ibid.
13 See Broumas, Ioakimoglou and Haritakis, this volume.
14 Marini 1991.
15 See Mirowski 2014; Kraft 2009.

placed high pressure on the entrepreneurs and the capitalist system; therefore employers preferred to deal with traditional unions to undermine workers' autonomy and reproduce the representative system. On the other hand, the capitalist system needed a reliable workers' mass that would stick to agreements and therefore provide the employers with a more accurate planning capacity. Since then the parameters have changed drastically. During the last two or three decades the traditional unions have mainly been battling against rollbacks – or even just to limit cuts to workers' rights, payment etc. – and have not achieved any new rights or advantages for workers. In many situations they have been forced by their rank-and-file workers to act, and often they negotiated agreements with the bosses that lagged behind the goals and expectations of workers. In social conflicts they barely appeared on the scene, though sometimes they jumped on protests and attempted to take the lead in processes organised under the initiative of rank-and-file activists or other movements.

Neoliberalism and the new production model often called 'post-Fordist' have caused the integrated factories that assembled every single step of the production process to disappear. With transport costs ever more in decline, international division of labour and just-in-time production have reached new heights. Work is no longer a homogenising factor helping to constitute workers' unity and class-consciousness. The new production model has created a huge variety of labour conditions and fragmented the working class. The old bureaucratic union model is slowly perishing, together with the Fordist society of which it was a part and the social democratic parties it allied with. Thus there has been a lot of debate regarding the demise of the working class as political subject in industrialised countries. Some have argued that it is now to be found in the developing and emerging economies where industrial production has been offshored, and others are seeking for new political subjectivities as a new class concept.[16] Although there is some truth in these arguments, one also needs to take a closer look at what is currently going on at different levels and in various corners of the world – a task *The Class Strikes Back* tries to accomplish.

Obviously there are numerous examples of unions and workers' struggles these days, and there have always been diverse approaches. Despite all the limitations trade unions are facing, Staughton and Alice Lynd remind us that

> [T]he purpose of labor unions is to help workers sell their labor power as advantageously as they can. Unions will always be needed for this purpose. But while unions are necessary, they are not sufficient.[17]

16 As Hardt and Negri 2004, p. 103 state: 'Multitude is a class concept'.

17 Lynd and Lynd 2000, p. 1.

Today, in times of economic and political crisis – a systemic crisis of reproduction, as many critical Marxists and radical leftists would argue – the unions did not only start to mobilise very late (more than a year after other social movements), but their traditional practices also often proved ineffective. On the contrary, and in the same period, autonomous workers' struggles without the established unions and workers pushing their own unions have been popping up all over the world (see particularly Curcio; Lydersen; Oostinga, this volume). This accumulation of historical experience of radical union practices gains more importance every day.

Hence this volume aims to examine how new, anti-bureaucratic forms of syndicalist, neo-syndicalist and autonomous workers' organisation emerge in response to changing work and production relations in the twenty-first century. Capital's relentless effort to transform the organised workplace has accelerated the deterioration of institutionalised national collective bargaining as the dominant model for worker representation. New forms of workers' organisations rooted in self-activity and often committed to anti-capitalism organise labour struggles where conventional unions have proven ineffective or even never tried to organise struggles (see Dinler; Oostinga, this volume). This self-organisation is also increasing the democratic capacity of workers to advance their own interests and the needs of their communities.

This collection critically examines the rise of contemporary forms of workers' organisation, with examples drawn from throughout the world. It challenges the widespread vision that the best means to counter neoliberalism or austerity is to reinvigorate conventional unionism. It also contests the pessimist view that in times of neoliberalism and crisis workers' struggles have little hope of success. The different chapters demonstrate the alternative means that many workers are pursuing to advance their own interests through self-organisation, as the heirs of the earlier generations of socialist, communist and anarchist labour struggles.[18] This adds new successes and defeats to the vast history of autonomous workers' movements – but at the end of the day what remains are new insights and experiences of common struggle and solidarity which can be shared, and which could pave a way for a future without capitalism.

18 For a history of syndicalist and self-organised workers' movements see Azzellini 2015; Ness and Azzellini 2011.

Reviving Labour History – Autonomous Workers' Struggles

This volume is a collection of examples of the recent development of independent class-oriented unions and struggles in different countries. As mentioned above, the global transformation of relations of production and the decline in trade union power over the last 30 years of ascendant neoliberal economic policy has led to the configuration of new forms of worker organisation that use tactics, pursue goals and design strategies that differ strongly from traditional institutionalised union politics. The new forms of worker organisation that we are concerned with are typically rooted in class solidarity that emerges at the workplace and in neighbourhood communities. In the twenty-first century they seek to fight factory closures, precarious labour relations, segmentation based on ethnicity or origin as well as bureaucratisation of their organisation by cultivating democratic structures at the point of production. They challenge capitalists, authorities and traditional unions with concrete forms of solidarity and struggle.

Given the (unprecedented) economic crisis of 2008 and its ongoing repercussions, such novel forms of worker organisation are emerging in very different contexts all over the globe. Although they have a lot in common, the analysis must be adjusted to the specific contexts, since resistances are situated locally. Thus, every single case study examines the context of local histories, conditions and the spatially and temporally located balance of power. The collection sheds light on the socio-economic and cultural specificities while subsequently embedding the struggle in a broader picture of resistance and fight for emancipation. It focuses on country studies and specific case studies in both the Global South as well as the Global North (from India to Colombia, South Africa, the Balkans, Italy, Germany, USA, Egypt, etc.) The different chapters demonstrate the dramatic growth of syndicalist and autonomist formations and the necessity of establishing genuine worker organisations. They reveal that workers seek to form and join democratic and independent unions that are fundamentally opposed to bureaucratic leadership, compromise, and concessions: the *sine qua non* of traditional unions throughout the world.

Workers' Self-Organisation beyond and against Corporative Unions and the State

The first section of the volume deals with workers' struggles against and beyond (bureaucratic, mediating and corrupted) trade unions and state repression or co-optation. Mithilesh Kumar and Ranabir Samaddar start with an account of

the militant struggles of workers in the automobile sector of Maruti Suzuki in Gurgaon-Manesar and migrant workers in hot-rolling steel factories in Wazirpur, India. They reflect on the implications of globalisation of production and casualised labour for workers' rights and compensation, i.e. meagre wages, widespread use of contract-labour, authoritarian work rules, and systematic victimisation of militant workers. They also highlight that the state is complicit with capital:

> The issue at the heart of this new art [of governance] is how to govern conditions of production without producing a subject or producing a normative phenomenon (poverty in this case) instead of defining a worker whose rights have to be protected by the state in face of an onslaught by global capital.[19]

Workers at Maruti Suzuki's Manesar car assembly plant have waged a determined struggle with the aim of registering an independent union, the Maruti Suzuki Employee Union. The primary demands of the workers were the right to unionise and that all contractual and temporary workers should be made permanent. When seeking support from central trade unions and *khap panchayat* – the union of a few villages – it became clear that central trade unions tend to reproduce a form of bureaucratic functioning which resulted in a split between leaders and the rank and file – a tendency which often leads to the betrayal of the interests of the struggling workers. The authors subsequently raise the question 'whether the idea of *autonomy* is the best conceptual tool to understand today's workers' movements that are often displaying new ways of organisation, mobilisation, and a new consciousness'.[20] As a way forward for analysis they propose to scrutinise the issue of *autonomy* dialectically 'in the context of society, economics, and most importantly the strategy and tactics of proletarian politics'.[21]

Luke Sinwell goes on to tell the traumatic story of 16 August 2012, when South African police opened fire on a large crowd of men who had walked out on strike from a platinum mine at Marikana, about 80 miles north of Johannesburg. They shot down 112 miners, killing 34. It was the bloodiest massacre by South African security forces since the end of racial apartheid and arguably marked a key turning point in South African history. The author draws

19 Kumar and Samaddar, this volume.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.

on extensive workers' testimonies and ethnographic research. He details how mineworkers united with each other and, in some cases, died while fighting for their rights. He illuminates how the idea of a 'living wage' of R12,500 first emerged and then spread like wildfire across the industry and soon shook an entire nation. Mineworkers, through their ad hoc, independent worker committees, challenged the 'pocket unionism' exemplified by the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), thereby instilling a new radical political culture at the mines – one based on workers' needs rather than bosses' interests and informed by notions of direct democracy.

The next contribution takes us to the crisis-ridden European Union member-state Greece. Antonios Broumas, Elias Ioakimoglou and Kostas Charitakis provide an overview of the recent economic model of Greece, the austerity measures imposed after the economic crisis and the way the crisis of capitalism has further discredited conventional unionism. By analysing labour struggles in Greece during the past five years they highlight how the crisis has also helped to reconstruct the forces of resistance within labour. They are now more interrelated with and embedded in wider social movements and the aspirations of the oppressed classes. The authors illustrate these developments by (1) discussing the phenomenon of general strikes as a distinct form of labour struggle during the crisis, (2) identifying events of labour struggle which have acquired increased significance due to their social and political impact, and (3) analysing the specificities of grassroots labour struggles. A case study is also dedicated to Vio.Me, a recuperated factory in Salonica, Greece. The authors finally point to the interrelations of labour and wider social struggles and call for 'the formulation of hybrid social/labour communities of struggle as the necessary step forward for the labour movement in Greece'.[22]

Dario Azzellini closes the section with an account of the contradictions and different interests that workers struggling for workers' control are being confronted with in Venezuela, where the government declares itself socialist and in favour of workers' control. But while government rhetoric has been in favour of workers' control, the workers' experience in recuperated factories, nationalised companies and generally state-owned companies – which are supposed to be under workers' control or at least on the path towards it – is that the ministerial bureaucracy is sabotaging workers' efforts. Therefore in recent years struggles for workers' control in Venezuela have erupted in various state-managed companies, which, following official promises, should be under workers' control, but in fact are not. Moreover many of these companies and

22 Broumas, Ioakimoglou and Charitakis, this volume.

workers see themselves as the guarantee of 'production for the people', and accuse government bureaucracy of being at best inefficient and unprepared, and at worst of being corrupt and beholden to a private capitalist agenda. The chapter resumes the problematic of Venezuela's rentier economy, which is at the root of the economic and political distortion of the country and an obstacle for its transformation, and it subsequently provides an account of the development of the movement for workers' control and respective government policies. Azzellini analyses the success and failure of workers' control initiatives and government politics in different areas, and finally presents a model which involves both community and workers' control.

Non-Corporate Unionism and Social Movements

On 5 December 2008 Richard Gillman abruptly closed the Republic Windows and Doors factory on Goose Island in the Chicago River, putting almost 300 workers out of a job during the holiday season in the midst of the economic crisis, denying them their legally due severance pay and cutting off their health insurance. Kari Lydersen recounts the stirring story of Chicago workers at the Republic Windows and Doors factory, members of United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE) Local 1110, and their plant occupation in December 2008. She shows that behind the sit-down was tireless organising by workers and their union. Lydersen brings the energy of the workers' struggle alive while offering poignant lessons to unions, community organisers, and other fighters for social justice in the context of the global economic meltdown. It is a tale of an unlikely triumph, a victory for workers that might not have happened in a different context where people were not as sympathetic to laid-off employees. Rank-and-file democracy coupled with a dedication to struggle from the side of UE proved a success story for Republic Windows and Doors workers – a 'Chicago Christmas Carol' that needs to be told, as Congressman Luis Gutierrez rightly said.

Collective action by organised workers played a fundamental role in the Egyptian revolution, which erupted after years of strikes and social protests. Yet this aspect of the revolutionary process has received little attention from researchers until now. Drawing on their decade-long experience of reporting on and researching the Egyptian labour movement, Anne Alexander and Mostafa Bassiouny provide an in-depth account of the emergence of the independent unions during Mubarak's last years in power. They trace the pivotal role of the workers in the succession of events that led to the 2011 uprising and the subsequent unfolding of the revolutionary process. The fact that the

existing unions were an extension of state bureaucracy led to the workers' struggles growing into new, independent unions. Often these were led by activists searching for new forms of organisation that would be free of the limitations imposed by the state and led by the rank and file, with a leadership held accountable to the membership. The authors trace the growth of these important unions, noting however the difficulties in sustaining these models of workplace and industrial organisation when struggle subsided under the impact of the counter-revolution, or when the actions of international NGOs helped to impose a Western model on the movement. In doing so, they exhibit the 'tense and complex relationship between democratic and bureaucratic forms of organisation in the Egyptian workers' movement'.[23]

Failed privatisations, rampant unemployment and a thoroughly inefficient and unaccountable political system have for a long time characterised the nation states formed after the breakdown of Yugoslavia. Taking the example of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Chiara Milan scrutinises the events unfolding after 5 February 2014, when laid-off workers of five bankrupted factories took to the streets to get back their unpaid pensions and health insurance. Shortly afterwards, riots exploded across the country in the biggest protest wave that Bosnia has witnessed since the end of the war, which subsequently became known as the Bosnian Spring. What started as workers' protests quickly spread all over the country and was joined by the citizens of Bosnia, channelling their rage into horizontal and self-organised assemblies called plenums. They mushroomed throughout the country and surfaced in as many as 24 cities and towns. New grassroot movements, assemblies and unions arose and in their togetherness and solidarity people showed that the 'ethnic card' of dividing them – a strategy employed by local elites so perfectly over the last decades – could not be played any longer. Although participation in the rallies faded away several months after the revolt, and the flood that hit the country a few months later appears to have wiped out the new experiments in collective self-organisation, the protests and plenums of the Bosnian Spring contributed to activate solidarity and create networks as well as to openly confront nationalism and neoliberalism. The laid-off workers of Tuzla founded an independent trade union called *Solidarnost* (Solidarity), aimed at uniting workers with various professional backgrounds and across ethnic boundaries. Given their previous experiences with conventional means of representation they started 'to organise autonomously following a pattern that challenged both previous models of workers' uni-

23 Alexander and Bassiouny, this volume.

ons and ethnic divides'.[24] Milan concludes that it is hard to predict whether the Bosnian Spring will develop into a full-fledged, long-term social movement, or whether it will pave the way for the formation of a political party, as happened in Slovenia and in Spain. Nevertheless, the uprising had an 'empowering effect on all these people who refuse to align with the dominant rhetoric of ethnic hatred and deem it necessary to fight in the name of social and economic justice'.[25]

Social and economic justice have for a long time been at the core of Colombian trade union Sinaltrainal.[26] The union regroups mostly workers from the Colombian food industry of transnational corporations such as Coca Cola, Nestlé, Unilever, etc. Right from its foundation in 1982 the union has attempted to transform the workers' movement in Colombia. Their cause became known all over the world through major national and international campaigns against Coca-Cola ('The Campaign to Stop Killer Coke') and Nestlé, which were accused of being guilty of threats and violent attacks on trade unionists. Carlos Olaya provides insights into union organising and strategies in a context of state repression and transnational corporations working with paramilitary groups to remove union activists and workers from factories through assassinations and intimidation. He points to the need to expose the interplay of different mechanisms and layers of capitalist exploitation in order to push forward the emancipatory potential of trade union activism. At the end of it could be the 'abolishment of paramilitarism, demilitarisation of society, exercise of a real, direct democracy and effective protection by the state of all the people's rights'.[27]

Drawing on the legacy of the anarcho-syndicalist Free Workers' Union Germany (Freie Arbeiter-Union Deutschlands – FAUD), Hansi Oostinga discusses the recent labour conflict at Berlin Babylon cinema. Since dreadful working conditions were constantly being ignored by traditional trade unions, employees turned to the anarcho-syndicalist union FAU (Freie Arbeiterinnen- und Arbeiter-Union – Free Workers' Union) for support. Although at the basis of the struggle were issues of lack of adequate labour representation, low pay and poor working conditions, the fight soon transcended the labour dispute and opened up a public discussion on the role of trade unions and their mandate, when on 11 December 2009 the FAU was prohibited from calling itself a union

24 Milan, this volume.

25 Ibid.

26 Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Industria de Alimentos (National Union of Food Industry Workers).

27 Olaya, this volume.

by Berlin's regional court. Rarely seen in Germany, with its strong corporatist tradition, this labour conflict stands out in that it has been built on the direct participation of the workers, who have developed innovative demands and methods of struggle. It also shows that autonomous organising is promising in small businesses with a high number of casual and part-time workers who are neglected by big unions.

Renewed Forms of Struggle and Workers' Self-Management

Given the difficult context and environment for trade union organising in Turkey, Demet Şahende Dinler scrutinises new paths of unionising and mobilisations pursued since 2000. The examples discussed are characterised by flexible associations and networks which did not have legal structures and were thus easy to establish. It is remarkable that they were mainly led by independent activists or workers' leaders intervening in informal labour (waste pickers, migrant labour, domestic workers, seafarers, etc.) which was neglected by traditional trade unions. In a case study on Kazova the author examines the fight for self-management of an abandoned textiles factory in Istanbul, critically discussing the characteristic features, organising methods, international solidarity networks as well as its connection to the Gezi protests which erupted in May 2013. Despite a lot of promising signs and palpable success, the struggles are still fragmented, nascent and fragile in character. Thus, Dinler concludes that although 'there is great potential to exploit in the emerging labour struggles in Turkey, none of them is strong enough to contribute to the building of a robust and organic labour movement'.[28]

Indonesia's labour movement has been reignited since a popular mass movement ousted Suharto in 1998 in the aftermath of the Asian crisis. Newly emerging, genuinely independent and democratic trade unions are now competing with old authoritarian state unions over members and influence. The resulting trade union landscape is extremely diverse and fragmented. It ranges from employer-dominated or state-led 'yellow unions', reformed or progressive unions modelling themselves around social-democratic ideas, to radical unions championing explicitly anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist goals and radical, militant, class-based strategies. Drawing on qualitative fieldwork, Hauf analyses the emergence of the newly established National Union Confederation (KSN)

28 Dinler, this volume.

from a Cultural Political Economy perspective.[29] He shows that radical imaginaries of class struggle and workers' control informing the strategies and practices of KSN have historical forerunners in the time after independence, surviving violent repression under Suharto and re-emerging in the Reformasi era. Moreover, the KSN seeks to link urban struggles to rural struggles such as occupied plantations through the larger Indonesian People's Movements Confederation (KPRI), bringing together labour unions, peasants' and fishermen's organisations as well as women's and indigenous people's movements, and aiming to build 'solidarity economies' beyond capitalism.

It has often been argued that the cooperative system could further the demands for workers' self-management. However, such a model does not per se contribute to workers' emancipation. In Italy, once famous for its huge cooperative networks, exactly the opposite is the case. Drawing on the logistics and warehousing sector in the Po Valley, Anna Curcio shows that the coop model has been integrated into the capitalist just-in-time system in order to exploit cheap migrant labour and to circumvent labour law and social obligations. Workers employed in these cooperatives neither enjoy any sort of social security protection nor labour rights, as cooperatives are not subject to the national collective labour contract. Thus Curcio identifies 'the coop model [as] the new paradigm of precarious labour organisation in Italy'.[30] Cooperatives in the logistics sector have been transformed into the spearhead of precarisation and exploitation, relying on a mainly migrant labour force contributing to the racialisation of labour. Curcio shows how this new labour force organised itself in and with existing rank and file labour unions and conducted impressive strikes and struggles against their 'cooperative' employers.

Another sector which is characterised by low wages, bad working conditions and the exploitation of a mainly migrant workforce is the cleaning sector. Outsourcing labour to other companies has become widespread practice. In 2004 Latin American cleaners working in London's financial district began unionising and founded the Latin American Workers' Association (LAWAS). Their struggle for acceptable working conditions and equality at the workplace was fuelled by the accomplishments of the 'Justice for Janitors' campaign in the USA. At the same time a group called London Citizens attempted to emulate the successes of 'Justice for Janitors' and set up the campaign for the London Living Wage. The Living Wage is a minimum wage calculated by the campaign as the amount necessary to be able to live in London above the poverty line.

29 Jessop and Sum 2012.
30 Curcio, this volume.

Apart from forcing companies such as Barclays and Goldman Sachs eventually to promise the living wage, Wigand argues that the 'greatest success was to lead the cleaners out of their invisibility and make them conscious of their own numbers and strength'.[31] However, worker victories often come with institutional backlash and certain tensions in organisational terms: the cleaners started out with a community organisation (LAWAS), then turned to a professional union (Transport & General Workers Union), subsequently pursuing a syndicalist approach to union organisation (Industrial Workers of the World) and finally establishing a new union organisation (International Workers of Great Britain). Based on various interviews with union activists and cleaners, Wigand identifies as one of the main challenges that the 'London Cleaners' struggle is characterised by extremely low power of production, which can be compensated only by a high degree of public pressure. This is exceedingly difficult to maintain permanently'.[32] Nevertheless, renewed protests and direct action at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London show that the struggle is far from being over.

To conclude, even if some of the common experiences of labour struggles covered in this volume have succumbed to the surrounding capitalist environment, they nevertheless point both to the persistence with which direct democracy is pursued – also in the sphere of production – and its potential as a real alternative to the current system of capitalist exploitation. In that sense the struggles and case studies discussed in this volume add valuable insights and need to be read in relation to a long history of labour organisation worldwide:

> [T]here is little need to spell out in detail how the way people live now under the contemporary form of capitalism – with the collapse of the labor market, the growth of the informal economy, and the undermining systems of social solidarity throughout the overdeveloped world – bears more than a passing resemblance to the working conditions of the laborers and artisans of the nineteenth century who made the Commune, most of whom spent most of their time not working but looking for work.[33]

31 Wigand, this volume.

32 Ibid.

33 Ross 2015, p. 3.

PART 1

Workers' Self-Organisation beyond and against Corporative Unions and the State

CHAPTER 2

Workers' Struggles and Autonomy: Strategic and Tactical Considerations

Mithilesh Kumar and Ranabir Samaddar

Introduction

Workers' struggles in Gurgaon-Manesar in the last decade have caught the attention of political activists and trade union organisers throughout India and abroad. Political parties of the left, however, are still to come out with a full analysis of the dynamics of the struggle and the lessons for the left. Praise for the workers, astonishment at their perseverance, and a sense of local solidarity seem to be the main response of the left. There have been hardly any meetings on this issue in states like West Bengal where the left was traditionally strong, and their trade union following claimed to be massive. This is partly because the left does not know what to say in such meetings beyond offering the expected words of solidarity and sympathy. They do not know how to respond and relate to a situation which is not of their own making but which is resplendent with all the glory and tragedy associated with the classical left. Is this un-decidability about the nature and organisation of the workers' movement what we call 'autonomy'?

Workers' struggles around the globe are entering a new phase of militancy. It can be said that new forms of struggle are emerging in the era of globalisation of production and increasing casualisation of work. Several new neologisms have come up to describe the condition of work. Some of the more popular ones are precarious work, precariat, and the more familiar phrases like unorganised and informal workers, and informal work conditions. There have also been attempts to come up with new methods of organising workers under contemporary conditions, in which the organised sector is supposedly becoming increasingly fragmented, with lean production or just-in-time production becoming the normal production method and shop-floors becoming increasingly redundant as a site of both production and mobilisation. Even where the shop-floor is important, as in the automobile sector, the worker is now a mere appendage of the machine, and has to tune himself to the iron rhythm of the robot. The ideal worker, it seems, is one who can transform him/herself into one of the cogs of a huge machine. Perhaps what we witness now is not so much a

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clear division between formal and informal work conditions as a mix of the two, and a gradual transformation of shop-floor conditions in the direction of precariousness. After all, the Gurgaon-Manesar unrest happened in a so-called organised branch of industry – the automobile sector, where production is happening on high-tech shop-floors, with cutting-edge machinery increasing productivity to a level hitherto unseen – which is nevertheless marked and permeated by rudimentary work conditions that are reminiscent of household industry. The workers' blog *Gurgaon Workers News* has noted that the supply chain of Maruti starts in Mujesar, a village in Faridabad.

Often automobile parts have many tiers to pass through before they end up at the Maruti or Hero Honda main factory. For example, rubber hoses for carburettors arrive in the form of rubber blocks in Mujesar, a village in Faridabad surrounded by industry. What remains of the village is the scattered layout of the small one-storey shanty huts with cows and goats in front. The rest has been transformed by the industry. Inside the huts people work on 1970s laces of German origin, turning metal or working on antique power presses. Maruti's supply-chain starts here.[1] Gurgaon-Manesar has transformed the entire area into a social factory – not metaphorically but in reality, thus turning the battle at Maruti into one for the command and occupation of the social factory. The Maruti struggle showed the significance of the idea of 'factory and beyond'.

In a substantial sense, industrialisation at Gurgaon-Manesar represents the new type of industrialisation and the financial circulation characteristic of this age of globalisation. In most of the factories, the formation of unions was prohibited for a long time. In the plants producing automobile parts, production standards have been set in tune with the production needs of the car-producing plants in the United States and elsewhere. If work stops at Gurgaon-Manesar or occurs at a lesser speed, this will hamper the wages, salaries, and comfort level of the employees in the USA, though more importantly it will affect the global profit margin in the industry. Perhaps economists will have to rack their brains to find out how much of the present rise in productivity has been due to development of machinery and how much due to an intensification of the physical efforts of the workers, by tying them to the rhythm of the second, minute, and hour, and grouping them in such a way that the work rhythm is not interrupted due to the absence of the worker, howsoever small the period of that absence may be. But then the calculations of the productivity of the body have always been an impossible question for political economy.

1 http://gurgaonworkersnews.wordpress.com/gurgaonworkersnews-no3/#fn1.

The issues arising from this phenomenon are: What are the challenges the working-class movement faces in uniting the workers who are segmented and marked by the vagaries and irregular frequencies across the supply chain? What should be the location and site for working-class struggle when the shop-floor condition shrinks or becomes precarious? How do the workers mobilise and organise? What will be the method or approach of the political organisers? Does this entire situation produce the cry for autonomy? All these questions lead us to a critical discussion of the call from certain quarters for the 'autonomy' of the working-class movement.

In this article we shall analyse the making of two workers' struggles in the peri-urban areas of Delhi: the Maruti struggle and the struggle of workers in the un-organised sector in Wazirpur. These struggles in two industries where working conditions are in stark contrast to each other have some important similarities. These similarities point to major tendencies in the working-class movement of the present day.

However, before we begin our analyses of these two movements we have to take note of the fact that the state is aware of the problem of the unruly worker working in precarious labour processes. In fact, one of the central problems of statecraft in the present era is how to govern unruly, often militant, population groups working in extremely uncertain conditions. Every other day we hear news of the murder of a factory official, of workers raiding a company or plant office, of the sudden disappearance of a worker or of a labourer working in precious conditions who has committed suicide. The state is also aware of all these developments and has taken into cognisance the problem of the unorganised sector and unorganised workers. With the establishment and recommendation of the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector the state has come up with a novel idea. The question of the worker is transformed into a question of the poor. The original question of the nature of work and the work process is displaced. While the Commission report conceptualises both the informal sector and the informal worker from various angles, it avoids the issue of capital and linkages of informal production to the organised and unorganised market of capital and commodity. Therefore it has no alternative but to turn to the concept of poverty as a means of solving the problem. Thus, instead of asking the question of who is a precarious worker or what constitutes precarious working conditions, the Commission goes on a statistical tangent by quantifying the labouring poor. As a result, first the distinction between peasant and industrial worker and between domestic work and factory work, along with several other such crucial distinctions, collapses; and second, the recommendations essentially boil down to anti-poverty recommendations, while the state's own machinery to protect the rights of the unorganised worker remains

woefully inadequate. This is a novel development in the art of governance. The issue at the heart of this new art is how to govern conditions of production without producing a subject or producing a normative phenomenon (poverty in this case), instead of defining a worker whose rights have to be protected by the state in the face of an onslaught by global capital. To put the dilemma more concretely, how to normalise the figure of the unorganised worker through social measures, while allowing and in fact facilitating the uncertain conditions of work in the wake of globalisation? The dilemma characterised the response of the state to workers' protests in Delhi.

Struggles at Maruti: Changing Faces of Labour and Capital

The history of Maruti is a fascinating one on two counts. It began operation as a state-owned company (Maruti Udyog Limited) with its model Maruti 800 in 1983. In the final decade of the welfare state it was the car every member of the middle class aspired to. It acquired a brand loyalty unmatched in the automobile sector. In other words, it was one of the success stories among the state-owned enterprises, despite the perception that these enterprises, on account of being state-owned, were inefficient and loss-making. With the economic liberalisation of 1991, Maruti saw a gradual transformation from a public-sector undertaking to a joint-sector company and finally to a privately owned company. With Suzuki Motor Company of Japan at the helm now, Maruti not only saw a transfer of ownership, but perhaps the first experiment with just-in-time production or what was then called the Toyota system of production.[2] In such a system, a worker was told how many times he could go to the toilet, and for how many seconds or minutes. How much time would a worker standing in front of the belt need to drink water? How much could you talk with the fellow worker standing next in the assembly line?

This demanded a new kind of workforce pliable to a particular regime of production. This fact is extremely important in any analysis of subsequent struggles at Maruti. Maruti now has two manufacturing units – one at Gurgaon and another at Manesar, the site of the militant struggle of 2012–13. However, the first wave of struggle at Maruti came about in 2000–1, during a period of transition, as older workers were trying to come to grips with the new management and new production system. This period also saw an unprecedented rise in productivity at the factory. This first struggle was important in the

2 People's Union for Democratic Rights 2001.

history of the conflict, because in many ways it set the template for the subsequent demands as well as the question of the struggle's strategy and tactics. The struggle began with the question of incentive wages, which the management unilaterally changed, abandoning the method of calculation on the basis of savings of labour-cost and introducing in its place calculation on the basis of productivity per direct worker.[3] The agitation started on 8 September 2000 with the decision to wear black badges, to shout slogans and conduct gate meetings. After a general body meeting, the union decided on collective action that included a tool-down strike, assembly, and a collective hunger strike, and wrote to the management calling for a union-management meeting. When there was no response from the management the workers began their tool-down strike of two hours in each shift. In response, the management started to dismiss and suspend workers. On 12 October 2000 the management imposed on the workers the condition that they would have to sign an undertaking of good conduct in order to enter the factory. This particular strategy was to be used later over and over again by the management of Maruti. There was a lockout from 12 October. By mid-December the workers realised that their agitation was being ignored. It was then that the union took the decision to move their agitation to Delhi and started a sit-in demonstration in the winter chill in front of Udyog Bhawan. This created a stir in the parliament and government had to intervene, as Maruti was still a joint-sector company. A settlement was reached and the good conduct undertaking was withdrawn, but only a few workers who were dismissed were taken back.[4] However, what came to the fore were some of the tactics which would be deployed later against any workers' agitation. It was during this period when the workforce at Maruti became increasingly casualised, with contract workers and apprentices being recruited in large numbers. In fact, during this first phase of struggle they were used to continue production at the factory.

The particular labour process and the production regime put in place in this period was marked by intensification of social control of the workers. Apart from the usual management steps, such as disallowing union formation, suspending workers at will, handing over rebellious workers to the police, and restricting physical movement of a worker in the plant, social control was buttressed from the outside. The rural rich gentry all around, the upper caste kulaks, and the wise elders of the nearby settlements all supported the company bosses. Not only did these sectors profit hugely from the increasing

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

financialisation and consequent sale of land for the special economic zone, but the money was then invested in building up the kind of ties with business there in various ways. Some have invested the money to build palatial houses – at times as resorts for the super-rich from outside – while some have built hutments for the workers – all as matter of business. Some have invested in the high-end restaurant business or luxury retail. Some are contractors to build roads, some have engaged in the supply of building material. Some are simply agents in the sale of land and other property. This moneyed class is the mainstay of the *mahapanchayat* (village governing body) of the Gurgaon-Manesar area. In most cases the *mahapanchayat* supported the Maruti owners in all these years. Not surprisingly, years later when the great Maruti unrest broke out and the fleeing workers wanted shelter in nearby villages, some of the wandering workers were handed over to the police by the local gentry, particularly if the worker belonged to a low caste.

Some of the members of the local rich gentry became contractors for Maruti and other plants in the area. Some became a canteen supplier; some supply other material to the plant. None of these were the merely spontaneous results of a sudden availability of money. Rather, company officials deliberately decided to retain such suppliers in order to guarantee local stability and security. On the other hand, as more and more temporary hands were engaged in Maruti, the workers were casualised, contract-bound in the special ways indicated earlier, and left bereft of any social security entitlement. These workers were mostly *Dalits*. They were kept invisible from the public profile of the company and the business, so that later the bosses could say that only a minority of the Maruti workers were troublemakers. On their account, large-scale worker dissatisfaction was a lie. The repeated lock-outs at Maruti were aimed at protecting the majority of loyal workers. Such claims gradually helped the state and the local government to frame its response: quick apprehension of the troublemakers, quick trial, and quick exemplary punishment.

What followed the agitation should be taken as a study in the transition from a welfare-state regime to a 'regulatory-state' regime.[5] Firstly, in order to undermine the Maruti Union Employee Union (MUEU), which had led the agitation up to this point, a new union, the management-controlled Maruti Udyog Kamgar Union (MUKU), was established in 2001. A massive retrenchment pro-

5 This is how the new role of the state is articulated in a paper published by the Planning Commission in 2008. See Government of India 2008.

cess in the name of the Voluntary Retirement Scheme was undertaken, and workers were laid off. In 2002, Suzuki increased its share to 54.2 percent. In 2006, the Manesar unit of Maruti was established. The grip of management on the workers was in this way tightened as never before. There were regular reports of daily abuse of the rights and dignity of the workers, mostly on grounds of caste, as well as the impossible working condition of the lean production system.

In 2011 a new wave of struggle at Maruti brought it to the forefront of working-class struggle in India and attracted global attention. The discontent against the working conditions and the abusive attitude of the management reached a breaking point. On 3 June 2011, the workers at the Manesar plant submitted an application to register their independent union, Maruti Suzuki Employee Union (MSEU).[6] The next day a workers' sit-in at the Manesar factory began. The primary demands of the workers were the right to unionise and that all contractual and temporary workers be made permanent. On 6 June, the services of 11 workers were terminated. On 17 June the labour department intervened and the workers were reinstated and a verbal assurance was given that their union would be registered. The workers occupied the factory during this entire period. They had learnt their lesson from the earlier struggle that it was unwise to get out of the factory as it allowed the management to declare a lockout. What followed was constant threats and abuse by the management as well as dismissals and suspensions. This went on till August, when suddenly on 28–9 August a large contingent of police entered the plant and management sealed the gate. When the workers arrived the management declared that they could enter only after signing an undertaking of good conduct. The workers refused to do so. Harassment and arrest of union leaders followed. On 30 September the workers agreed to sign the good conduct undertaking. However, only permanent workers were allowed to enter while 1,100 contract workers were denied entry. They were told to take their dues and leave. From 7 October permanent and contract workers occupied the factory and on 13 October High Court passed the order that the workers should vacate the factory.

In the meantime the management laid siege to the factory, cutting the water supply and closing the canteen. In a dramatic turn of events, still largely inexplicable, the strike ended in November as some leaders of the strike took compensation from the management and left the company. In any case, the management promised that the union would be registered by 31 December 2011.

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6 People's Union for Democratic Rights 2013.

But the promise was not fulfilled. The Maruti Suzuki Workers' Union (MSWU) was finally registered on 31 January 2012. What followed was more of what had already gone by.

On 18 April 2012 the union presented a charter of demands to reduce work pressure, to scale back the extreme demands placed on workers by the work schedule, to end the incentive scheme, etc. In May two union leaders were suspended because of an altercation with the supervisor. However, they were reinstated due to collective pressure from the workers. Matters came to a head in June–July, when talks between management and the union broke down. Workers stopped reporting early and worked only for 8.5 hours. On 18 July 2012 a worker was abused with casteist remarks by a supervisor and the worker was suspended.[7] Subsequent events as they unfolded remain unclear. Workers said that bouncers were called by the management and violence broke out, resulting in the death of a human resources manager. Who killed the manager remains a mystery. Workers demanded an impartial probe into the incident. In any case, the violence and the death of the manager allowed the state to crack down on workers with ferocity. Thus came to an end the year-long struggle of the Maruti workers.

In this entire period the struggle remained autonomous in the sense that the direct intervention of trade unions of the left and other parties was negligible. However, after the events of July 2012, as the struggle came under heavy state repression, several trade unions came to the support of the workers. This period is more interesting as it revealed a completely new face to the trade union movement in India. It revealed new methods of negotiation between the workers and the unions. There were several unions and workers' organisations, ranging from various shades of what is called the far-left to ones that were more like non-governmental organisations and labour solidarity associations than unions. This meant a shift in the organising principle from one based on the concept of class to another based on the concept of community. This, as later events showed, was to have serious repercussions for the movement.

After the 18 July incident, 546 permanent workers were terminated along with about 1,800 temporary workers, and 147 permanent workers were arrested on charges of murder.[8] To meet the consequences of the crackdown of July 2012, the union reorganised itself through a provisional committee and a new movement began from 7 November 2012. MSWU demanded that the arrested leaders be released, dismissed workers reinstated, temporary workers made

7 Ibid.

8 Mazdoor Bigul 2013.

permanent, and an impartial probe into the incident of 18 July be instigated. However, this time the struggle was perceptibly different in terms of tactics and strategy. The new phase of struggle started on 7 November 2012. While the earlier movements recognised the importance of sitting-in or occupying either the factory or an important government office, this time the workers moved around. An important reason for this was that a large number of workers had been terminated and the temporary workers were looking for jobs, thus making it difficult for the workers to organise an occupation of the factory. However, there was considerable debate between the various unions and MSWU about whether to shift the site of struggle to the capital (Delhi) rather than clinging on to Gurgaon-Manesar. This suggestion was not taken up. That this was the case is a bit surprising, as the experience of the struggle had shown the gains of the workers standing their ground, even if that meant shifting at times the location of the struggle. In this case, if the terrain of the mobilisation had been even only partially shifted to Delhi, the kind of repression possible in Haryana may have been prevented from recurring, because such repression if unleashed in Delhi would have attracted large-scale public interest. In any case, by this time the issue of the Maruti struggle was not a local one only, but a national and even a global issue. Also there would have been a greater chance of workers' mobilisation from other places and a greater display of social solidarity had the site of mobilisation been moved to Delhi. In the earlier struggles in the Gurgaon-Manesar area, especially the struggle in Honda, the workers were successful in combining their specific demands with the larger labour issues of the area and had been successful too in mobilising workers cutting across companies and industries. This suggestion was also made by the workers' journal *Bigul Mazdoor Dasta*, which was involved in the movement with MSWU.

In the meantime MSWU aligned itself with some central trade unions like the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU). On one occasion, when the site of the movement shifted to Kaithal, the workers sought help from the notorious *khap panchayat*.[9] In some circles, this tendency of the workers to choose their own leadership has been taken as a positive phenomenon and a sign of autonomy. However, the experience of Maruti showed that such alliances are never symmetrical in their power relations. In this case the power was firmly in the hands of *khap panchayat*. After the police repression of 19 May 2013

9 *Khap panchayat* is the union of a few villages. They act as quasi-judicial bodies that pronounce harsh punishments based on customs and traditions, often applying regressive measures to modern problems.

in Kaithal, the *khap panchayat* withdrew its support. With this came the end of this phase of the struggle. There was a seminar held at Jawaharlal Nehru University where MSWU asked for suggestions for continuing the struggle.

The latest notable situation in the Maruti struggle is that MSWU has been reorganised and a new body has been elected.[10] However, this long history of Maruti struggle has left the question of the strategy and tactics of the workers' movement open. How do we conceive the autonomy of the workers' movement? Taking into account that many of these workers belonged to villages around Gurgaon-Manesar, their impulse led them to fall back on the community organisation of the *khap panchayat*. They also tried to align themselves with central trade unions of the parliamentary left as well as organisations belonging to the radical left. These forces were parts of and not merely spectators in the debates surrounding the question of organisation. A working-class movement, even one as sophisticated as that of the Maruti workers, led as it is by what are called advanced workers, working at the cutting edge of technology, cannot remove itself from its political and social background. Possibly it does not even want to do that, and is prepared to be part of the sectarianism and polemics traditionally associated with the *organised* left. In the whirlpool of militant politics in Leninist Russia, the Bolsheviks had said (and the quote is attributed specifically to Stalin): 'We think that a powerful and vigorous movement is impossible without differences – true conformity is possible only in the cemetery'.[11]

It cannot be forgotten that to a large degree the struggle was sustained because of their link with the villages. Perhaps the post-colonial condition not only does not completely transform peasants into workers, at least for now, but in this condition the workers have to traverse both spheres. In the case of Maruti the workers who were part of the struggle were only the first generation who had given up farming and taken up technical education to become part of the skilled workforce. Maybe that is the reason that forced them to look for succour in their villages rather than in their so-called autonomous self. Also, it must not be forgotten that after the collapse of struggle post-18 July 2012, the unions and organisations of the left rallied in support of MSWU in the face of heavy state repression, though not to the required extent. Certainly more could have been done. However, the support helped the movement remain alive both on the ground as well as in progressive circles and the media.

10 Maruti Suzuki Workers Union 2014.

11 Stalin 1912.

The question is: Is autonomy even desirable, at least in the way it is understood. Is there a new way to conceptualise the issue?

There is of course a strong line of argument that the desire to autonomously build up a workers' movement in Maruti originated from the specifically precarious situation there. More than three decades back the Suzukis had started their journey with Maruti with a 26 percent stake. Now they control 52 percent of the stock. While the main company is located in Japan, the lion's share of exports is to Europe and Africa. The United States is one of the company's biggest investment centres, while in South Africa there will soon exist one of their large assembly plants. According to their 2011 Annual Report, 62 percent of their foreign sales come from India and 48 percent of total sales of the Suzuki products are accounted for by Maruti Suzuki. The increase in production and sales has been possible due to just-in-time production, which in turn has required all three categories of workers – permanent, contract labour, and apprentice. In 2012, of the total number of Maruti workers 1,100 were contract labour, 400 apprentice labour, and only 950 were permanent labour. The number of contract labour has fluctuated from time to time. This has helped the Maruti plant at Manesar to increase its annual production capacity from 250,000 to 350,000. This has been possible, as indicated earlier, by speeding up the production process. So if for instance the worker at the Manesar plant earlier got two tea breaks of 15 minutes each, now he would get two tea breaks of 7.5 minutes each. Likewise lunch time was reduced from one hour to 30 minutes. Strangely, while political economy speaks of intensification of production, and thus the increase of production through constant improvement of technology, it never speaks of, and it does not have the language to speak of, how to measure the role of the body and the intensification of its labour in the increase of production. This is the background to the way in which labour was categorised in the Maruti plant, namely, permanent, casual, and apprentice.

It is understandable that the traditional trade union movement led by the classical left parties failed to respond to the phenomenon of flexible and just-in-time production designed by global capital and facilitated by the neoliberal state. For them the wage question was the soul of the labour question. Thus, the question remains whether the idea of *autonomy* is the best conceptual tool to understand today's workers' movements, which often display new ways of organisation and mobilisation as well as a new kind of consciousness. In Italy, theoreticians of workers' movements had argued in the 1970s that in contrast to the centralised decisions and authority structures of modern institutions, autonomous social movements involved people directly in decisions affecting their everyday lives. In this way democracy would expand and help individuals

break free of the political structures and behaviour patterns imposed by capital from the outside. Such an understanding involved a call, made from a revolutionary perspective, for the independence of movements from political parties. It sought to create a practical political alternative to both capitalist democracy and what the Italian theorists defined as authoritarian socialism.[12]

This is not the place to discuss in detail the theory of the autonomist movement. But in the context of the recent workers' movements in Delhi, surely it will be important to look dialectically into the issue of autonomy in the workers' movement in the context of society, economics, and most importantly the strategy and tactics of proletarian politics.

To arrive at this discussion we now have to move on to the second experience that we propose to scrutinise here.

Struggle of Hot Roller Workers in Wazirpur: Who Organises the Unorganised and the Footloose, and How

The workers in Wazirpur are as far removed from the Maruti workers as it is possible to imagine. The workers work in hot rolling steel factories in Wazirpur under the most dangerous conditions. The temperature of the furnace in front of which they have to stand is 1,500 degrees Celsius. The working process involves a batch of workers working for 30 minutes on the furnace and taking rest for the next 30 minutes when another batch of workers takes over and the process repeats. The 30 minutes rest period is not taken into account in the working hour by the factory owners. Most of the workers are migrants from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. It is interesting to note how the migration pattern of workers is used in the production process. Migrant workers go back to their villages during the sowing and harvesting season. It is a circular kind of migration. Thus during the winter, when it becomes unbearably cold in Delhi, it is time to blood the new, inexperienced migrant worker, as it is more 'comfortable' in the winter to work on the furnace. During the summer when the migrant worker goes back to the village the production is carried on by the permanent workers. Migration thus becomes a decisive element in the nature of the work contract. However as with Maruti, the percentage of permanent workers working round the year and settled in Delhi is relatively low in relation to the total workforce. Most workers come through a well-formed network of

12 This is of course an extremely simple version of a large corpus of writings. For details, see Cuninghame 2010; Lotringer and Marazzi 1980; Katsiaficas 2006.

migration built through kinship. The alternative is to come through labour contractors who often work in the same factory in the capacity of supervisors or foremen. It is important to be aware of this employment structure when analysing the June–July 2014 struggle at Wazirpur.

A detailed chronology of the struggle is to be found on the blog set up by the committee leading the struggle.[13] What is important in this discussion is the way the struggle came up with novel forms of collective action. It is also marked by the most intense polemics between different groups associated with the struggle. It is important to recognise the successes of the struggle first. Most of the workers in this work do not get even the minimum wage. Although there was a struggle in 2012–13 that achieved partial success in terms of wages and holidays, issues of work hours and work conditions remained heavily debated, e.g., the absence of any social security provisions. The experience of collective action was fairly low among the workers. The heroic seven-day strike of 1988 was all but forgotten.[14] Here lies a difference with the Maruti case, where the experience of struggle was readily available to the workers. With regard to Wazirpur this was due not to a lack of a history of struggles, but to the fact that owing to the specific organisation in the informal sector, which is closely related to migration, it becomes difficult for a workers' movement to have a continuous history. The history is interrupted by long periods of fallowness and each time struggle starts anew, so to speak. One of the most important interventions made during the struggle was that of the community kitchen. In itself this may not have been a great new tactic, but it had not been used for a long time. Organising in the informal sector is difficult due to a lack of any financial security, and since the workers are mostly migrants with nothing to fall back on, the owners have always used hunger as a strategy to break the workers. After almost 20 days of strike, when the community kitchen was started, the owners were taken aback and forced to negotiate. Some even were forced to close their factories as they could not have run them profitably according to the new settlement.

The struggle also made a redundant labour department suddenly active and relevant. Once the settlement was reached the onus of the implementation fell on the labour department.[15] The officials of the labour department were genuinely surprised to find the kind of power they still had over these informal

13 See http://garamrolla.blogspot.in.

14 For a history of this strike see http://gurgaonworkersnews.wordpress.com/workers-history/#fn461.

15 For details of the settlement see http://pudr.org/?q=content/wazirpur-struggle-continues-factory-owners-refuse-honour-written-agreement.

units. All these may change, however, after new labour reforms are put in place. But for the time being the struggle has forced them to take up investigations of the factory and the working conditions prevailing in it.

However, the struggle brought an important question to the fore. Who organises the workers at sites that have not been previously organised or where organisation has been at a minimum? Here the history of the left in India becomes important. Changing circumstances have forced the radical left, which emerged after the movement of the late 1960s, to look at their programme, strategy and tactics anew. Contrary to the belief that the radical left is in terminal decline or at best only active in distant forests, a great ideological and political churning is taking place within this grouping. As a matter of fact, the quantity of polemic that it produces has reached a level similar to that of the 1960s, if not greater still. This has been brought about precisely because of the questions raised by the working-class struggle and the methods of organising it and of making it more militant and sustainable. The radical left is now forced to reconsider the question of party and union, as well as the possible new forms of association that can be developed through working-class struggle. These are no longer ossified concepts.

The struggle in Wazirpur and its partial victory is a testament to the fact that at least the unorganised sector, where the parliamentary left's union activism has only a limited presence, may become a thriving ground for experiments in radical left workers' organisation. Also, as the Maruti struggle has shown, even in the organised sector, and at the cutting edge of technological work, the radical left has an important role to play. With the rise of contractualisation and casualisation of work the workers may have been made mobile. But this has made them more amenable to the kind of politics propounded by the radical left. After all, concepts like mobile war and positional warfare have not escaped the political lexicon of the radical left in India.

Conclusion

Both of the cases discussed here suggest that the question of 'autonomy' needs to be seriously investigated and the received notions of workers' autonomy reassessed. What is it that labour, labour struggle, and the form of labour struggle are autonomous *from*? Or, from what do they have to be autonomous? What kind of emancipatory politics will such *autonomous* form engender? Finally, through the lens of autonomy, will the working class discover only its own interest, or will it complete the historical task that Marx had so eloquently expressed?

We have indicated the need to look into the question of autonomy dialectically. In other words, the issue cannot simply involve the choice between party form and union form, or union form and autonomous organisational form. Nor can it be the choice between political movement and the self-organisational movement of the workers, or, finally, between political upsurge and social movement. Every uprising of the workers has shown strong marks of autonomy, a swell of consciousness at the ground level, and a large element of spontaneity. Yet almost to the same measure, each has also exhibited marks of strategic leadership, strong organisation, wide social networks, and a transformational urge. The great Railway Strike in India in 1974 was one of the clearest instances of the presence of 'autonomy' of the movement. But the formation of the great autonomous institution of the NCCRS (National Coordination Committee of Railwaymen's Struggle) was a political decision and an agreed decision of the political parties leading the struggle. NCCRS was backed by the tremendous upsurge of the railway workers. Mass initiative was created through struggle, errors, failures, advances, and success. Likewise in the Kanoria Jute Mill in the last decade of the last century, the celebrated movement for self-management after occupying the factory was led by an autonomous group, yet with a particular politics, and with the support and solidarity of different left mobilisations.[16] Such was the case also with the Dalli-Rajhara movement of the miners led by the late Shankar Guha Neogy, which was once again marked by strong organisation, a keen sense of tactics and strategy, and the active involvement of the rank and file. This history is therefore dialectical. Strongly poised between the two, workers in India are now learning to strategically and tactically use the concept of autonomy.

Autonomy as a movement and as a theory opposes the notion that capitalism is an irrational system. Instead, it favours what it takes to be the workers' viewpoint, privileging their activity as the lever of revolutionary change as that which alone can construct a communist society. Economics is seen as being entirely political; economic relations are direct political relations of force between class subjects. And it is in the economic category of the social worker, not in what it considers as an alienated political form like the party, that the initiative for political change resides.

Yet the question is: Can the rich experiences of the working-class movements in India be framed by the concept of autonomy, particularly in non-

16 On the Kanoria Jute Mill struggle, see Chakrabarty 2014; see also in this connection Debnath 2007.

relational terms? We are not indulging in semantic dispute here. What is involved is rather the conception of politics itself.

Once again, as earlier indicated, the idea of autonomy today is witnessing a revival in India in the wake of factories turning into sweatshops; the most virtual form of accumulation combining with the most primitive; the wage question linking up with the issue of work conditions; and labour getting enmeshed with the issue of casualisation. While admittedly the old trade union movement failed to appreciate the changes in labour regime ushered in by neoliberal modes of accumulation, and consequently to revise its strategy, the answer is not to make autonomy the holy principle of the life of labour, but rather to appreciate the phenomenon dialectically.[17] This means bringing back the great question of organisation, transformation, and emancipation. That the question of organisation is crucial is made plain when we see that while in 1980–1 the share of wages and salaries in gross national income was 40.5 percent, in 2011–12 it had come down to 22 percent.[18]

On the other hand, the state has no illusions to the effect that the workers' movement is autonomous. If it were so, the state would have made peace with it. Yet as Maruti showed, the state came down violently on the strike and the entire movement, justice was summarily denied, criminal justice provisions were abused, trade union rights were trampled upon, and every governmental step was taken to ensure that Maruti does not become the symbol of a *politics of the workplace and beyond*.[19] The employers, the public authority, local elites, the moneyed gentry, and the machinery of law and justice – all ganged up against the workers. The need of the hour was not the imperative to be autonomous, but rather to be more and more linked to the politics of society, the reality of the social factory; and this called for a rigorous consideration of strategy and tactics.

Workers have come a long way from their early forms of resistance. From being rick burners, machine breakers, humble petitioners, sober trade unionists and stewards of unions, to trade union militants leading general strikes and teaming up with other struggling sections of society – this is the tortuous history of the workers' movement. Yet this glorious and often tragic history has to be re-visited again and again in order to determine the strategy and tactics of the working-class movement in the context of one's own contemporary

17 On the paradoxical play of autonomy, mass initiative, and political leadership of the movement in the organisation of the Indian Railway Strike in 1974, see Sherlock 2001.

18 From the respective Annual Economic Surveys, cited in Charcha 2013, pp. 54–8.

19 On the legal dimensions of the violations of Maruti workers' rights, see the International Commission for Labor Rights 2013.

period. Strategy and tactics are crucial concepts, as crucial as the imperative of autonomy. The latter is a concept, while the former are principles for waging class war, in fact for all war. They indicate relational judgements, the evaluation of balance of forces, command, stewardship, mobilisation, deployment of forces, logistical planning, measurement of time, etc. Once workers have gone beyond the boundaries of the workplace trade unionism that they know and understand naturally, they often become reliant on national institutions like political parties and national trade unions. Since the parties and unions have very little idea of working outside the national institutional sphere, workers have to grope for a way out of their institutional confines. This is the time when they cry out 'treachery!' They say their leaders have sold out. Yet they cannot find the exit route.

This is where the two cases we have cited are indicative of new thinking and new modes of organisation, howsoever faulty and hesitant the initial steps may look to us. These movements have consciously or unconsciously addressed the reality of the social factory and they have combined the idea of autonomy (if that means mobilisation from below and mass initiative) with the need to frame appropriate strategy and tactics, which only political leadership can provide.

So long as industry catered to local markets, served local areas, and drew from local populations to form its labour force, sectionalism and differentiation among workers was not a major problem for union organisers. But now, in this globalised age, precarious conditions of work have accentuated the problem of sectionalism and differentiation, which may bring back some of the maladies evident in workers' movements in the pre-mass industrialisation era. This is evident even in many developed countries, and often we see union organisers travel from these countries in order to visit workers' movements and organisers in the backward countries, promoting there the formation of 'autonomous unions' while unions in their own backyards lie neglected, relegated, demoted, ridiculed, and destroyed. The slogan of autonomy reflects the desire to exit the closure mentioned in the previous paragraph; and as such it reflects the dualities and paradoxes in the present situation. The situation calls for dialectical thinking on autonomy and organisation. While in many fields observers speak of de-unionisation – that is, a decline in union membership and several other associated features – workers in several other fields are founding unions, associations, solidarity forums, militant groups, and fighting battles that involve political choice at every step. The slogan of autonomy is the appearance of a different reality, which we have tried to indicate in this article in as much as the question of the wage may become under particular circumstances what Marx called the 'form of appearance' of the 'true state of affairs', in this case,

the question of precarious work situations and of the labour process. In its categorical form, enunciated by Kant, autonomy can speak only of critical reason. The phenomenon of a surge of rank-and-file activism can easily lend itself to the language and form of autonomy. Yet, as Marx said, it is absolutely essential to go below the form of appearance. Marx had written in the context of a discussion on wages:

> The forms of appearance are reproduced directly and spontaneously, as current and usual modes of thought; the essential relation must first be discovered by science. Classical political economy stumbles approximately onto the true state of affairs, but without consciously formulating it. It is unable to do this as long as it stays within its bourgeois skin.[20]

The task then is: Instead of spontaneously giving oneself over to the trend of providing an ideological name for a new or emerging reality, we have to proceed dialectically in our analysis of what is happening. Questions of organisation, tactics and strategy are therefore important; and they can be discovered (at least in their elements), discussed, analysed, and formulated only through a science of relational analysis.

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20 Marx 1990, p. 682.

CHAPTER 3

Autonomous Worker Committees in Marikana, South Africa: Journey to the Mountain

Luke Sinwell

On 27 August 2012, directly below the mountain in Marikana where 34 workers were brutally murdered by the police less than two weeks earlier, a Lonmin worker named Babalo, who was responsible for welcoming visitors after the massacre, introduced us to an extremely influential and arguably new form of independent working-class leadership.[1] We sat with eight workers in the sun on the dry yellow hay-like grass and asked them, 'what do you call yourselves?' One of the leaders, Thabiso, began to chair the meeting. He smirked at us and then responded that their organisation had no name, but that they were the 'workers' committee', as if to suggest that this was self-explanatory. Neither the management of Lonmin, nor the established unions including the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) nor the competing Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU) were in control.[2] Rather, it was the workers themselves – their vehicle was the workers' committee. This was our first interaction with the committee at Marikana and we have maintained contact with them since.

This has been essential for obtaining the sensitive information which surrounds the massacre given the levels of distrust that have subsequently developed amongst the workers. As one former worker committee member who was

1 Lonmin is the third largest platinum mine in the world. Marikana is the small town in which parts of Lonmin co-exist. They are located in the Rustenburg platinum belt in the Northwest Province of South Africa – and approximately 100 kilometres from Johannesburg. The names of workers that I have interviewed or received information from have been given pseudonyms. At this time I was working with Thapelo Lekgowa, who was amongst the first to identify the workers' committee at Marikana following the massacre. He is an intrepid researcher who remains committed to the people of Marikana.

2 The NUM was the largest affiliate of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and included about 300,000 members until the Marikana massacre took place. In the platinum belt, workers left the NUM in vast numbers – believing it had betrayed them – and joined AMCU. COSATU is part of the tri-partite alliance which also includes the ruling African National Congress (ANC) and the South African Communist Party (SACP).

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responsible for negotiating with the management after 16 August indicated to us in the process of arranging an interview with him, 'during these times, one cannot even trust his own brother'.[3] Some of the workers would later turn to alcoholism to cope while others would take their own lives and the lives of others. The events of 16 August have scarred the consciousness of the workers in Lonmin. One worker, who helped initiate the August 2012 strike, lamented that:

> It was very difficult for us and even now our lives after 16 August have changed and I don't remember the last time we felt happy about anything or smiling about something since 16 [August 2012] … Even at night, when you sleep, once you think about what happened then you lose your sleep for two or three hours because you took everything upon yourself. And then you will keep thinking, why did things get like that?[4]

To a certain extent we – as researchers – have also lived Marikana and we have dreamt of it at night, but our experiences are nothing like those of the heroic figures who risked their lives on the infamous mountain. To them, the strike literally became a matter of life and death. Many of the workers we have engaged with continue to vow that they would die, if not for their demand for a living wage – R12,500 – then for the rights of workers more generally. We have experienced Marikana a great step removed from these realities.[5]

Seeking to uncover the intimate dynamics within a post-massacre context is obviously no easy task and requires a significant degree of commitment on behalf of the researchers. Workers understandably tended to be sceptical – and at times even hostile – to those who came to Marikana, including journalists and academics. In order to understand Marikana, and its workers' committee, it was therefore necessary to conduct ethnographic research. This seeks to understand, from the people's own perspective, what they do and the meanings that they associate with their actions. It also involves participant observation,

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3 In fact, this statement was told to Siphiwe Mbatha – a high spirited revolutionary who is the coordinator of a community-based organisation of the Thembelhle Crisis Committee. Siphiwe has assisted me in making contacts, interviewing and translating for me during interviews with workers in Lonmin, Impala and Anglo.

4 Interview with Babalo undertaken by Luke Sinwell and Siphiwe Mbatha in Marikana, 20 May 2013.

5 The workers on the mountain were demanding a living wage of R12,500 after deductions, which is approximately equivalent to US$1,250 per month – and about 2.5 times what they were earning at that time. The demand for R12,500 has since become a rallying call for much of the working class in South Africa more generally.

the central method of ethnographic research. Participant observation is when the researcher attempts to understand a culture by observing what people are actually doing, and to a certain extent, as the word participant suggests, immersing and involving him or herself into the culture he or she is studying.

On 16 August 2012, 34 mineworkers were killed by the police with live ammunition in an event that has become known as the Marikana Massacre. At first, television footage, which showed mineworkers charging the police with deadly weapons, suggested to the public that the police were responding in self-defence. However, later evidence, drawn in part from research done by the University of Johannesburg, told a very different story of a planned killing.[6] Indeed, the police had ordered four mortuary vans (they hold about eight people each) which were to arrive in Marikana on the day of the massacre and 3,000 rounds of live ammunition were ushered into Marikana on that morning. Further evidence from police filming also shows that the police had their hands ready to shoot and that their guns were cocked prior to the mineworkers beginning to charge towards them.[7] In fact, they were running past the police to go home – to the adjacent informal settlement called Nkaneng – in order to avoid being killed.

This chapter does not seek to advance an argument about the sociology of the massacre itself. For that, readers should get a copy of *Marikana: A View from the Mountain and a Case to Answer*, which provides an examination of the events surrounding the massacre from the perspective of the mineworkers who survived it.[8] They should also watch *Miners Shot Down*, which offers a devastating analysis of the role of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), the police, Lonmin (the platinum company) and the ruling African National Congress (ANC).[9]

Rather, the chapter makes use of empirical evidence in order to explain how and why the workers of Lonmin – the third largest platinum company in the world – bypassed and then eventually left the union – NUM – which they had been members of. It also details the changing nature of the autonomous workers' committee that was formed in order to negotiate directly with management. The paper demonstrates that this was a temporary committee, which in part explains why workers soon jettisoned the committee and then joined the rival union – AMCU.

6 Alexander et al. 2012.

7 See Desai 2014.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

Following the massacre, NUM, which was once the 'darling' of workers, was now conceived of as an enemy which was on the side of the bosses. In this line of thinking, one leader of the workers' committees – in a play on words – called it the 'National Union of Management.' It should also be noted that discontent with the NUM was not new and did not begin in 2012, which was instead a tipping point. Surveys undertaken by the Society Work and Development Institute (SWOP) on shop stewards of NUM revealed that in the Rustenburg region, satisfaction with union representation was the worst.[10]

Drawing from in-depth interviews and informal meetings with dozens of workers who had been members of the committee or went to the mountain on 16 August, the paper seeks to uncover exactly what this elusive committee is and how it has changed over time. In so doing it profiles the history of workers who organised in order to stage one of the most important unprotected strikes in South African history – a strike which exerted such great power over a period of merely seven days until, on 16 August, virtually the entire national security of the ANC was deployed. Orders were given by the police to use full force and to kill miners if necessary. The outcome is now well-known – 34 miners died in what has been called the Marikana Massacre and no police were killed or injured on the day.

Since the burgeoning of trade unions from the mid-to-late 1900s until the present, trade unions have been the preferred topic of investigation by labour historians.[11] Industrial sociology in post-apartheid South Africa has followed this trend, as it has been dominated by investigations into formalised unions which operate within the framework of the tri-partite alliance.[12] Buhlungu in particular has noted the anti-democratic nature of unions, the tendency for shop stewards to drift away from workers and become part of the bureaucracy, rather than to represent them, as well as the discontent that has resulted from this.[13] He has also called the victory of 1994 – whereby the trade union federation COSATU gained great influence as a partner with the ANC – 'A Paradox of Victory'.[14] COSATU and its affiliated unions were closest to power, but they arguably became victims of that same power. To a certain extent they became institutionalised and a fundamental component of the neoliberal programme adopted by the ANC in 1996, the Growth Employment and Redistribution Policy

10 Bezuidenhout and Buhlungu 2007, pp. 245–65.
11 Ness and Azzellini 2011, p. 1.
12 See Buhlungu 2010, Forrest 2011, and Von Holdt 2003.
13 Buhlungu 2010.
14 Ibid.

(GEAR), which replaced the more people-centred Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP). COSATU played a key role in formulating the RDP only to see it jettisoned in the name of market principles and international investors.

The tendency of social scientists to focus on formalised structures in the workplace and elsewhere has eclipsed the possibility of studying informal organisations – in this case worker committees. The agency of workers, and more specifically the independent workers' committee, is arguably the key feature surrounding the event of the Marikana Massacre – one which is likely to become as important symbolically as the Soweto Uprisings or the Sharpeville Massacre, turning points in South African history. According to Frankel, author of the authoritative text on the Sharpeville Massacre, 'Marikana has [already] become a moral barometer against which future developments in mining and wider South Africa will be measured for many years to come'.[15] The committee at Marikana is important in understanding the strike wave along the Rustenburg Platinum belt where these independent organisations emerged – though the committee at Lonmin was not necessarily the first or the most long-lasting of these committees.[16] Only empirical research, grounded in oral histories of those survivors who were centrally involved, can uncover the hidden details which shed light on the nature of these committees and their political trajectory. At this stage, scholars and the general public know very little about them or their relationship to unions. The Commission of Inquiry, initiated by President Zuma and launched on 1 October 2012, was intended to unpack the causes of the events between 9 and 16 August in Marikana, but is also unlikely to provide much information about these committees.[17]

This paper argues that the workers' committee in Lonmin offered both 'a direct challenge to capitalist hegemony' and a reformist attempt which operated inside 'the capitalist logic of profitability'.[18] It investigates what happens in between the two extremes. While the demands made by the workers – and the committee – were reformist (demanding higher wages) the methods employed by the workers did – in the end – challenge the hegemony of capital and reshape the structural conditions in which people now act. From 11 August – five days prior to the massacre – the workers removed the wage negotiating

15 Frankel 2013, p. 5.

16 Equally notable workers' committees – which eventually went on to lead powerful strikes – were established at Anglo-Platinum and Impala Platinum in Rustenburg also in 2012 (first at Impala) – these are respectively the first and second largest platinum mines in the world.

17 See Frankel 2013, p. 42.

18 Ness and Azzellini 2011, p. 5.

table from the offices of management, and placed it at the foot of the mountain of the working class. Their power could only be contained by a combined effort of the police, the ANC, and Lonmin to use their full force to literally kill the mineworkers.

The management eventually responded that the demand of R12,500 could not be given to the Karee shaft only, but was a decision to be made for all the mines at Lonmin. This provided the worker leaders with the impetus to unite all the shafts at Lonmin – leading to a mass meeting of Rock Driller Operators (RDOs) on 9 August 2012.[19] When the workers were attacked during a march to the NUM on 11 August, they formed a new *ad hoc* committee on the infamous mountain, with the primary purpose of protecting themselves from the NUM, preventing people from going to work, ensuring that there was a non-violent approach amongst the workers, and engaging with visitors, including unions and the police. They waited patiently for their employer at the mountain until the police – who seem to have been given the go-ahead by key ANC officials – underwent operation 'D-day' and massacred 34 workers with live ammunition.[20]

'People don't just elect a leader', said one of the younger members of the workers' committee; 'they study the person first.' Members of the committee were chosen by their fellow workers because of their sober minds, their respectfulness towards others, because they say things as they are, and do not renege on decisions made by the collective. They listen carefully, have the ability to maintain order and simultaneously can lead people in the right direction. Nevertheless, the power of the workers' committee was based on the workers themselves and underpinned by notions of radical direct democracy. As one member indicated, 'we were chosen by the workers and we cannot make any decisions without them saying so first … We had to do what they wanted'. Reflecting on the logic of the strike, another member explained the logic behind the formation of an independent committee: 'we wanted it to be known that without us [workers] the union will not exist'. The allegation that the 2012 strike at Lonmin was the result of inter-union rivalry functions to serve the interests of NUM and mine management – it does not take seriously the core demands of workers. Rather, it assumes that workers are objects, rather than subjects of the unions to which they belong, incapable of thinking and acting on their own.

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19 RDOs are arguably at the centre of production in platinum mines. What started out as a strike of only 3,000 RDOs quickly extended to the entire workforce. For a historical account of RDOs' role in mining and their involvement in the 2012 strikes in the platinum belt in South Africa, see Stewart 2013.

20 See Desai 2014.

The chapter explains the different stages in which the committee expressed its power and how the politics which underpinned the committee – and the workers struggle at Lonmin more generally – changed over time. The demand for R12,500 remained constant despite shifts in the constitution and the approach of the committee (discussed below) – including its decision to join the union, AMCU. Furthermore, their main demands and the idea of independent working-class power have become embedded in the minds of ordinary South Africans.

The Origins of the Strike at Lonmin

Workers did not initially plan to strike at Lonmin – but rather to engage with management around a monthly increase and also for a wage demand of R12,500. However, when management refused to offer any serious concessions, the workers from one particular shaft at Lonmin called Karee began to mobilise workers from the two other shafts – Eastern and Western. Days later, they held a mass meeting of around 3,000 workers (all RDOs) and decided to begin the strike later in the day.

An informal workers' committee consisting of RDOs emerged at Lonmin in Karee mine in May/June 2012. At first they engaged with a small number of workers, but eventually about 100 RDOs began to attend. One of the foremost leaders of the committee reflects that, 'They started opening their eyes. Now they are seeing that they were oppressed'.[21] The RDOs at Lonmin, in Karee mine in particular, had been undertaking strenuous labour – some for merely months and others for decades. Their earlier experiences highlighted to them that their unions were inadequate and they began to realise that they needed to do something on their own in order to transform their situation.

In particular they were disgruntled with the fact that in the two other main shafts at Lonmin – Eastern and Western – RDOs were given assistants to help with their drilling. They approached management with two demands: that they be given compensation for the fact that they didn't have assistance and that their wages be increased to R12,500. To a significant extent management's response to the informal RDO representatives was responsible for extending the demand of R12,500 beyond the one shaft – Karee – where it was popularised independently. Management thus provided workers with the impetus to

21 Interview with Molefi undertaken by Luke Sinwell and Siphiwe Mbatha in Rustenburg, 28 September 2013.

mobilise workers from other shafts. According to Molefi, 'we told all the shafts … that we need to unite. So that we can fight for this R12,500 [together] because of the hard work that we are doing'.[22]

At this time, RDOs in Eastern and Western were not stagnant: they desired an increase in wages and were slowly becoming more and more disillusioned with the NUM. Sandile, who worked at Eastern shaft, was one of these workers. Born in 1981, he grew up in a town called Qumbu in the Eastern Cape and left school after finishing standard nine in 1999 because he lacked money for food and transport. Like others in his community, he lived far away from the school that he attended and he walked 45 kilometres – leaving at a staggering 3 a.m. each morning in order to arrive at 7:50 a.m. Dissatisfied with the low wages he received from other jobs thereafter, he came to Lonmin in April 2011 and became an RDO. He joined the NUM at Eastern because it was 'the only union that was working in the mine [at the time]'.[23] Mass meetings were held regularly with RDOs and the NUM shop stewards and he was one of the ordinary members who stood up at meetings in May and June 2012 in order to demand better wages and working conditions from the NUM leaders. The workers, including Sandile, hoped the NUM would provide positive feedback regarding their demands, but they never did so. He recollected:

> I am waiting a long, long time. Thereafter waiting I take [the] decision on 9 August [2012] to organise the RDOs to come in the stadium to talk about what to do … [Because] this money is so small. It's not enough.[24]

The idea of a mass meeting of all RDOs emerged and Sandile (and perhaps others) informed the leaders of NUM at Eastern that there needed to be 'a central meeting'.[25] He sought to give them confidence and believed they were in a position to assist when he told them, 'NUM you can do it'.

However, the union did not respond and workers took it upon themselves to unite with other shafts. Bongani was another worker who helped organise the meeting on 9 August. He was born in 1978 in a poor rural village called Libode in the Eastern Cape where he is a pastor in the Zion Christian Church. Like many of the other workers who held leadership positions in recreational spaces and at schools where they grew up, his position as a pastor informed his

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22 Ibid.

23 Interview with Sandile undertaken by Luke Sinwell and Hendrick More in Wonderkop, 18 August 2013.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

involvement in workers' politics at Lonmin. He started in the mines at Anglo-American Platinum and in 2005 he began working at Lonmin. By 2006, Bongani had become involved in wage negotiations with the NUM. During this time, he was a member of the NUM and became their safety representative between 2009 and 2012. According to Bongani:

> These issues of money stretch far back. We have been complaining for a very long time. We even tried to meet with our leaders – the NUM – to discuss the matter. In August we decided we were going to take further steps ... We got tired of waiting and started meeting as workers.[26]

On 7 August, Bongani and other representatives met with the RDOs at Karee and they [leaders from Western] spoke to the management at Western in order to request R12,500 – the main concern being to obtain a significant increase if not the entire R12,500. Bongani remembers being told that they, 'cannot give us the increase. [Management told us that] we will have to speak to Ian Farmer who is the mine manager and that there will have to be an agreement amongst all the mines'.[27] The workers in Western also confirmed that in Karee they were given a similar response. 9 August was determined as the date on which they would provide feedback on the engagements with management. At the mass meeting, the workers decided that they would strike the following day and also march to management at the Lonmin Platinum Division (LPD).

The next several days that followed have been well documented both by the Judicial Commission of Inquiry and by academics and journalists.[28] Workers proceeded to march to LPD on 10 August and were met with a white security officer who told them to wait. After a few hours, they were informed that they needed to march to the NUM – their official union. The employer claimed he was not in a position to negotiate directly with informal worker leaders.

The Formation of the 'Mountain Committee'

The next day – 11 August – was a turning point in the struggle. Workers responded to being attacked by their own union by heading to a mountain in the community where they could see intruders. They formed a new committee

26 Interview with Bongani undertaken by Thapelo Lekgowa in Marikana, 10 November 2012.

27 Ibid.

28 See Alexander et al. 2012, Frankel 2013 and Jika et al. 2013.

which they called the mountain committee – this was more militant and was geared towards defending itself from their union. Additionally, no longer were the workers to negotiate on the terms of the employer – at an office. Rather, the negotiation table was placed at the foot of the mountain. The mountain became symbolic of the working-class struggle and the demand for R12,500.

On 11 August, the workers marched to the NUM offices with the hope that their demands would be heard. According to one worker, 'we got there [NUM offices], the leadership of NUM came out and shot at us, they beat us and they killed one guy[29] and the other one went to hospital. We ran [away] as workers'.[30] As suggested by our earlier work, the workers were unarmed.[31] When they arrived back at the stadium, it was locked and the workers armed themselves and went to the mountain. A worker recalled that:

> The reason we decided to go to the mountain [is] because when you are sitting in that stone there you can see anything that [is] coming from behind, and you can see things that are coming from the front … we were sleeping there until 16 August.[32]

The workers then went back to the stadium, but found it locked. Crucially, this is when the workers began carrying weapons like spears and machetes in self-defence. The NUM had attacked them once at their offices and the workers believed they would do so again. What began as a peaceful affair now became bloody and warlike. The demand for R12,500 was quickly becoming a matter of life and death. The workers were stationed at the mountain and a new, larger and more militant, committee to represent and protect them emerged.

Though there had been earlier informal committees (like the one described in the earlier section), those committees were also *ad hoc*. It also seems that many of the workers joined the strike without knowing the initial leadership. Sandile, who was coming from Eastern, concluded:

> We had no special committee that time [prior to 11 August]. Anyone that can talk and listen [had been part of the earlier committee] … Then after NUM [showed that it did] not care about the workers … [We elected] a

29 Later evidence indicates that although NUM did shoot and injure two workers who were sent to the hospital, neither of them died.

30 Interview with anonymous worker in Marikana, 2012 (other details unknown).

31 Alexander et al. 2012.

32 Interview with anonymous worker in Marikana, 2012 (other details unknown).

> special committee. [We decided] you and you are the leader today on this mountain … we must make [a] plan to promote.[33]

A committee was elected on 12 August which included five men from Eastern, five from Western, and five from Karee. Sam was one person who was elected onto what he called the 'mountain committee'.[34] He described their role as 'marshals' who were supposed to keep unity amongst workers. They also sought 'to avoid violence … If I am going to Rolland [Eastern] shaft, I don't want anyone to break the motor car or … [To hurt] someone … If I go to Wonderkop [Western], just go smartly'.[35]

One worker explained the logic behind electing people from the various shafts:

> People from here in Western knew who their leadership was and who is the leader in Karee and then that is when they choose their leaders. When we met they all knew who their leaders were. And [because] we knew people from Karee [we could be sure that] they will stand there … We wanted to make sure that there was order … because people from Karee don't know people from Western and a person from Western does not know a person from Eastern and a person from Eastern does not know the other one … and we said that a person that should be there should be a person that will be able to know these people, you see?[36]

Mgcineni 'Mambush' Noki, who later became known as 'the man in the green blanket', was amongst the physically strongest who was elected to help lead on the mountain. His loud voice made him suitable to communicate back and forth between the police and workers – and later to the thousands of workers who were on the mountain. Mambush was a keen soccer player and helped organise games at Marikana. He obtained his nickname from a Sundown's soccer player named 'Mambush Mudau'. His colleagues have described him as a 'born leader' and his family in the rural Eastern Cape Village called Mqanduli recollects that he always resolved conflicts when they arose in the household and that he feared unnecessary violence and destruction.

33 Interview with Sandile undertaken by Luke Sinwell and Hendrick More in Wonderkop, 18 August 2013.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

36 Interview with anonymous worker in Marikana, 2012 (other details unknown).

On the following two days, Mambush and others initiated a plan to extend the reach of their strike and it was at this stage that mineworkers from all the other occupations underground (besides RDOs) became involved:

> We talked about the people who were still going to work and we said that they [those not striking] also wanted that money and maybe if we all did not go underground then the employer will hear us fast enough … the employer will respond to us quickly. And we really did stop people from going to work.[37]

One of their strategies involved engaging the bus drivers that take people to their shafts. The same worker recalled that 'we told the bus drivers that they should also go and park the buses at the depot because no bus was going to come back and take people anywhere'.[38]

The workers marched again to NUM on 12 August, but they did not make it all the way there. One worker explained that:

> The employer was not able to come and talk to us. And the mine security just pointed their guns at us and we asked them if they might be able to call the employer for us. And [we said] that if they called the employer, they [the employer] will understand better and it happened that they did not call the employer for us. And then came a general worker from the employer's office and he said that he has heard about our complaint. And he asked us to wait, and at that time we have not said what our grievances were [so we were surprised that he knew them] and these men stopped us 10 metres from the employers' offices. And then the men from NUM came and said that the employer will not answer us. And then the mine security said they were giving us one minute, and if we were still standing there then they will do what they want. And then we agreed that we should be going back … to the ground [by the stadium].[39]

Bloodshed ensued after the workers were shot at. According to Alexander et al. 'two security men were dragged from their cars with *pangas* and spears. Their cars were later set ablaze'.[40] On the following day, workers proceeded to Karee mine to convince other workers to stop working. They were part of an armed

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

40 Alexander et al. 2012.

battalion of about 50. Mambush in particular has been accused by the police of waging a war between them and the workers on the mountain – as he was arguably the key leader who refused to give up their weapons when the police demanded them directly on this day. One of the workers' committee members summarised:

> We cannot give them our weapons because we have been beaten by the union, NUM. And it will become difficult if we do not have our weapons ... The police wanted [to take] our weapons by force and told us that the law does not allow us to go back to the mountain where we are staying. They [police] wanted to go there and we told them that we are not fighting with anyone, and we have the weapons that we have, but we want to go back to the mountain, and we want the employer.[41]

Bloodshed again ensued. A whistle blew which signalled that the workers should flee back to the mountain. The workers had in the first instance sought refuge at the mountain which would be a vantage point from which they could see anyone coming to attack them. In the second instance, they had drawn a battle line and placed the wage negotiating table at the foot of the mountain – refusing to enter the mines' offices – and demanding that the employer come directly to them – on their own terms.

Another worker, who was 26 years old at the time, explains that, on 13 August, he became part of the committee because 'everyone started excusing themselves'.[42] He arrived at Lonmin in August 2009 and joined NUM. He explained that being a mineworker at Lonmin has been difficult since 'every dream in South Africa is realised only if you have money'.[43] Many of the workers at Lonmin understandably reflect similar sentiments. Marx would have concluded that the logic behind the strike at Marikana was economistic and therefore could not provide revolutionary leadership. However, the theory of the workers at Marikana arguably surpassed all previous attempts at revolutionising South African politics since 1994, when black people gained the right to vote – because of the militancy that was exhibited and also because the theory was rooted in the experiences of the most oppressed. Sinqobe further reflects that:

41 Interview with anonymous mineworker, Marikana, 2012 (other details unknown).

42 Interview with Sinqobe undertaken by Luke Sinwell and Siphiwe Mbatha in Marikana, 20 May 2013.

43 Ibid.

> I used to be a captain for a soccer team, so I always had a way of controlling and understanding workers. Because firstly before you become a leader you need to understand people's needs and listen to what they say. And you must be polite and you need to be proactive and able to resolve complex problems so that you can take solutions to the leaders. People depend on you for solutions, not problems.[44]

There were workers elected onto the committee on 9 August, but he believed, 'most of them dragged their feet'.[45] He understood that

> they were scared because we are all aware that after a strike, leaders are marked as the ones who fuelled the strike. I am well aware that when I get back to the shaft fingers are going to be pointed at me. I am going to be the person who is going to be blamed for continuing the strike, so when people started excluding themselves someone had to step in to represent the people.[46]

This situation was compounded by the fact that, on 13 August, the workers were attacked by police – leading to two police officers, two security officers and four workers being killed in a warfare-like episode. Some of the worker leaders were later charged with the murders of police officers and, to some extent, the deaths of these police officers had been used to vindicate the use of full force on 16 August.

On 14 and 15 August the police and others attempted to negotiate with the workers, but the workers insisted that they wanted to speak to the employer only. Thereafter, Mambush handed another worker R1,600 to buy food for the workers on the mountain. Sinqobe was getting ready to leave but then AMCU President Joseph Mathunjwa arrived and he decided that he should stay and listen. He recalls that the police 'started putting up the razor wires, then they started shooting'.[47]

As the three-minute-long massacre itself began to unfold, the leadership was targeted by police, who hunted them down in a helicopter that hovered over the mountain, as well as with police vehicles and with live ammunition. Mambush was left dead with 14 bullet holes in his body. Another prominent member of the committee, Andries, was also killed. However, workers did not

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44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.

end their struggle after being mown down by the police, but intensified their strike, thereby remaining heroically steadfast in their commitment to obtain R12,500.

From Negotiating the Settlement to Trade Union Recognition

Many workers did not sleep on the night of 16 August, nor did they run away from their perpetrators in fear or in outright shock. It was just hours, not days, after the massacre that they began to consolidate their power, despite being victims of the harshest state repression since the dark days of apartheid on 16 June 1976. Workers at the shafts of Lonmin did not fall back in the midst of the murders of those who were near to them, but stood up, organised, and made themselves a stronger force. They continued the process of developing a committee based on direct democracy and working-class unity almost immediately after the massacre on the evening of 16 August and then extended their reach and intensified the strike in the two days that followed.

At around 7 p.m. that evening about 20 workers held an *ad hoc* emergency meeting in the dark below the mountain, where the bodies of their slain colleagues still remained. The police were still lurking around the dead bodies. To a certain extent the workers were afraid, but they also 'wanted to know what their [the police's] intentions were and whether they will kill us also since they had killed our fellow brothers'.[48] The meeting was not chaired by anyone and it was not called by a central committee or individual. Workers had come back to the mountain to find out what had happened and to discuss the way forward. Cebisile was at this meeting and he explained that:

> We decided to meet at the bottom of the mountain and [we] took a decision that we were not going back [to work] until we got what we were asking for [R12,500]. We decided to come back tomorrow morning [17 August] so that we could find out for sure who was arrested, killed and in hospital.[49]

The workers came to a consensus about two key issues: that the strike must go on and that workers would stop carrying their weapons. They were adamant that, 'we [workers] were not going to be intimidated by the death of our fellow

48 Interview with Cebisile, 2013 (other details unknown).

49 Ibid.

brothers. We were going back [to continue the strike] in memory of those who died'.[50] Most of the workers went back to their homes, but Cebisile and others stayed there the whole night to observe the police.

At 7 a.m. the following day (17 August), thousands of workers met below the mountain 'to nominate a group of people who will go and check the names of all the people who were killed, arrested. Some went to hospital to check the names of those people who were in hospital'.[51] One of the workers' committee members, who became responsible for organising the funerals of those who were killed on 16 August, vividly captured workers' feelings on 17 August:

> That is when our pain showed because … we wanted to go and see if our brother or my friend or someone I was working with [had died] as we knew each other as people. And then we were asking ourselves if so-and-so survived or what and the people [who] you had phone numbers of, you called and found out if they had survived and they would say, 'No, I survived'. Phones were going up and down on 16, 17 August, and you were yearning to see each other's faces just to make sure they survived, especially those [who] we did not know their numbers … But we did not know who survived because everyone was running to save his life, but when the reports came and we even heard from the radio also … how many people died then and then … when they tell you who died and you find that you know that person, and that started to give us so much pain. We had pain also on 16 August but it was more painful … on 17 August while we were reporting to each other who was left there … [some workers] did not come back and we did not know if he had died or what and we were worried the whole time … On 17 August we were still asking each other if they had seen so-and-so and then one would say 'no I have not seen him'. And then that is when we started to look in hospitals and in jails and then what they did was give people a list from jail and even in hospital to find out who was where … you see? And then after we were given that thing we knew who was where and who was in jail and then we saw that now there is something that makes us happy because now we see the one we thought had died was alive, he is [actually] in jail you see? And still because people were in jail, we did not see why they were arrested, so what happened was very hurtful.[52]

50 Ibid.

51 Interview with anonymous worker, 2012 (other details unknown).

52 Ibid.

Prior to 17 August, the committee had served as the interface between the mass of workers and visitors – such as police or management. Thereafter, their roles changed slightly. Cebisile explains that:

> [W]e heard rumours that the police were targeting those of us who were elected into the first committee, so we decided to elect new people into the committee. People who [the police] would not recognise. So that these people would be able to go to hospital and say they are friends and family members looking for their brothers or relatives instead of saying they are workers.[53]

Furthermore, he recalls that the employers wanted to speak to the leaders in the strike committee and the committee decided to choose different people:

> because we were afraid that they will arrest us if we were to go ourselves. We chose new people who will go and talk with them but then they will come back and report to us and then we would be the ones to report to the workers.[54]

The workers continued to meet below the mountain and also to send their delegation back and forth to go and speak with the employer. On 18 September 2012, workers negotiated for a 22 percent increase, far less than the increase to R12,500 but more than double the average increase of less than 10 percent which is normally obtained through union negotiations. The following day, they went back to work.

The vast majority of workers, having been attacked by NUM officials on 11 August 2012, were completely opposed to the NUM. One worker later reflected his understanding of the relationship between the tri-partite alliance and their former union:

> The ANC is COSATU. COSATU is NUM. All those people, they have got a hand in the killing of those people who died at the mountain. Because they are the ones who called government and said we must be killed.[55]

53 Interview with Cebsile, 2013 (other details unknown).

54 Ibid.

55 Interview with anonymous worker, 2013 (other details unknown).

The competing union, AMCU, which had a firm membership in Karee mine prior to the massacre, grew at an exponential rate throughout 2012 and 2013. This was in part because the President of AMCU, Joseph Mathunjwa, had come to the mountain sympathetically to listen to the workers as an equal, whereas the President of the NUM seemed to side with the management, opposing them and their decision to go on strike. On 13 August 2013, Lonmin signed a recognition agreement with AMCU – granting the union majority status at the mine. The leaders of the worker committees were then incorporated into the union, thus raising questions regarding the extent to which the working-class politics of the committee remained, or had been side-lined by the AMCU.

Conclusion

On the one hand, the worker committees that were formed at Lonmin in 2012 were temporary structures merely intended to negotiate wage demands and never designed to defeat capitalism per se. On the other hand, the committees (and the workers at Lonmin who went on strike) have had long-lasting effects which reverberate in the platinum sector and amongst the South African working class more generally. The workers' resolve for R12,500 at Marikana soon spread to other sectors, including gold. The three largest platinum mines in the world – Anglo platinum, Impala Platinum and Lonmin – are now in the process of holding a 10-week protected strike under AMCU. Moreover, the demand for R12,500 has been adopted not only by mineworkers around the country, but by communities who call for a living wage for all.

The NUM is now in crisis, particularly in the platinum belt. It is no longer the largest union in the COSATU federation. The National Union of Metal Workers of South Africa (NUMSA – which boasts 360,000 members) has now become the largest affiliate. Together, these two unions provided a voting engine for the ANC in national and local elections in South Africa. However, this has now changed. In part as a response to the Marikana massacre, NUMSA held a special congress at the end of 2013. Their report stated:

> Both at Marikana and in the farmworkers strike in the Western Cape, the armed forces of the state intervened in support of the owners of capital against striking workers. In both instances the result was the murder of workers whose only crime was to refuse to sell their labour for less than a living wage ... As a union we said that after the mowing down of 34 miners in Marikana, it can't be 'business as usual' in South Africa. How do we

> explain the killing of striking workers in a democracy? As a union we have conducted a sustained and thorough analysis of the political meaning of Marikana.[56]

NUMSA cut ties with what it refers to as the capitalist ANC and is considering the possibility of forming a workers' party.

In his *Wages, Price, and Profit*, Marx sought to persuade readers that 'Instead of the conservative motto, "a fair day's wage for a fair day's work!", they ought to inscribe on their banner the revolutionary watchword, "Abolition of the wages system!"'[57] But the case of the strike at Lonmin has shown that even a wage demand can indeed be revolutionary. The ability of workers to provide a challenge to capitalist hegemony extends far beyond Lonmin's unprotected strike of 2012. The strike gave confidence to and was a victory for the working class. The spirit of Marikana – which is defined by independent working-class power – will continue to reverberate in the lives of South Africans, in both communities and workplaces, for years to come.

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56 Numsa Declaration 2014, For the Special National Congress 17–20 December 2013, pp. 4–5.

57 Marx 1865, pp. 446–7.

CHAPTER 4

Greece: Grassroots Labour Struggles in a Crisis-Ridden Country

Antonios Broumas, Elias Ioakimoglou and Kostas Charitakis

Introduction

Austerity is the main political economic mechanism through which capital solves its crises. It involves transferring the costs of the solution to the forces of labour. Greece is a country that has now been in severe economic crisis for the past five years, and the impact on labour, the oppressed social classes and the environment may have no precedent in the country's recent history. On the other hand, by penetrating most facets of social reproduction, social antagonism has given birth to radical mutations in the forms of labour struggles and in wider social movements. In order to ensure the collective subsistence of the oppressed, resistance in the age of austerity has woven horizontal social relations based on mutual aid, collaboration, equality and direct democracy, thus acquiring constitutive characteristics in relative autonomy to capital and the state. In this context, grassroots labour struggles have become embedded in wider communities of struggle and networks of resistance, which were formulated during the years of the crisis. Hence, forces of labour are gradually becoming an integral part of a countervailing social subject, which is capable at times of disrupting capital circulation and accumulation and, in parallel, of reconstructing aspects of social reproduction on alternative material, political and cultural bases.

The present text aims to theorise labour struggles in Greece during the past five years from the standpoint of the oppressed, with the aim of providing useful theoretical tools for militants searching out ways forward.[1] Even though it touches various issues that refer to contemporary processes of domination and exploitation, this essay mainly deals with the political economy of labour struggles as an organic and vibrant part of social counter-power and examines their disruptive and emancipatory potential as opposed to the capital-state

1 Holloway 2012, p. 516.

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complex.[2] The overall argument of the essay is that the crisis of capital in the country has deepened the crisis of conventional unionism and has reconstructed the forces of labour and their resistance in the direction of a stronger interrelation with wider social movements and the needs and aspirations of the oppressed classes. The first part of the essay gives a picture of the radical changes in the reproduction of labour in Greece during these five years of austerity and crisis, whereas the second part provides a background analysis of the crisis of conventional unionism in the country. The third part of the essay approaches the phenomenon of general strikes as a distinct form of labour struggle during the crisis. In the fourth part, we provide a critical description of certain events in the labour struggle that have acquired increased significance due to their social and political impact. The fifth part of the essay elaborates on the structures and processes of grassroots labour struggles. Then a separate section is dedicated to the struggle of the recuperated Vio.Me factory in Salonica, Greece. The final part of the essay deals with the interrelations of labour and wider social struggles and attempts to sketch the characteristics of a new paradigm of labour struggles in the country. Finally, we conclude our analysis by calling for the formulation of hybrid social/labour communities of struggle as the necessary step forward for the labour movement in Greece.

The Capital Accumulation Regime in Greece

The foundations of Greek capitalism were established in the 1930s. Its consolidation took place in the two post-war decades and its characteristics have been continuously changing ever since. Greek capitalism was based on strong state intervention in the product and labour markets, the importance of small and medium enterprises, family businesses, familial corporate governance, and strong family responsibility as regards social protection.

We distinguish three historical periods of change in the accumulation regime: (a) from 1974 until the end of the 1980s, (b) from 1990 to 2007, and (c) from 2008 to 2014. During the first period, which started with the fall of the military dictatorship, change has brought about the expansion of the entrepreneurial state and a dramatic improvement of employee rights and social protection. During the second period, changes have promoted labour market flexibility and economic liberalism, financial expansion, the growing importance of corporations and the efficiency of the social protection system.

2 Huke, Clua-Losada, Bailey 2015.

During the third period, intense and brutal transformations stemming from the adjustment programmes imposed by the troika and the dominant social classes have wiped out the basic underpinnings of the 'old' model.

Greek capitalism has been based on the quick growth of the internal market and the establishment of a number of Fordist industries from the 1960s and 1970s onwards, the heavy reliance on revenues from tourism, merchant marine, European Union Funds, the use of foreign technology, and, following the technological and organisational path already created by more developed European countries, a large share of self-employed service workers and small enterprises. The small size of the domestic market has always imposed diversified production in small batches and flexibility in production lines. Only medium and large corporations implemented more sophisticated forms of division of labour and Taylorist principles of work organisation. Economic adjustment in Greece has been intimately tied to EU integration since 1974, when tariffs for traditional products started to diminish. Since 1987, exchange rate policy became one of the basic tools of disinflationary macroeconomic policy and was translated into an overvalued exchange rate that pushed firms to adjust.[3] As a result, the drachma was over-valued for 15 years. Firms responded to intensified competition in two different ways: corporations modernised their means of production and work organisation, while small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) tried to survive by lowering wages and degrading the working conditions of employees. As a consequence of this duality in entrepreneurial response to international competition, the traditional labour-market segmentation between skilled and less skilled or unskilled labour was reproduced. Thus the Greek labour market in its present form combines elements of anachronistic and modern divisions of the labour force, depending on which segment one observes.

These structural characteristics of the Greek economy define the two main segments of the labour market: The primary segment of skilled labour is composed mostly by workers holding a tertiary degree. The secondary segment of semi-skilled and unskilled labour is composed mostly by workers holding a primary or secondary degree. In 2007, the respective shares of the two segments in total employment were approximately 30 percent and 70 percent in the business sector, with an internal division of the primary segment in highly skilled professions (university degree, 17 percent of total employment) and a segment of associate professionals (tertiary non-university, 13 percent of total employment).

3 Ioakeimoglou and Milios 1993.

Policy-Driven Internal Devaluation

From 1995 to 2007 important changes took place in the economy. The Greek economy enjoyed a decade of growth and prosperity. The recovery, based on financial liberalisation, inflow of EU funds, public works and residential construction during the 1990s, and further boosted by low Eurozone interest rates and debt during the 2000s, created several virtuous cycles in the economy. This led to falling inflation and low real interest rates, a residential construction bubble, rising investment in non-residential fixed capital, acceleration in the productivity of labour and higher real wages, a decline in unemployment, high GDP growth rates and a surplus in the primary public balance. As a result of higher fixed capital investment, profitability was rising, capital accumulation was accelerating and new technology and organisational innovations were introduced in the labour process. More than half a million Greeks, mostly women, found jobs during these 'golden years' of the Greek economy.

In contrast to this good performance, the external deficit of goods and services increased dramatically from 1999 onwards, leading to rising external debt, which was due to the malfunctioning of the European Monetary Union (EMU).[4] Although the theory underlying the architecture of EMU had predicted that external deficits would trigger a market-driven correction mechanism, leading external deficits back to equilibrium, the Greek experience showed that market forces do not trigger any correction mechanism and surging deficits and exploding debt persisted. As a result, brutal political force was allowed to succeed where market-driven adjustment failed. A policy-driven internal devaluation (also known as competitive disinflation) has been imposed by the troika and the dominant social classes. The fierce fiscal adjustment that followed the implementation of two successive adjustment programmes plunged the economy into a deep recession that has become as extensive as the Depression in the 1930s United States. While GDP and employment increased again after an initial slump of approx. 25 percent and 20 percent respectively during the years 2010–14, the contribution of domestic demand to the increase of GDP even became negative. Further on, disinvestment led to a contraction in fixed capital stock, indicating a destruction of productive capacity. In addition, the capital/employment ratio has been constantly falling, a phenomenon which indicates that even if productivity were utilised to full capacity, this would not be enough to absorb the current level of unemployment.

4 Artus 2015; Ahearne and Pisany-Ferry 2006; Lane 2006; Deroose et al. 2004.

FIGURE 4.1 *Capacity utilisation rate and average profit margin* (*Greece 2006Q1–2016Q2*)
SOURCE: NATIONAL ACCOUNTS

Nowadays, the decline in purchasing power of the average wage is dramatic. It is now approximately 20 percent lower than in 2010. This is the result of high unemployment (25.6 percent in 2014 as opposed to 7.8 percent in 2008), which also undermines the bargaining power of workers and their unions. Such decline is fostered by structural changes in the labour market, which aim at increasing the vulnerability of workers to the changes in the unemployment rate. In other words, for the same unemployment rate, workers can now obtain lower wages than before. An important feature of the Greek crisis is that the abrupt decline in real wages and unit labour costs (–16 percent relative to 37 main competitor countries during the five years of internal devaluation) is not followed by a large fall in prices as predicted by mainstream theory. As a result, the average profit margin surged to historically high levels, compensating losses in sales. At the end of the adjustment process, fewer firms are selling less units of product (as shown by falling capacity utilisation) but each unit of product contains more profit (as shown by increasing profit margins).[5]

5 See figure 4.1.

Main Structural Reforms and Diffuse Precariousness

The previous section describes a kind of redistribution game. The game became possible when structural reforms in the labour market deprived workers of all possibility of defending themselves against the despotism of the employers. During the five years of the crisis the main structural reforms have been the following:

1. Employment in the public sector constitutes a particular and rather large segment of the labour market (15 percent of total employment and 23 percent of wage labour). It has been historically, but also in recent decades, a favoured field of political patronage. Employment security in the public sector is much prized in periods of high unemployment and working conditions are better by far than in the private sector – at least in SMEs. The downsizing of this sector organised by the troika and the governments in office, mostly during the first adjustment programme (2010–11), when there was a wide consensus of the population against the 'privileged' workers of this sector, was successful; it reduced the number of workers working in secure jobs as well as average wages. As a result, the wage bill of public servants decreased by approximately one-third compared to the level of 2009. The dismantling of the public sector changed the overall balance of power between capital and labour, as trade unionism has some of its bastions in this sector. Furthermore, wages in the public sector were affecting the reference wage in bargaining in the private sector.
2. Collective bargaining has been dismantled and reduced to a minor institutional status – almost a detail in the operation of the labour market.
3. The determination of minimum wages has been removed from the general national collective agreement between the Greek General Confederation of Workers and the employers' corresponding organisations; it is now determined by decree by the Ministry of Employment. It was reduced from €751 monthly to €586 in a single stroke in 2013 and its change has affected the average wage, since the minimum wage is a reference for the determination of pay in the business sector.
4. Concerning the duration of the contracts, firms now prefer fixed-term contracts and part-time employment instead of open-ended contracts (permanent full-time employment). Permanent employment conditions are receding, while less secure forms of employment are quickly becoming widespread.
5. As for pay practices, the majority of employers consider that, given the current situation of the labour market (high unemployment rates, espe-

cially for the young, mounting precariousness, rapid extension of part-time work, trade union weakness etc.) the new minimum wage of €586 (including the employer's contribution to social security funds) is a fair wage for all semi-skilled and unskilled workers. Wages of high-skilled employees and executives are individually agreed and are now much higher than before compared to unskilled workers.

6. In the way it was implemented in the 1980s, compulsory arbitration gave weak unions the state's backing in settling their disputes with employers. The abolition of compulsory arbitration now diminishes the bargaining power of the workers.
7. Employee compensation for layoffs has been dramatically reduced.
8. It is expected that very soon, with the application of the third adjustment programme, the protection of workers against mass dismissals will be greatly weakened.

These developments in the institutional framework of the labour market, as well as high unemployment rates and the resulting dramatic change in the balance of power between workers and firms, has given rise to certain new phenomena in the labour market. The distance in working conditions and salaries between employees in the public and the private sector has now been reduced, since the monthly pay of a large share of public servants is now under €1,000 and their jobs are becoming more and more precarious. As part-time work expands rapidly, the number of precarious workers increases. New flexible forms of employment are injected into the workplace, even in some sectors of the primary segment of the labour market. New forms of duality appear inside the modern sector of the economy. During the last quarter of 2014, the monthly gross salary for the 17 percent of the workforce has been less than the minimum €586 wage, whereas 50 percent of the workforce receives salaries of less than €1,100 and only 20 percent of the workforce enjoys salaries that exceed €2,000. It is estimated that almost one million workers are paid with a delay of one to twelve months. Overtime is usually (three out of four) unpaid or underpaid.[6]

These new phenomena show that a process of diffusion of precariousness is underway in segments of the Greek labour market which, until recently, have been considered immune to it. We therefore propose the term of diffuse precariousness to describe the totality of these new phenomena.

6 The following data are estimations from an as yet unpublished report by the GSEE Institute of Labour, based on microdata from the 2015 Labour Force Survey and the Structure of Earnings Survey (in file with author).

The Crisis of Conventional Unionism

Conventional unionism in Greece monopolises the formal representation of organised labour at the national level in the form of two third-level union confederations, which are based on the division between the employees of the private and the public sector. The General Workers' Confederation of Greece (GSEE), which represents private sector employees, is organised in 81 regional labour centres and 73 sectoral labour federations, whereas the Supreme Administration of Public Servants' Unions (ADEDY) is organised in 46 labour federations, representing the various structures of public sector employees. Even though they have certain differences,[7] both national confederations throughout their history have been economically dependent on the state[8] and dominated by political parties.[9] In addition, the bureaucracies of GSEE and ADEDY are purportedly structured so as to limit the representation of combative unionism by over-representing unions which are either literally inactive or established by the bosses of each sector, or which come from the relatively safer environment of the public sector.[10] As a result, the national confederations of GSEE and ADEDY have grown into a form of institutionalised representation of labour with limited autonomy in relation to the state and the parties of the political establishment, subsumed in the role of reproducing social consent and suppressing bottom-up labour struggles. For these reasons the penetration of union membership in the private sector has fallen by 15 percent in the past 20 years, collapsing to a 30 percent unionisation rate in the private sector.[11]

Collective bargaining agreements and the maintenance of wages at the level of subsistence for workers are so far the main activity of conventional unionism within an ideological framework of social consensus and cross-class collaboration. Neoliberal restructuring policies of the past five years have gradually dismantled the state institutions of mediation, upon which the whole system of sectoral and national collective bargaining between labour and capital in the country has been based.[12] The major aim of the supply-side policies of

7 The dismissal of employees in the public sector is in most cases constitutionally prohibited. Therefore, the labour unions of the public sector have a traditionally wider penetration, but are in general relatively less combative than those of the private sector.

8 Kouzis 2007, pp. 175–89.

9 Kordatos 1972; Kapsalis 2012, p. 7.

10 In 2012, from the 130 elected representatives of GSEE/ADEDY, 122 come from the public sector and only eight from unions of the private sector (Nikolaou 2012).

11 Kapsalis 2012, p. 6.

12 Kapsalis and Konstantinou 2013.

the memoranda imposed on Greek society was to radically cut labour costs in the country in order to make the national economy more competitive in the regional division of labour in the European Union. In this context, the collective bargaining system of regulating the labour-capital conflict was considered as outdated and was severely restructured in favour of capital. Hence, due to the massive unemployment in the country[13] and the abolition of the collective bargaining system, wages severely declined during the crisis.[14] These major losses on the part of labour further delegitimised the role of conventional unionism among workers as a machine for producing consensus with the bosses and created more fertile conditions for grassroots labour struggles.[15]

Under these circumstances, conventional unionism has entered into a deep crisis regarding its content, role and structure, a crisis that has superseded what until now the forces of the left had been describing as the 'capitulation' of the trade union leadership to the dominant relations of power, in consequence of its affiliation with the parties of the political establishment. Such dependence of conventional unionism on incumbent centres of power was not just a matter of temporarily negative correlations of power within the trade union bureaucracy but, rather, a deeper structural problem.

Conventional unionism in Greece has long been structured on the basis of a body of labour that had full-time, long-term and relatively stable working conditions (especially public servants), whereas it systematically excluded the flexible, precarious and unprotected parts of the workforce, as well as the unemployed and immigrants. Even though it has been rapidly increasing for years, this multitude of labour remained 'invisible' for conventional unionism, without being in any way represented within its institutions. And this paralleled the bureaucratisation, the suffocating dependence on party bureaucracies, the asphyxiation of democracy in workplaces through a hierarchical and

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13 In November 2014, the total number of unemployed was 1,242,219 people compared to 3,551,148 in employment, with the general rate of unemployment reaching 27 percent and the worst rates observed among young people (approximately 50 percent). According to the statistics of GSEE, unemployment in the country has acquired structural characteristics, since seven out of ten unemployed already stay jobless for more than one year. See http://news.in.gr/economy/article/?aid=1231353662.

14 Solidarity For All 2015.

15 According to a poll conducted in 2010, lack of trust among employees in regard to conventional unionism was up to 69 percent, which can safely be expected to have risen during the crisis. Yet in the same poll a 77 percent of respondents considered labour unions to be essential for the promotion of their collective interests (GSEE Labour Institute/VPRC 2010).

strictly controlled model of operation and the interrelations of union bureaucracies with the state and the bosses to guarantee social consensus. All these characteristics of conventional unionism have played a catalytically negative role, even during the climax of the crisis when the trade union bureaucracy was forced to denounce governmental neoliberal policies and to call for general strikes.

At the sectoral level, conventional unionism has been neither capable of organising nor determined to organise even the most elementary mobilisations in order to safeguard the level of wages of its members. Yet not even the model of combative left unionism has been able to achieve successes under these conditions. This failure was dramatically demonstrated by the defeat of the 2012 struggle of workers in the steel industry, which involved a months-long, heroic strike with broad solidarity and support from society. Having a narrow horizon, i.e., with demands against layoffs and deterioration in labour relations in only one factory, organised and led by a specific political party and its trade union subsidiary organisation, with forms of action purportedly limited to protest and to the demand for the state to intervene, the classic model of going on strike, as shown in the steel workers' strike, could not produce significantly positive outcomes under conditions of harsh social antagonism.[16] Hence, the heroic strike in the steel industry has been the tragic final act of the militant tendency of the old unionism, making the impact of the crisis on the role of classic trade unions even more evident.

The General Strike Paradox

Despite the crisis and discrediting of conventional unionism, over the last years (particularly the biennium 2010–12) the general strikes that the trade union bureaucracy was forced to declare from below have been the most massive and combative of the past forty years. Workers seized the opportunity through these strikes to express their rage and demands, giving to the often ceremonial demonstrations during strikes an element of direct conflict with the political establishment and the state. Despite the harsh repression at demonstrations, workers have shown strength and perseverance by violating *en masse* the limits of 'peaceful protest' promoted by the trade union leaderships, and they have done so not only through verbal condemnation but also through direct action

16 For a chronicle of the steel workers strike see Industrial Organisation of Athens Central Organisation 2012.

in the streets. Long battles with the police, crowds which refused to dissolve and regrouped again and again, the besieging for hours of the house of parliament, self-organisation and solidarity in order to cope with tear gas and take care of the wounded – all have become part of the normal image of demonstrations during strikes, replacing the nerveless parades of the past.

This living process of radicalisation in the streets further deepened the gap between workers and trade union leadership. The will to continue the fight and forge a plan of struggles that would endure were in blatant contradiction with the decisions of trade union bureaucracies for piecemeal struggles or symbolic one-off strikes, which looked more like attempts to relieve the tension among workers rather than actually fight. Inevitably, general strikes during the years of the crisis took a general political character outside of sectoral trade union demands, also expressing those parts of society that were not represented by official trade unions. It is not by coincidence that, as happened during the Greek December 2008 revolt, the tone during the strikes was set by the new social subject of labour, consisting of precarious or unemployed workers. On the other hand, notwithstanding their necessity, central political mobilisations through general strikes and demonstrations constituted an 'escape route' from the weakness of labour struggles at the actual locus of exploitation, i.e., at the workplaces.

In conclusion, the general strikes at this phase of the crisis have been appropriated by the multitude of labour and diverted for its own aspirations. This has occurred despite and against the will and aspirations of the bureaucracies which officially declared them, thus transcending the narrow boundaries of conventional unionism and creating socio-political events which expressed wider social forces. The paradox in this case is that the most dense and intense period of general strikes in the history of the Greek labour movement has not been accompanied, as one would expect, by a reinforcement of trade unionism but, rather, by an intensification and greater revelation of the depth of its crisis. As a result, after the first three years of the crisis GSEE has gradually retreated into deactivation, whereas leftist trade union factions have been unable to create or even play a role in any large-scale socio-political events.

Events of Labour Struggle with Significant Impact

There were, however, certain struggles marking the period when general strikes subsided which gave birth to novel characteristics, although these too highlighted already well-known limits of struggle. It is not by coincidence that these significant labour struggles took place in the public sector where unionisation

still holds ground and where the shock from the eradication of labour rights (or even privileges) of previous decades was, in some respect, even greater than in the private sector. The neoliberal restructuring of the state and its institutions penetrated the core of social relations which had been the basis of social consensus since the times of the dictatorship, i.e., the secured, lifetime job with high salaries (well above those in the private sector), better working conditions and higher than average welfare benefits and health insurance. Such a favourable configuration of labour conditions in the public sector has been the outcome of a combination of historical factors related, on the one hand, to clientelism and, on the other, to the struggles and the combative spirit of civil servants. The sudden, violent downgrading of these social groups into working conditions almost identical to the already horrid labour conditions obtaining in the private sector caused explosive struggles and, most importantly, triggered perhaps for the first time the transgression of the division between employees of the public and private sector and an opportunity for common struggle involving both.

Emblematic among labour struggles in recent years has been the struggle of the Ministry of Finance cleaners.[17] On 18 September 2013, 595 mostly female cleaners of the Ministry were sacked, in fulfilment of the requirements for job cuts in the public sector that had been imposed by the memoranda agreed with the country's external debtors. The struggle of the Ministry of Finance cleaners has been a persistent, largely self-organised and long-lasting struggle with important feminist characteristics. It has also featured new forms of protest, such as the establishment of a permanent camp/activist meeting point outside the Ministry, and a combative attitude, such as surprise blockades, occupations of sites and clashes with riot police. Furthermore, this particular struggle has mainly oriented its activities towards society by maintaining a presence in most other struggles that have taken place at the same time, as well as by keeping contact with social movements. In many ways, the struggling female cleaners have deliberately sought to connect the righteousness of their immediate interests to win back their jobs with the rights of the majority of society to overthrow the neoliberal restructuring policies of the memoranda. As a result, the struggle of the Ministry of Finance cleaners managed to gather a very broad wave of support and solidarity, something unusual for public sector employees, and hence became a symbol of resistance that even triggered

17 For more information check out the official website of the struggle: https://595katharistries.wordpress.com/.

solidarity in other countries.[18] After the election of the Syriza–ANEL coalition government in January 2015, the Ministry of Finance cleaners have gradually been restored to their former positions.

In contrast to the experience mentioned above, another highly promising labour struggle, that of the secondary education teachers, was sabotaged by the union leadership before even getting started, despite the fact that the vast majority of teachers had voted in favour of a combative and long-lasting general strike. The secondary education teachers' confederation is a sector with a tradition of militant struggles and is maybe the only one throughout the public sector with significant democratic procedures at grassroots level, even having teachers' assemblies in schools. The union has always had a strong presence in all the main confrontations of the period and has organised several sectoral strikes with significant impact. In May 2013, the decision of the union's general assembly to go on strike during the national student examinations, which could have led to their postponement, foreshadowed a direct confrontation with the right-wing New Democracy–PASOK coalition government that was then in power; and it seemed at the time that this might have acted as a catalyst for a wider escalation of popular mobilisation. Nevertheless, the partitocratic bureaucracy of the trade union suspended the strike at the last moment on the pretext of the government's threat to force them to return to work and prosecute the strikers. This negative development raised the level of frustration not only in the sector but in all other labour sectors, transmitting the message that within the existing trade union structures, even those with the strongest, most politicised and militant grassroots organisations, it is impossible to organise the struggle with determination and real potential to win.

There have also been other attempts to establish a centre of struggle where all available forces of labour could be assembled and attract broader social support. Such are the cases of the metro workers' strike, who occupied the headquarters of the company, or the maritime workers, who entered into a rough contest with the powerful Greek ship-owners. Yet no matter how brave they were and notwithstanding the social solidarity garnered, these struggles quickly succumbed to severe state repression, which reached its climax when the ministers responsible issued decrees stating that the workers must compulsorily return to work, on grounds of public interest. In both cases it seemed that there was no plan for direct conflict; instead the efforts were possessed of

18 On 20 September 2014, a global day of solidarity with the struggle was organised, with events taking place in Spain, France, UK and elsewhere. See Demotix, International Day of Solidarity for Greek Cleaners in London, available at: http://www.demotix.com/photo/5818115/international-day-solidarity-greek-cleaners-london.

a more symbolic character, the aim of which was to promote a more militant stance of disobedience within the existing framework. Other sectoral labour struggles, such as those of public electricity company workers, of municipal employees and of public servants in certain ministries, were not able to interrelate with broader labour and social forces, since they confined themselves within their sectoral interests and failed to overcome the gap between the public and the private sector.

Grassroots Trade Unions and Struggles

Within this context of frustration and glimpses of hope, an undercurrent of unionism at the base and grassroots struggles has emerged in opposition to and outside of the trade union bureaucracy, claiming an autonomous presence and activity for the workers themselves. Primary-level unions in coordination, popular direct democratic assemblies, labour/social collectives from workplaces and neighbourhoods have acted for the first time together through direct action, militant solidarity and active independence from conventional unionism.

The first sign of interrelation between labour struggles and wider social movements already appeared before the crisis. On 6 December 2008, after the assassination of the teenager Alexandros Grigoropoulos by a police officer on patrol in the leftist neighbourhood of Exarcheia, Athens, the economic and political establishment was caught amid a full blown revolt in all major cities of the country, spearheaded by the youth, the precariat, the immigrants and the underclasses. In the more than thirty days of the revolt, protesters hit the streets in unprecedented numbers, using mottos such as 'Fuck May '68, Fight Now' and constituting a powerful and polymorphous social movement characterised by the creative negation of existing social relations and structures and an inclination towards the aim of absolute social liberation.[19] On 22 December 2008, midnight, Konstantina Kouneva, the secretary of the Attican workers union in the cleaning sector and a Bulgarian immigrant, was ambushed by two men, who splashed sulphuric acid all over her body and also forced her to drink the acid. The vile attack destroyed her face, eyesight and oesophagus and directly threatened her life, leaving her hospitalised for several months. Kouneva was an immigrant, a woman and a combative grassroots syndicalist in one of the most exploited labour forces, in a sector deeply characterised by mas-

19 Vradis and Dalakoglou 2011.

culine domination and the racist behaviour of bosses and their goons.[20] Due to her vibrant syndicalist activity, the bosses had already reportedly issued repeated threats to her life in the lead-up to the attack. While the streets were still burning, the masses who had participated in the December revolt were quick to grasp the related issues of labour, immigration and masculine domination that characterised the attack, and to form a powerful solidarity movement that brought the issue to the centre of public attention.[21] On 27 December 2008 the central offices of the public urban railways, where Konstantina was working as an outsourced employee, were occupied and transformed into the coordination centre for the solidarity struggle. On 29 December 2008 a large demonstration marched to the hospital where Konstantina was struggling to stay alive, and on the 1 January 2009 a much larger demonstration of several thousand people took place at the site of the attack. After that, social movements organised a series of demonstrations and occupations of radio stations, engaged in direct action against the headquarters of Konstantina's employer's company, leaving them in disarray, and also organised a fund-raising campaign for Konstantina's hospital expenses and life costs. As a result, the harsh exploitation of workers in the cleaning sector became widely known, and the united struggles between the movements and the union of Attican cleaners forced public entities such as the public urban railways to re-evaluate contractual provisions over worker conditions with outsourcing companies. Due to the mobilisations, which lasted for years, the heroic personal stance of Konstantina Kouneva became a symbol of struggle for precarious workers, especially females, leading to her election as member of the European parliament with SYRIZA in 2014.

Grassroots unionism had almost disappeared from the Greek labour movement since the late 1970s, when an important movement of democratically organised primary-level unions and labour committees had developed in the factories. After that period base unions were absorbed by the stratified conventional unionism and the domination of political parties over horizontal social activity. The re-emergence of this tradition, with characteristics adapted to contemporary capitalist reality, has not been an easy process, and therefore it has been one of the most important qualitative characteristics of the legacy of the December 2008 revolt. After the revolt many efforts towards the autonomous organisation of the workplaces have been initiated, and this undercurrent became visible in the general strikes that followed. Certainly,

20 Kampouri and Zavos 2010.

21 Stavrides 2010.

labour struggles at the grassroots have not evolved in a linear way and have not acquired momentum within the labour movement. Hence primary-level unions remain embedded in the institutional structure of conventional unionism and use the typical bureaucratic model of operations (with limited exceptions); and yet several of them declare their will for, and act to bring about, a new militant labour movement with autonomy from the state and the bosses. Despite the fact that the horizontal coordination between these primary-level unions has not been stabilised, whereas many of the disadvantages of bureaucratic unionism re-appeared within them due to strong connections with political party factions, many nascent associations or collectives of workers have been established – most notably in the service sector – which operate with a strong commitment to the principles of direct democracy and grassroots struggle and often act in concert, thus creating informal networks of struggle.

Until now, the activity of these base structures has focused mainly on addressing concrete cases of layoffs, employer terrorism and precarious labour relations, rather than dealing with the issue of wages, which traditionally constitutes the main locus of demands for the trade union movement. In addition, practices of struggle within these grassroots labour struggles give emphasis to direct action, demonstrations, blockades, sit-ins, boycotts and other forms of activity that invest in the combative spirit and the perseverance of participants, and not in the general protesting that is the main tool of struggle of traditional trade unions. As a result, by following a strategy of worker self-defence and horizontal solidarity in direct conflict with the bosses, these struggles have managed to achieve small victories in cases of employer impunity – a testament to their persistence.

The Recuperated Factory of Vio.Me: Resistance, Occupation, Production

'You can't? Then it's us who can!' has been the slogan expressing the tenacity of the Vio.Me workers in their attempt to take into their own hands the factory in which they were working after its abandonment by the bosses. Despite the mistrust and open hostility which they encountered from trade unions and certain forces of the political left,[22] the slogan of the workers of Vio.Me

22 Indicatively, the Communist Party of Greece has acted against workers' attempts to recuperate other workplaces and has generally opposed this type of worker struggle, on the

has come true and, since February 2013, the factory operates under worker self-management, with its products circulating throughout the country and in many European economies.[23] For the first time in Greece, self-management has been carried into actual practice in the difficult terrain of industrial production. In a simple and clear manner, the workers themselves state in their informal articles of association:

> We operate the factory's production and management structures under conditions of full-fledged self-management and workers' control. The fundamental principles of operating the factory, of conducting our struggle and the central tenets of our future plans are the equality in our participation in decision-making, horizontality and direct democracy.[24]

As might also be expected from similar experiences in Argentina and elsewhere,[25] the starting point of the Vio.Me project has been the collective effort for survival of all those involved, i.e., a fight for subsistence and a way to tackle unemployment, the rapacity of the bosses and the indifference of the state. Yet the most important element in the Vio.Me struggle is the fact that behind the choice to recuperate the factory lies the conscious desire of participants to live with dignity beyond the usual forms of struggle, that is, through demands, the delegation to others of the task of solving their problems, or even the establishment of clientelist relations with politicians. Without waiving any of their legal rights, the Vio.Me workers have decided not to wait for promises to be fulfilled or institutional arrangements to be enacted, but to strive through self-organisation for another model of labour without bosses and without any help from the state. In this way, the Vio.Me workers have been able to uniquely connect the struggle for survival with the struggle for a decent life and, hence, to connect their personal survival with social emancipation.

A second aspect of the struggle concerns the very structure and content of the labour movement. In order to engage with the project of recuperation, the Vio.Me workers had to overcome the obstacles of bureaucratic trade union structures and the purely symbolic, fragmented and corporatist trade union type of activity. The general assembly of the workers became the unmedi-

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basis that through recuperation workers become 'small bosses' (Zamponi and Vogiatzoglou 2015, p. 7).

23 The official website of the Vio.Me workers is available at: http://www.viome.org.

24 For more analysis of the internal operation of the Vio.Me project and its relation to horizontality and collaboration, see Malamidis 2014.

25 Ruggeri 2014.

ated space of collective decision-making regarding each and every step of the struggle, whereas the trade union has been re-organised on the basis of direct democracy, thus surpassing the board of directors' structure and any kind of institutional representation. Furthermore, the Vio.Me workers have addressed their call personally to workers of any other workplace they could reach, in the belief that their case is of relevance for the entire labour movement and for society in general. And the very content of their message has been a call for workers and social movements to collectively take matters into their own hands in every terrain of struggle and in every field of social reproduction. As a result of this call, the 'Caravan of Struggle and Solidarity' has been established as an open, horizontal space of coordination and joint action for trade unions, individual workers from different sectors and for hybrid labour/social collectives, and since its commencement has been a strong presence in labour and social struggles.

A third, and totally innovative by Greek standards, aspect of the Vio.Me struggle is the assignment of the project to the control of society. The orientation of the recuperation is decided by a wide network of militants and local assemblies that acts in solidarity throughout the country and which has embraced and supported the effort from the start. An outcome of this strong connection with society has been the collective decision that the recuperated factory will produce biological cleaning products that meet basic household needs and respect the environment. Even the diffusion of the Vio.Me products is conducted in a completely different way, through an informal network of social spaces, solidarity structures, markets without intermediaries and cooperative groceries. This distribution network has succeeded in strengthening social solidarity by transgressing the impersonal relations between producers and consumers that are found in the capitalist market.

Viewed as a palpable response to the crisis, the self-management of Vio.Me has shown a way of rejecting any simple return to previous conditions, i.e., to more normalised and supposedly 'fair' conditions of exploitation. On the contrary, the Vio.Me struggle laid down a concrete way of engaging with an alternative organisation of production and distribution on the basis of social needs instead of private profit; on the basis of free cooperation instead of exploitation; on the basis of solidarity instead of competition among peers; and on the basis of environmental sustainability instead of economic growth to the detriment of humanity and nature.

New Forms of Labour Organisation amid the Crisis: Towards a New Paradigm of Struggles

During the five years of the crisis, labour struggles in Greece became more entangled with social movements. The re-structuring of the Greek economy and society according to neoliberal orthodoxy has not confined itself to the workplaces but, instead, has penetrated all terrains of social reproduction. As a response, massive grassroots movements have spawned not only to collectively defend subsistence and dignity on the basis of solidarity and direct action, but also to open viable alternatives for the future.

In the beginning of the crisis, social forces were set in motion on the basis of mutual aid, with the aim of providing the material bases for social reproduction. Throughout the country collectives have established community kitchens and peer-to-peer solidarity initiatives for the distribution of food, reconnected electricity that was cut down to low income households, organised 'without middlemen' the distribution of agricultural produce, established self-organised pharmacies, healthcare clinics and tutoring programmes and organised networks of direct action against house foreclosures. Yet later on, social movements have acquired deeper political characteristics, striving for the formation of institutions that will be both long-lasting and semi-autonomous from the capital/state complex. The Greek squares movement of 2011 and its direct democratic assemblies spread to almost every city and village of the country, bringing to the forefront a constituent popular power which directly confronted the neoliberal establishment and led to the demise of the social-democratic government of Papandreou.[26] The squares movement left behind an important legacy of structures operating through direct democracy, such as local assemblies and social centres, yet it also unleashed social forces which boosted the social and solidarity economy and the movements for the defence and the promotion of the commons.[27]

A fertile interchange between grassroots labour struggles and this constellation of horizontal movements established the basis for stronger connections between the two. Struggles in the workplace became more embedded in local communities and everyday life in the workers' districts. In addition, horizontal movements acquired distinct elements of labour struggle as part of their theory and praxis. The activity of horizontal workers' structures has in many cases been accompanied by numerous social and political collectives operating in

26 Sotirakopoulos and Sotiropoulos 2013.

27 Giovanopoulos and Mitropoulos 2011.

neighbourhoods and numerous individuals in solidarity, breaking in this way the traditional boundaries between trade unions and society and thus gaining wider social characteristics. Exemplary in this regard is the fight against the abolition of the Sunday holiday, a struggle with momentous durability and militancy, around which a permanent coordination of primary trade unions, labour collectives, popular assemblies, solidarity initiatives and self-organised social structures has been formed. Similar coordination has been established on the spot in many cases of layoffs in various workplaces (schools, bookstores, trade, couriers, catering, telecommunications, etc.), but also in relation to more general issues, such as activities for the support of unemployed workers, e.g., for free transportation and unemployment benefits for all.

An important mutation in the struggles has also been the turn of many self-organised structures (squats, social centres, initiatives in the neighbourhoods) to issues of labour and unemployment and to workers' struggles, which previously were dealt with in a cautious manner, or even with negative predispositions. The interrelation of labour with social structures and initiatives has offered new opportunities for weakened labour forces to rejuvenate their struggles and, on the other hand, opened the often self-referential structures of the labour movement to key issues for wider social groups. Certain features in this new paradigm of labour struggle are mainly encountered within horizontal social movements. These features include, among others, the self-organisation of participants themselves without expecting any guidance from party bureaucracies, the direct-democratic decision-making process in assemblies, unmediated horizontal communication and coordination without representation and permanent delegates, the orientation to direct action and solidarity in practice beyond the formal and, often, fruitless protest, and, of course, the hostility to conventional unionism and its bureaucracies. By flexibly seeking ways of communication with society without losing its counter-power characteristics, this presents a model of struggle over and above even the tradition of anarcho-syndicalism, which tends to acquire self-referential characteristics. In any case, it is a paradigm in process, which attempts to respond to the dramatically pressing demand for a contemporary labour movement re-invented from below and reconstructed on an emancipatory basis.

Nevertheless, this whole process of opening labour struggles to society and vice versa has not been without problems and deficiencies. The movements have been unable to establish solid organisations of the unemployed masses and demand dignified conditions for them. Grassroots labour struggles have failed to consolidate into long-lasting structures that could openly challenge the formal representation of institutionalised syndicalism. Most important, even though grassroots communities of worker struggle have been able to wage

important battles in certain sectors or workplaces that functioned as heroic examples for the rest of labour, organised labour failed to avert the neoliberal restructuring of employment conditions in the country.

Crucial within this context is the interrelation between labour and the movements of the commons.[28] The extensive privatisations of common goods and public benefit entities through the neoliberal restructuring programmes imposed on the country generated labour struggles that broke barriers between them and society and produced genuine social movements. In cases where social struggles reached high levels of radicalisation and consciousness, movements shifted towards the commonification of public utilities as an alternative not only to privatisation but also to state management, engaging both workers and user-citizens in their self-production and self-governance.[29] During these five years of the crisis, several unions of the public sector went on combative strikes and engaged in many other forms of struggle with demands that superseded their sectoral interests and were oriented towards the common good.[30] Nevertheless, these labour struggles failed to connect with wider social groups and to avert the implementation of neoliberal policies for many reasons. First of all, the bureaucratic upper hierarchies of institutionalised syndicalism purportedly boycotted bottom-up coordination between unions and sectors, which could have given momentum to the struggles. In addition, the dysfunctional structures of the Greek state and the phenomenon of widespread corruption even at the lower levels of its hierarchies developed over the past forty years had significantly thinned the public goods character of welfare state services and had to a certain extent discredited public sector unionism. Yet in many cases the will for the commonification of basic goods and the struggle against privatisations acquired popular characteristics within and through the social movements themselves, giving birth to a collective socialised labour subject and leading to important victories on the central political stage.

28 Zamponi and Vogiatzoglou 2015, p. 8.

29 Fattori 2013, p. 265.

30 Indicatively, the unions of public sector doctors and primary and secondary education teachers, which constitute the most massive workforces inside the state, engaged in numerous mobilisations during the crisis, with the main demand of upholding and strengthening the public-good character of health and education, which was dismantled by the policies imposed. Alongside them, the Public Power Corporation unions went on strike on several occasions, when the privatisation of the company was imminent. Furthermore, certain trade unions and professional associations, such as the bar associations of the country, conducted long-term work-to-rule actions against government bills that destroyed social rights to the detriment of the lower classes.

In 2011 the Greek Government announced its intention to privatise the Public Water Corporation of Salonica (PWCS), the second largest city of Greece, as the starting point for the privatisation of all public water corporations of the country. The PWCS workers' union did not follow the usual line of sectoral struggle but called for the support of the citizens of Salonica to avert these plans. Immediately, an anti-privatisation alliance was formed between the union and social movements of the city to fight back, called the '136 Movement'.[31] Yet as the struggle gained in popularity, participants realised that an agenda restricted to resistance would not annul privatisation, and instead proposed the commonification of the water services of Salonica. According to the proposal, municipal districts would establish non-profit water cooperatives of end users of the service, which would then confederate at the second level, in order to purchase the auctioned 51 percent of the shares of the PWCS and govern the institution through direct citizen/worker participation and on a non-profit basis.[32] In 2013, the first-level water cooperatives formed the second-level 'Citizens' Union for Water' cooperative, which attracted financial aid from social responsibility investors and registered a formal public offer for buying the PWCS. When the public offer was rejected on vague procedural grounds by the state authorities, the water movement of Salonica counter-attacked with a massive informal referendum, which, even after having been outlawed by the government, had a turnout of 218,002 citizens,[33] 98 percent of which voted down the privatisation of the PWCS. In consequence, the pro-austerity government was forced to freeze the privatisation process before stepping down after the January 2015 elections.

Another major battle against institutionalised neoliberalism in the country has been the commonification of the Greek public broadcaster ERT. On the night of 11 June 2013, the Government closed down the broadcasting of ERT in real time, while the daily evening news report of the television channels was being broadcast to thousands of viewers, and within the next days pushed through an emergency decree for the abolishment of the public entity. For one

31 Grassroots militants have calculated that if citizens themselves bought the PWCS, the cost per water end-user from the purchase of the public corporation would be equal to €136. Therefore, the number 136 has acquired symbolic significance within the Salonica water commonification movement, giving it its name.

32 For more information on the commonification proposal of the 136 Movement see 'The Citizens' Bid to Control Thessaloniki's Water', available at: http://www.136.gr/article/citizens-bid-control-thessalonikis-water.

33 The total population of the city amounts to 325,182 according to the 2011 official nationwide census, which means that two out of three citizens voted in the informal referendum.

month massive social mobilisations took place against the closure. After that, ERT employees together with activists and citizens formed direct democratic assemblies and took the production of the television and radio programme into their own hands. For almost two years most radio and television channels of the public broadcaster were able to produce and transmit thousands of hours of broadcasting through occupations of premises and infrastructure, which had in many instances the same or even higher view rates than those when ERT was under state control. The self-managed ERT became an important community in the country's anti-austerity struggle and broadcast a radical radio/TV programme with news reporting and opinions from the grassroots. The struggle for ERT was partially won when the anti-austerity SYRIZA-ANEL coalition government formally re-established the public broadcaster on 29 April 2015. Yet the government did not implement in the law the valuable experience of the preceding two years of struggle, and instead re-statified the corporation.

Solidarity and cooperative economy has historically been one of the main expressions of the labour movement.[34] Social cooperatives and associations of mutual aid have often been utilised by communities of labour as a means to accumulate the material bases that would increase their relative autonomy from the power of capital. Yet the labour movement in Greece had never before experienced a mutualist period as has been the case in other countries. The 2011 Greek squares movement and the structures of mutual aid that emerged after its retreat have been the starting point for the rejuvenation of the cooperative spirit among activists and wider social groups, which was destroyed in the 1980s and 1990s due to clientelism, partitocracy and economic dependence of cooperatives on the state.[35] Several hundreds of workers' collectives throughout the country, consisting of unemployed or precarious workers, who either participate in the movements or are influenced by their political and ethical values, have been engaging formally or informally in productive activities in the fields of production, commerce and services on the basis of equality, direct democracy, solidarity and collaboration.[36] Even though formal second-level structures of the newly born cooperative movement have as yet failed to crystallise, several meeting points have been formed in which all these divergent initiatives of the solidarity and cooperative economy can participate. Worth mentioning is the Festival for the Solidarity and Cooperative Economy,[37] which was set up during the squares movement and has been organ-

34 Lieros 2012.
35 Papageorgiou 2010, pp. 39–42.
36 Solidarity For All 2015.
37 Available at: http://www.festival4sce.org.

ised each year since October 2012. Another process of bringing together agricultural, artisanal, social and intellectual commons communities and movements is the CommonsFest, an annual grassroots festival for the protection and expansion of common goods.[38] Together with the solidarity structures of the horizontal movements, this nascent cooperativism forms a constellation of grassroots social reproduction in antagonism to the contradictions of hierarchy/domination, exploitation and ecological destruction.[39] Spanning most sectors of production, many cooperative initiatives often placed their infrastructure, labour power and know-how in the service of the horizontal movements, hence enhancing their organisational capacity and social penetration. Furthermore, the cooperative coffee-shops and bookshops now established in most neighbourhoods of Athens and Salonica function as the cells of the horizontal movements in urban space and the carriers of alternative values and culture. In conclusion, the structures of solidarity and cooperative economy in the country have been capable of reproducing labour identities that are more socialised, because more embedded in local communities and grassroots struggles. Hence they have opened a new dimension that brings the labour and wider social antagonistic movements one small step forward towards the self-management of production and of society as a whole.[40]

Conclusion

Nowadays, the state of exception is imposed by capitalist domination upon most of wage labour, establishing a wide grey area where labour rights have ceased to exist and structural unemployment has led to a state of permanent marginalisation. Long gone is the era of a labour movement with the mission of negotiating the price of labour power, recognised under the law and integrated as an institutional structure for the smooth reproduction of labour power and, ultimately, of capitalism itself. Can this ‘end’ be transformed into a ‘beginning’ for the revival of the labour movement on the basis of self-organisation, direct democracy and the permanent combative antagonism with capital and the state? Is this a historical ‘opportunity’ for us to break with all those elements

38 The 2015 CommonsFest, held in Athens on 15–17 May, gathered the most vibrant activists, communities and cooperatives of the country and featured international speakers, such as Richard Stallman, Massimo De Angelis and Pat Conaty. More information about CommonsFest can be found at: www.commonsfest.info.

39 Varkarolis 2012.

40 Kioupkiolis and Karyotis 2015.

that kept the labour movement dependent on and ultimately subservient to the established order, by transcending mere protest, claims and negotiations, and by creating here and now our own life-world based on solidarity and collaboration?

We have thus reached the crux of the matter. Wage labour, and generally work for productive purposes in alienation from the labourer, which today reveals more and more clearly its essence as slavery, establishes the terrain wherein thrive all the current ills of poverty, the reduction of personal life into the 'bare' survival of the *homo sacer*, the devastation of social relations and environmental destruction. To put it plainly, and tragically, there is no future in this terrain of social relations. If it seeks to 'win a whole world', the labour movement needs to be transformed from a movement pushing forward demands within wage labour relations into a movement that battles against them. The sanctification and upgrading of wage slavery, i.e., of capitalist exploitation, to a universal right by the left has resulted in the deepest dependence of the labour movement and of workers on capital and the state. Hence even its most militant demands and victories reproduced the very chains of the movement and its labour power as a commodity. Recycling this logic amid the crisis, i.e. demanding work for all, better pay and some rights, as already dramatically experienced in Greece, leads the world of labour into a long-term strategic defeat.

On an individual and collective basis, we need to come face-to-face with some wrenching key questions that emerge from both the crisis of conventional unionism and the limitations of grassroots struggles and their structures. What will replace wage labour, which is constantly being transformed into precarity and unemployment? Will it be a type of new feudalism for workers, totally dependent on the new conditions of exploitation and domination? Or will it be a solidarity and cooperative economy circulating and accumulating social – monetary – values? Should we continue to demand the 'right' to our exploitation and the now impossible return to Fordist full-time employment, or should we focus our thoughts and action on ways of freeing ourselves from wage labour, to engage in real social praxis, i.e., our free, creative and productive activity – a form of praxis capable of meeting our needs and desires at the social and individual level? And finally, what will replace degenerating and withered conventional labour movements? Do we need to keep operating through hierarchical and bureaucratic labour organisations or should we create a new type of socio-political formation, which, above all, will reproduce emancipatory relationships both internally and externally?

The emerging social subject of the nomadic, fluid, flexible and insecure employment/unemployment of contemporary wage labour, which has been the 'protagonist' of both the recent uprisings, as happened with the December

2008 revolt, and of the self-organised struggles and structures, has the potential to open up alternative perspectives and trajectories for our common future. Nevertheless, the question of how to overcome its partiality and fragmentation towards a unification of its social dynamism still remains open. In this context, the 'socialisation' of the labour movement is a precondition for overcoming the disadvantages mentioned above. This 'socialisation' necessarily goes beyond a narrow and distorted 'class consciousness' generated around a partitocratic top-down politicisation and the persistence of narrowly defined labour interests; rather it places at centre-stage the problems, needs, everyday life and emancipation of society, taking social utility and the environmental impact of the economy into consideration.

The formulation of socialised labour communities of struggle is the necessary step we have to take in order to generate spaces of social reproduction without domination/exploitation and independent from capital and state. It is the prerequisite for a robust process of social emancipation. Based on the daily activities of millions of people who do not wait for the conditions of the revolution to mature, an interconnected constellation of communities, movements and social structures/processes is the vehicle that will enable us to survive by transforming our lives and to live beyond survival: to live a life worth living. The relation of capital cannot exist without us; but we can only live without it.

CHAPTER 5

Fighting Against Capitalist Ownership and State Bureaucracy – Labour Struggles in Venezuela

Dario Azzellini

Since 2012, a wave of labour conflicts has been observed in the state companies of Venezuela. This is a result of the crisis that has been hitting Venezuela hard since that year, as well as of the growing conviction of Venezuelan workers and rank-and-file activists that the government's institutions often fail to manage state enterprises efficiently. Therefore in most cases protests are not over wages or labour-related demands, but rather over company management and ministerial bureaucracy. The workers demanded and took control over the plants to reclaim workers' control, a transition to socialism and production oriented toward satisfying the needs of the popular masses. In the private sector conflicts are on the rise too, with workers and communities taking over several factories after they were closed down or abandoned by the capitalist owners. While the official discourse of the government is favourable to workers' control, institutions and institutionally managed enterprises have been reluctant to hand over responsibility to the workers. The only actors with an objective interest in the transformation of the economy and the relations of production are the workers themselves and the organised communities. This contradiction is a result of Venezuela being a rentier economy, with oil exportation as its main source of income. Venezuela's economic structure is geared towards extraction and hinders the construction of a productive economy. Over the past 16 years, the Venezuelan government tried to address this problem with a variety of strategies, ranging from investment incentives and support for cooperatives to nationalisations and the construction of a state-owned production sector.[1] Therefore labour conflicts, ownership of the means of production and the construction of a productive economy are strongly linked to each other. This chapter examines different struggles for workers' control and self-management in Venezuela, situating them in the broader context of the specific characteristics of the Venezuelan economy and institutional politics.

1 Azzellini 2009; 2010a; 2011; 2012; 2014; Azzellini and Ressler 2006; 2010.

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The Venezuelan government explicitly claims to be a workers' and people's government; President Maduro himself is a former bus driver and unionist. Nevertheless, reality is contradictory and positive measures and improvements go along with violations of labour rights in both the private and the state sector. Far-reaching labour rights have been included in the constitution of 1999 and broad social programmes have improved living standards for the vast majority of Venezuelans.[2] After the entrepreneurs' lockout, which aimed at ousting President Hugo Chávez in 2001–2, Chávez signed a decree banning 'unjustified dismissals', which has been extended every year since, also under President Maduro. Over the last 15 years, labour rights have also been reinforced through legislation, especially with the Organic Law of Work and Workers (LOTTT) passed in May 2012.

The LOTTT required almost a decade of discussions in the Venezuelan National Assembly as well as in the labour movement before it was passed. Nevertheless, it introduced fundamental improvements for workers. Therefore, it doesn't come as a surprise that after the defeat of the government in the elections for the National Assembly in December 2015 the LOTTT was one of the main targets of opposition leaders and industrialists, who demanded its abolition. The LOTTT prohibits outsourcing, unfair dismissals and mass layoffs; it establishes new working hours and introduces retirement pensions for all workers, including self-employed workers and women with full-time work at home;[3] it guarantees the right to work for women and people with disabilities, it increases maternity leave and it introduces a two-week paternity leave. Moreover, the LOTTT establishes workers' participation in the social process of work and for that purpose it stipulates the introduction of workers' councils, which are to be regulated by a different law. However, at the end of 2015, that law had still not been passed.[4] Nevertheless, thousands of 'unjustified dismissals' occurred in both the private and the state sector, causing massive protests that were often successful. The labour inspectors of the Ministry for the Social Process of Labour, which have been introduced by the government in order to intervene in favour of the workers when their rights are violated, have been accused by workers, unions and even politicians of the government parties of often ignoring or dismissing workers' claims.[5]

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2 Azzellini 2010b.

3 Work at home is recognised by article 88 of the 1999 constitution 'as an economic activity that creates added value and produces social welfare and wealth'. República Bolivariana de Venezuela 1999.

4 LOTTT 2012.

5 Provea 2015, pp. 152–5.

Despite a rapidly growing labour force – rising from 10.5 million in April 1999 to 14.1 million in May 2015[6] – informal labour in Venezuela was reduced from 56 percent of the economically active population in 1999 to 39.7 percent in 2013.[7] According to the Venezuelan National Institute for Statistics (INE) a job is considered part of the informal sector if the workplace has less than five workers including the owner, if the workers are employed in households or if the workers are self-employed non-professionals (such as street vendors, drivers, craftsmen offering basic services, etc.).[8]

Since 2014, the informal sector has been growing again (reaching 40.8 percent in May 2015)[9] due to the severe economic crisis Venezuela is undergoing. The crisis is caused and aggravated by low oil prices, economic and financial attacks and sabotage from both within and outside the country, as well as by errors made by the government regarding economic, financial, monetary and productive policies. Crisis and inflation have seriously affected the living standard of Venezuelans and the losses could not be compensated by the regular salary raises ordered by President Maduro.

Venezuela has to overcome its historical condition of producing and exporting primary resources according to the needs of the North and transnational companies, a practice which is socially, economically and ecologically unsustainable; the productive forces of the country have to be transformed in order to serve the social and economic needs of the majority of the Venezuelan people. This is not an easy task, given that Venezuela's industrial density is just 0.25 for every 1,000 inhabitants – in Colombia it is 1.2 and in Mexico 1.7.[10] In other words, Venezuela produces a very small part of what it consumes, relying on imports for goods ranging from unprocessed food to technology, textiles, tooth paste and bicycles. The country does not even have enough capacity to process the food it produces. Its industrial structure consists entirely of export-oriented extractive industries: oil and other fuels, mining, steel and aluminium.

Given that the necessary structural change is not going to be effected by the profiteers of the rentier economy, the democratisation of ownership and management of the means of production has been a declared intention of the Bolivarian government since Chávez first took office in 1999. Since then, the government promoted several different ownership and management models for all kinds of companies. Takeovers of companies by their workers started to

6 SIPD 2015, p. 32.
7 INE 2015.
8 INE 2015.
9 SIPD 2015, p. 85.
10 Álvarez 2011.

become more widespread as an answer to company closure in the aftermath of the lockout and the failed coup against Chávez in 2001–2 and the ensuing divestment.[11] In state industries, especially in the oil industry and electricity suppliers, the workers restored operations after the management had sabotaged and stopped them.[12] In labour conflicts, workers began to more frequently demand the intervention of the state and nationalisation. While at first workers expected that nationalisation would solve their problems, soon they would realise that the struggle was far from over, even if their situation regarding income and social security had without any doubt improved. In many companies under state administration – in nationalised companies as well as in old or new state companies – workers find themselves facing inefficiency and corruption, which causes further protests and struggles.[13]

The experiences of the last decade and a half have increased radicalisation among workers. The great expectations regarding the state's involvement have faded and it remains clear that the materiality of the state apparatus is not transformed by a change in state power.[14] Strikes have grown in number and intensity since 2008. While from 2000–1 to 2007–8 the number of strikes observed every year was between 57 and 132, the number of workers' strikes rose to 214 in 2008–9 and to 222 in 2009–10.[15] While critics usually consider this a proof of the failure of the Bolivarian process, it should rather be considered an achievement that class struggle has been on the rise in a context in which – at least until 2012 – living conditions were constantly improving. To the extent that Venezuela continues to have a capitalist system with a bourgeois state, increasing conflicts of labour with capital and bureaucracy can be understood as a motor of social transformation.

The workers' movement has increasingly assumed a protagonistic role in the Venezuelan transformation process; workers' councils, workers' control and struggles for worker participation can be found in almost all state enterprises

11 No reliable data is available on the total number of company recuperations. Numbers vary between 100 and 300. It also depends on how the recuperations are counted. In Venezuela the term recuperations often encompasses worker recuperated factories and nationalised companies under some form of supposed mixed management.

12 Azzellini 2010b.

13 Azzellini 2014.

14 Poulantzas 2000, p. 131.

15 Provea 2011. The numbers are problematic since Provea does not distinguish between protests to defend privileges and protests for access to rights. Neither do the figures include labour struggles beyond strikes, such as workplace occupations. Nevertheless, a rise in labour conflicts is manifest.

and in several institutions. The day-to-day experiences in enterprise management and the political training workers often receive within the same institutions – which paradoxically later try to hinder effective workers' participation – have ultimately contributed to the formation of a movement for workers' control.

In this chapter, I will first offer an overview of the development of the movement for workers' control; I will then review the different company models promoted by the state as a proposed framework for workers' participation or self-management; I will examine various cases of struggles for or actual experiences of workers' control in the private and state sector; I will focus on the contradictory experience of the worker-recuperated, nationalised and state-administered fish and seafood processing plant La Gaviota; finally, I will discuss the company model which involves both community and workers' control.

The Movement for Workers' Control

Besides nationalisation of the core oil industry and expropriation of great landowners, in its first years the Chávez government concentrated on promoting cooperatives, which had a central role assigned to them in the 1999 Constitution. The focus on cooperatives lasted until 2006. They were thought to serve the creation of a social and solidarity economy and thus enjoyed preferential conditions, such as exemption from registration charges or certain taxes and preferential access to low-interest loans and institutional contracts. The government also incentivised private entrepreneurs in economic difficulties to hand over a part of their business to a co-op set up by their own employees. In nationalised medium-sized companies, the government also introduced models of shared property (workers' cooperative and state), turning the workers into co-owners. Previously, Venezuela was among the Latin American countries with the fewest cooperatives. At the beginning of the Chávez government in 1998, there were only about 800 officially registered cooperatives with approximately 20,000 members in all.[16] The favourable conditions led to a boom in the number of cooperatives registered.

According to Sunacoop, the National Cooperative Supervisory Institute, in mid-2010 274,000 cooperatives were officially registered. 27 percent of those (73,968 cooperatives) were certified by Sunacoop as operative, bringing the national cooperative membership to an estimated total of 2 million, even

16 For details about the cooperatives development in Venezuela see Azzellini 2011.

though some members participate in more than one cooperative or also have a job.[17] About 12 percent to 13 percent of the economically active population is working in cooperatives, contributing around 2 percent of GDP. However, the rapid growth of cooperatives without adequate institutional structures for support, accompaniment and control regarding the use of government aid has led to problematic results.[18] The initial assumption that cooperatives would spontaneously produce for the satisfaction of social needs and that their internal solidarity based on collective ownership would extend to their local communities proved erroneous. Most cooperatives still followed the logic of capital: they prioritised maximisation of net revenue to supporting the surrounding communities, many refused to integrate new members in order to increase their level of profits, and some produced mainly for export rather than satisfying domestic needs first. Moreover, the mixed ownership model has encouraged workers to embrace the logic of the employer. Consequently, workers have been rejecting the mixed ownership models with the state and with private entrepreneurs. The company model of mixed ownership was given up by the government in 2006; from then on, cooperatives would be connected more closely to self-organised communities, to the point that institutions picked up the model of community-controlled cooperatives as developed from below and promoted it. Communal Social Property Companies (EPSC) proved to be the best-working alternative and democratic collective company model (see section on communal enterprises).

In 2005 experiments in co-management of state companies started and a new enterprise model was created by the government to push companies in general, private or state-owned, towards a new direction. The *social production companies* (EPS) received aid from the state and had priority in state contracts; in exchange they had to invest part of their profits into the communities, introduce some kind of co-management with the workers and support the creation of cooperatives in production chains. The form of ownership – state, private or collective – was not of importance. No general criteria of validity were set up, so each institution established different criteria independently. Some state-owned companies started supporting the creation of cooperatives that would be integrated in chains of suppliers or would further process their products, but no general reorientation could be forced. Many companies which in no way fulfilled the EPS criteria also registered as EPS to take advantage of government aid. As of the second half of 2007 no more EPS were founded.

17 Baute 2009.

18 Azzellini 2012.

The name EPS has been used since then, still without any general definition, for *socialist production companies* or *companies of social property*.[19]

It was in the basic industries where the first attempt at co-management in an already state-owned (but not a nationalised) company started: following an initiative of Chávez, aluminium smelter Alcasa started developing a system in 2005, aiming at fomenting workers' control. The experiment ended in failure because of the strong resistance it faced from the regional and national administration, the Alcasa-management itself, the management of the holding Venezuelan Corporation of Guayana (CVG) Alcasa belongs to, and even from corrupt union sectors.[20] In 2007 president Chávez called on workers to build Socialist Workers' Councils (CSTTs). At first only a few councils were formed, all in factories recuperated by their workers, in which workers maintained control after the old owner had been expropriated by the state. This was the case with the National Valve makers Company (CNV), renamed Inveval, the metallurgic factory Inefa, which produced pipes and taps, and the textile factory Gotcha in Maracay, among others. The workers of these companies initially formed cooperatives, they faced huge difficulties with the state institutions and struggled hard to maintain control over their production facilities.[21]

Pressure from below led some institutions as of 2010 to permit or even promote the formation of CSTTs, although there was still no law to that effect. While there is still an effort in the majority of institutions to impede the formation of CSTTs, in some others, as well as in many state companies, it is the institution itself that takes initiative in forming them, distorting their meaning and reducing them to a representative body of workers dealing with labour-related demands within the governmental bureaucracy. This has made CSTTs a new territory of conflict and in several cases has transformed the CSTTs and the struggle for their creation into new struggles for workers' control.[22]

One of the main motivations of workers to push for workers' control relates to productive efficiency. Apart from better working conditions and a greater sense of dignity in their jobs, workers mainly demand workers' control because they see it as the only guarantee of lowering production costs and producing in order to satisfy the needs of the majority of the population. Their experience with state bureaucracy has demonstrated that most of the representatives of the state apparatus are not qualified for their jobs or, for various reasons related to corruption or internal power struggles, are not interested in efficient national

19 Azzellini 2009; 2011.

20 Azzellini 2009; 2011; 2014; Azzellini and Ressler 2006; Purcell 2014.

21 Azzellini 2009; 2011; 2014; Cormenzana 2009.

22 Azzellini 2014.

production with workers' participation in management, nor in changing the relations of production.

In May 2009 Chávez participated in a weekend workshop with more than 300 workers from the CVG's carbon, iron, steel, and aluminium companies, mainly from workers' organisations supporting workers' control. Many of the 17 different plants had been nationalised in recent years – or re-nationalised, after they were intentionally run into bankruptcy in the 1980s to precipitate their privatisation. Corruption, technological backwardness and lack of investment left the companies that remained in state hands constantly running at a loss. In the workshop, possible solutions to the sector's problems were discussed and new strategic lines were proposed for the transformation of CVG, with workers' control of production at the head of the list. Chávez authorised a ministerial commission to elaborate, along with the workers, a plan for the transformation of CVG based on the guidelines put forward in the workshop. Thus, the 2009–19 Socialist Guayana Plan emerged, approved by Chávez in August 2009.[23]

The plan can be summarised as the construction of three large corporations of iron, steel, and aluminium under workers' control, which would then form a single company. The results of this new form of management varied from company to company, although by 2012 the majority of the worker-presidents had been removed and the workers were denouncing non-compliance with the plan. Once in charge, the worker-presidents appointed with the support of Chávez faced open and hidden resistance by the relevant ministry, the CVG, the administration of the company, political administration, the private sector and even some unions involved in illegal business.[24] The flow of financing from the state to the companies with worker-presidents was deliberately slowed down or stopped and corrupt unions sabotaged production. To top this off, when the corporations were created in 2013–14 they were given the form of typical corporations with vertical structures, the opposite of what was proposed by the Workers' Assembly of the Plan Guayana. Moreover, all the companies of the CVG group remain dependent on state funding.[25] The motivations behind the resistance against workers' control are many. They encompass cultural reasons, for example the conviction that workers are not able to manage a company on their own; financial reasons, in the sense that workers' control is most likely to end privileges and therefore possibilities for corruption; political reasons, in cases where the government representatives or the management

23 Mppibm 2009.
24 Azzellini 2014.
25 Aporrea Tvi 2014.

of the company – be it from a state-centric leftist or from a liberal and right-wing point of view – do not consider it appropriate to have companies under workers' control; or simply for the reason that workers' control is structurally opposed to the prerogative of institutions and the state to exercise control over social processes.[26]

At the onset of the supposed transition of the basic industries of CVG towards workers' control through the Socialist Guayana Plan and in reaction to the strong resistance to the process, workers from Alcasa, Sidor and other basic industries organised the 'First National Meeting for Workers' Control and Workers' Councils' which was held in Ciudad Guayana in May 2011. The meeting brought together over 900 participants from a large number of workers' councils, occupied factories and unions, who discussed practical and strategic questions in 30 different workgroups. Three main obstacles for workers' control were identified: a) The attacks of the opposition against anything that has to do with the revolution; b) The sectors of the Bolivarian Process 'that conceal their true interests with a supposedly revolutionary discourse [and] do not have the intention of eliminating the lifestyle of capital but of changing the people in control'.[27] As a result, forces of the Bolivarian process itself end up sabotaging workers' control, since there is no legal or regulatory framework for the proposed workers' control and workers' councils; and finally c) The workers' own shortcomings, such as de-politicisation, apathy, scepticism, individualism and consumerism. To the above should be added the fragmentation of the labour movement at the regional and national level and the lack of criteria for working with strategic planning features.[28] Despite all the 'contradictions, obstacles and deficiencies' in the process of construction of workers' control identified during the meeting, the overall evaluation was positive: 'The balance of power is still favourable to the workers … The working class is determined to change the old model. We want to participate in the administration'.[29]

The participants of the encounter were not at all pessimistic, quite the contrary. The movements for workers' control started coordinating through the 'National Collective for Workers' Control'. Demonstrations for workers' control and regional meetings followed, and in June 2013 the 'First Workers' Congress' titled 'Results and Challenges of Workers' Control and Workers' Councils in the Construction of Socialism' took place in the Orinoco Steel Plant Alfredo Maneiro (Sidor), in Ciudad Guayana, with the participation of 450 workers

26 Azzellini 2014.

27 ENCO 2011.

28 ENCO 2011.

29 ENCO 2011.

from 81 companies. The conference, which was prepared in several meetings of the 215 spokespeople, led to important advances regarding the political debate, the organisation and coordination of the movement for workers' control; moreover, it promoted agreements on new initiatives of struggle.[30] The movement for workers' control is also connected with other popular organisations in Venezuela and supports the construction of Communes and the advance towards the 'Communal State'.[31] In July 2015 different workers' control groups in Venezuela hosted the 'V. Encounter of a Workers' Economy', bringing together more than 500 workers and researchers from the Americas, Europe and Africa. The opening of the encounter in Caracas and the entire meeting in Amuay, western Venezuela, were hosted in public buildings granted to the workers by state institutions. Transport for the participants of the encounter was also granted by state institutions. The factory directors of the two state-owned factories whose workers' councils were responsible for the organisation of the encounter in Amuay even offered to organise it in the factories. However, the workers' councils of the two 'socialist enterprises' Venezolana de Telecomunicaciones C.A. (Vtelca) and Venezolana de Industria Tecnológica (VIT), assembling mobile phones and computers and laptops respectively, rejected the proposal, since they have ongoing struggles and conflicts with the management of their companies and state bureaucracy about workers' participation in the management of the factories. As in many other state enterprises in Venezuela, the situation in Vtelca and VIT is very unusual: the workers do not have control of the company, they do not participate in management or in decisions regarding who is in charge of the management; however, they control parts of the production process, they decide on their own to whom they will give access to the plant, they are in a full-scale conflict with the management and they continue their struggle for workers' control. In the meantime, the company management and the ministerial bureaucracy are in no position to dismiss the workers, but they verbally assure their support for workers' control while they are actually making it impossible.

New Struggles for Workers' Control

In most state companies, conflicts over questions of participation and working conditions are on the increase. Protests, denunciations of irregularities,

30 PCTT 2013.

31 See Azzellini 2013; Azzellini and Ressler 2011.

and demands for workers' control appeared in Industrias Aceites Diana, Café Venezuela, Fama de América, Lácteos los Andes, the energy supplier FETRAELEC, Empresa Socialista Pedro Camejo, and the cement enterprises, among many more. In the private sector, labour struggles have been denouncing intentional hoarding, speculation and underproduction, for example in the case of Polar, the country's biggest food producer. There have also been at least a dozen new takeovers since 2013. Among them were the graphic arts company AZERTIA GC in the industrial zone of Palo Verde, in Petare, Gran Caracas, and the chicken production plant Aves Barquisimeto of the SOUTO group in the north of the city of Barquisimeto, in Lara state. Aves Barquisimeto was occupied by 28 workers after the company announced its immediate closure on 21 August 2013 and the layoff of 180 workers. Considering the closure and layoffs fraudulent and illegal, the workers took over the plant, insisting that it was in perfect condition and could be put in operation at any moment. With the takeover, the workers were aiming to prevent the owners from dismantling the plant, as well as to ensure the uninterrupted maintenance of the site. They demanded nationalisation and transformation into a Socialist Production Company, managed with the participation of the surrounding communities.[32]

Other companies under workers' control in Lara State are Beneagro (part of the SOUTO Corporation), Brahma (Grupo Cisneros), Egreca (Gres), Alentuy (Aluminium) and Interceramic C.A., which produces ceramics for floors, facades, and ceilings. Interceramic's owner closed it on 31 August 2012, communicating to the workers via Skype from Spain that the factory had ceased operations and that all of them were dismissed. The workers decided to take over the factory and launch a struggle against the owner. During the struggle, the idea of reopening the company under workers' control became more and more prominent, and as a result production started once again under workers' control on 29 October 2013, with production contributing materials to the housing construction programme Gran Misión Vivienda Venezuela.[33] In September 2014, the US-based owner of Clorox abandoned its chlorine cleaning products plants in the states of Carabobo and Miranda. During the previous months he had already downsized production from 9,000 boxes a day to 3,500 boxes a day and had stopped producing large bottles of chlorine; then suddenly, he disappeared. The workers started massive protests. Only four days after Clorox had

32 Radio Tamunangue Libre 2013a.

33 Radio Tamunangue Libre 2013b.

been abandoned by the owner, the state intervened at the plant, citing illegal closure. By October Clorox was once again in production.[34]

In state-owned enterprises, several struggles for workers' control included takeovers. In late August 2013, the Socialist Enterprise Pedro Camejo, located near the town of Urachiche in Yaracuy state, was taken over by its workers with the support of the peasantry and of the PSUV mayor of Urachiche. The workers accused the management of not respecting the workers and complained of large missing sums of money, while much agricultural machinery went unrepaired for lack of replacement parts. Worker Carlos Gudiño affirmed that 'it's not a takeover, but workers' control as a response to bad management'.[35] The Socialist Enterprise Pedro Camejo is a state company that lends specialised machinery and offers transportation services for the agricultural sector. For the peasants, its services are fundamental, especially during the 'winter harvest'.[36] During the takeover, the workers went on working, repairing machinery and putting it at the disposal of the peasants.

At the end of May 2014, workers took over state-owned Ocimetal in Los Guayos, Carabobo. Ocimetal is a metallurgic factory expropriated and put under state administration in 2011. It has 300 workers and is mainly producing car parts, but it is able to produce a wide range of metal articles. Conflicts between workers and the directors appointed by the Ministry of Commerce had been going on for a while. The collective labour agreement had expired and the directors were not demonstrating a willingness to negotiate a new one, workers' rights were not respected and the workers were denouncing the management as corrupt. According to the workers, the management was affected by in-fighting, manipulated the company's books and engaged in illegal activities. The workers met with the Vice Minister, who promised an investigation. The ensuing behaviour of the management looked very much like retaliation. The directors pushed the workers to work harder and focused production on car parts for General Motors.

> They are as bold as brass, trying to put pressure on us in the name of productivity. It is the bad management of the directors that is holding back our production, for example for much more strategic sectors, such as producing frames for doors and windows for Venvidrio and the house building programme Gran Misión Vivienda. The government sent money

34 AVN 2014.

35 Aporrea tvi 2013b.

36 Aporrea tvi 2013b.

> and all projects stopped half way through, and then they tell the Minister that the workers are responsible[.][37]

Thus explains Gustavo Martínez, secretary general of the shop-floor union in Ocimetal. When on 30 May 2014 the director announced to the workers that by direct order of the Ministry they would not be paid until they complied with the reorganisation of production according to new priorities, the workers had had enough. They held an assembly and decided to kick out the entire managing team from the plant and not let it in again. 'We want workers' control not controlled workers', declared Martínez on behalf of the workers. As in similar cases, the workers continued producing during the occupation, while the directors were trying to persuade suppliers to stop providing Ocimetal with raw materials.[38]

One of the most significant labour conflicts in Venezuela in recent years took place at the food producer Industrias Diana, a state company managed with broad worker participation by means of a Socialist Workers' Council. When the Minister of Food Félix Osorio appointed David Mendoza as new general manager for the plant on 26 July 2013 without consulting the workers, the latter rejected the unilateral designation. They mobilised workers, communities and the alternative press to the plant, pursuing their struggle with determination until an acceptable new manager was named, while at the same time keeping up production.[39]

Industrias Diana is the largest domestic producer of oils and margarine, covering 35 percent of the national demand for margarine and also producing mayonnaise, salsas, and soups. 80 percent of its production is distributed by means of state trade networks and 20 percent goes to the market. Besides its central plant in Valencia, Carabobo, Diana has five other production sites. The company, whose former proprietors had gradually brought it to the edge of bankruptcy, was nationalised in 2008, before the owners could dismantle the factory, and placed under state administration with the promise of workers' control. At the moment of nationalisation, the company was producing 200,000 litres of oil a month, employing 300 workers. With a broad participation of workers through the CSTT, Diana presently produces a total of 7,000 tons of edible oils annually, with 2,000 workers. At the same time, there are plans for the construction of another plant, which would raise production to

37 Pacheco 2014.
38 Pacheco 2014.
39 Aporrea 2013a.

37,000 tons a year. Industrias Diana is among the few nationalised companies that are self-sustaining; it has raised its workers' salaries, it pays dividends to the state, and even has investment capacity.[40]

Besides objecting to the unilateral appointment of David Mendoza as the new general manager, the workers also objected to his status as a private entrepreneur in the food sector, something that according to them did not agree with the interests of the revolution. The workers declared that 'the person who assumes the responsibility of directing the company must have come from it, guaranteeing experience in production and a commitment to the political basis the factory was founded on by the Comandante; that is, under workers' control and for the revolution'.[41] In order to mobilise and broadcast accurate real-time information about the struggle, a community radio station was brought to the Industrias Diana grounds.

Mendoza and his team paid no attention to the protests and installed themselves in office. As a consequence, on 31 July 2013 the workers of Industrias Diana evicted him and his team, escorting them out of the plant.[42] Minister of Food Felix Osorio not only criticised the workers of Industrias Diana, but even went as far as to say that Chávez had been wrong about the workers' councils and that they were not capable of managing a company.[43] To subdue the workers, he ordered a halt to the payment of wages.

After a 20-day standoff, on 15 August 2013 President Nicolás Maduro confirmed the designation of General Dester Rodríguez as the new general manager of Industrias Diana. Rodríguez had previously worked in the coordination of community contacts at the food distributor PDVAL (which belongs to the state petroleum company PDVSA) and had the workers' approval. Héctor Mieres, worker at Industrias Diana and part of the CSTT, declared: 'The most important thing about this achievement is the disposition that General Rodríguez has demonstrated to understand and respect the decision-making and participatory mechanisms that we the workers have achieved as part of workers' control'.[44] The example of Industrias Diana is important, given that in the past several processes for workers' control in other state companies had been aborted without major resistance on the part of the workers.

With the new director and on a course towards workers' control, Industrias Diana registered a new production record in March 2014, supplying 38 percent

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40 Aporrea tvi 2013a.

41 Aporrea 2013a.

42 Consejo de Trabajadores de Industrias Diana 2013.

43 León 2013.

44 Aporrea 2013b.

of the national market with more than 19,000 tons of oil, fats (lard and margarine) and mayonnaise, well above the installed capacity of 10,000–11,000 tons a month. Moreover, the government approved an investment of US$ 67 million that would permit the quadrupling of production by the end of 2016.[45]

Another very important case is the victorious struggle of the workers of Lácteos los Andes (Landes) in August 2013. Landes produces milk, cheese, yogurt, ice cream, juices, and many kinds of desserts, and supplies millions of Venezuelans daily. The company had been nationalised by president Chávez in 2008 in response to intentional shortages of milk and milk products caused by private industry. At that point, Landes had three production plants. After its state-financed modernisation, Landes had three main plants (Cabudare, Caja Seca and Machiques) and 37 smaller production sites. Landes is among the most efficient nationalised companies. It has multiplied production in all areas and introduced 84 new products.[46] When Landes was nationalised, Chávez declared it would be gradually controlled by the workers, to the extent that they would be prepared to assume the tasks. However, there were never decisive advances in worker participation, even though the workers formed CSTT and commissions that covered all areas related to the operation of the company and also to aspects of the workers' quality of life. In March 2013, the workers of Landes denounced a drop in production that reached 40 percent. Maintenance of the plant was neglected, while the money allocated to it disappeared. The workers held the management responsible, accusing its officers, and ultimately also Osorio, of corruption; however months of investigations and audits concluded with no results. According to the workers, various officials in different institutions were covering up mismanagement in the company. In August, the workers intensified their struggle, demanding the dismissal of management and advances in workers' control at Landes. 'We have an unresponsive management that has done nothing. The solution is to remove the management, open an administrative, civil, and penal investigation, and resolve the problems through workers' control',[47] pointed out one worker.

After several meetings of the workers with representatives of the President of the Republic, in which they presented their complaints and proposals, President Maduro removed the directorate of Landes. In subsequent weeks, a restructuring of the company's administrative model was agreed upon that moved towards a model of increasing workers' control. Landes came under

45 Marea Socialista 2014.

46 Cordero 2015.

47 Aporrea 2013c.

direct control by the workers, who carried out a social audit. Luis Moreno, a worker at Landes who was elected general manager by the workers, is also part of the 'National Political Command', the maximum authority in the company, formed of 25 spokespeople from different plants, chosen by the workers in direct, secret elections. As the term suggests, the spokespeople do not make decisions, but are merely the bearers of decisions made in workers' assemblies. It was further agreed to create a workers' political command in each region and to subdivide the company's organisation into six territories with separate administrative policies in each. All of this was based on the experiences and decisions of the workers.[48] With a worker-director and advancing further towards workers' control, Landes produced again at a regular level and the government granted considerable credit for a modernisation that should almost double production capacity once concluded.[49]

The Case of La Gaviota

Many of the smaller nationalised production facilities under state administration are afflicted by mismanagement and the workers have to engage in constant struggles.[50] Such is the case of La Gaviota, located in Cumaná, in the eastern state of Sucre, a company that produces canned sardines, tuna, *pepitonas* (a Venezuelan clam) and fish flour. In January 2009, the workers went on a 75-day strike after the private owner downsized production, stopped distributing the products in Venezuela in order to smuggle them into Brazil and turn a higher profit, systematically disrespected the workers' rights and stopped paying their social security and vacations. Enjoying the support of nearby communities (La Gaviota is the main source of income for the locals), the workers occupied the plant. They have since been waging a struggle to have the plant placed under workers' control, in order to guarantee high production volumes, good quality and a low consumer price (canned sardines, their main product, is among the products price-regulated by the government).[51]

In early May 2009, the national government ordered a temporal seizure of the plant to prevent closure, and at the end of November 2009 it declared the nationalisation of La Gaviota. Commencing after the seizure of the plant, the workers elected a workers' council in order to manage the company in tandem

48 Gómez 2013.
49 Cordero 2015; VTV/AVN 2014.
50 Azzellini 2014.
51 Hidalgo 2011.

with the Ministry of Commerce. The nearly 300 workers of La Gaviota enjoyed job stability, better wages, food coupons, social security and other basic rights.[52] After two weeks, the plant was again producing at 50 percent of its capacity. Workers and communities did not have total control of the company; nevertheless, the workers were *de facto* the central decision-makers and had access to all company operations and books. In March 2010, government responsibility for La Gaviota passed to the state-owned Venezuelan Food Corporation (CVAL). La Gaviota was then also incorporated into the newly constituted Venezuelan-Cuban mixed 'socialist enterprise' *Industrial Fishing of the ALBA* (Pescalba), which is also the provider of the fish and clams that the company processes. CVAL disrespected the agreements reached and the participation process that the workers had been constructing. It imposed a new external directors' board, which replaced the workers' assembly as the central entity of decision-making. The new management denied the workers access to information regarding purchases and the company's accounts, insisting that only data on production and sales is of interest for the workers.[53]

Under the new management, production declined immediately without any reasonable explanation. The workers of La Gaviota and the surrounding communities escalated their struggle for workers' control. Intense protests in the plant starting in October 2010 and a 21-day long strike in December forced Pescalba to accept the participation of workers and community delegates on the directors' board of the enterprise. Following elections held in the plant and the surrounding community, a new directors' board made up of three delegates each from the state, the workers, and the community, was constituted in January 2011. In April 2011, workers of La Gaviota and Pescalba, supported by other workers and nearby communities, organised protests because production in both enterprises was paralysed, and large amounts of production output was being held back in stock, instead of being distributed. Protesters accused the administration of the two enterprises of being responsible for these problems. Finally, Juan Carlos Loyo, Minister for Agriculture and Land, came to Sucre – following a direct order from Chávez – to talk with the protesters. After the minister was taken on a guided visit around the plant by the workers, a general assembly with the participation of all workers of La Gaviota was held. Loyo announced that all members of the directors' board of Pescalba corresponding to Venezuela were to be replaced, the whole financial administration of La Gaviota was to be handed over to the mixed board of directors of La Gaviota,

52 Prensa UNETE 2011b.

53 Hidalgo 2011; Prensa UNETE 2011a.

and the workers and communities would soon start participating in the distribution of products as well as in every other part of the production process.[54]

During the following months, La Gaviota increased production levels again and the mixed directors' board was installed. Nevertheless, real workers' participation did not advance. In June 2012, the workers of La Gaviota asserted that all decisions regarding the company were made by government officials, as the community delegates never represented the community, but merely supported every government decision. At the same time, they also blamed the management for dramatically sinking production levels.[55] In October 2012, a new mixed directors' board was elected. There was still no real workers' control but at least production was restarted. The main cause for problems was now again Pescalba: in early August the workers made clear that they were running out of aluminium for the production of small cans for sardines, the main product of the plant. La Gaviota had deposited the money for the aluminium supply in a Pescalba account in early June, but Pescalba had ordered the supply with a bad check and the money had disappeared.[56] Finally, a government intervention restored aluminium supply; meanwhile, however, several tanks used to process and boil the food were out of order. Most of them were between 40 and 50 years old and the modernisation promised by the government in 2009 had never materialised. Production dropped to 20–30 percent of the original capacity and in August 2014 the plant had to close.

For a whole year before the closure, workers and communities protested, demanding the modernisation of the plant and workers' control. They continued with their protests in order to ensure that the agreement to reopen the factory with new machines and the same workers would be respected. Their distrust was not unfounded: when the workers of La Gaviota elected their new delegates for the director's board in October 2014, the general director of Pescalba refused to recognise workers or community delegates as members of the board.[57] Pescalba imposed a new director. In November 2014, the workers found out that the new director had been a shareholder of La Gaviota before the nationalisation. The workers presented proof and justifiably demanded his replacement.[58]

In August 2015, the new tanks and productive machinery for La Gaviota started to be delivered at the plant. Next, they had to be installed and the

54 Hidalgo 2011; Prensa UNETE 2011c.

55 CCO-La Gaviota 2012.

56 Prensa UNETE 2013.

57 Prensa UNETE 2014.

58 Prensa UNETE-CTR 2014.

facilities had to be prepared in order to restart production promptly. That was when the workers' claims were finally heard. In early September, Minister of Food Carlos Osorio came to visit the plant, participated in an assembly with the workers and laid off the director after 95 percent of the assembly of all workers voted against him.[59] Production was supposed to restart in December; the workers had still not achieved workers' control, but neither had the administration been able to get rid of the rebellious workers or to halt their drive to place the plant under workers' control. The struggle of the workers continues, now with a plant on the way to becoming fully equipped and capable of producing efficiently for many years to come. Without the workers' struggle, the plant would have long been closed down.

Community-Controlled Companies

Local communities in Venezuela have not only supported company takeovers but have also founded companies in their communities. Local self-organisation is widespread. In 2006, the 'communal councils' were recognised by law as a fundamental structure of local self-government. Communal councils in urban areas encompass 150–400 families; in rural zones, a minimum of 20 families; and in indigenous zones, at least 10 families. The councils constitute a non-representational structure of direct participation, which exists alongside the elected representative bodies of constituted power. Several communal councils can come together to form a commune. By the end of 2015, over 40,000 communal councils and more than 1,200 communes existed. Communal councils and communes are entitled to receive state funding for their projects. At first, communities – with institutional support – used to establish regular workers' cooperatives. From 2006 on, communities started forming community-controlled companies as an alternative to traditional cooperatives, which had proven not to automatically respond to community interests. In these new communal companies, the workers come from the local communities; these communities are the ones who, through the structures of self-government, the communal councils and communes, decide on what kind of companies are needed, what organisational form they will have and who should work in them. Traditional cooperatives did not permit advance planning of a production cycle (production, transformation and distribution) to create what Mészáros calls communal systems (communitarian and cooperative) of production and

59 Prensa UNETE 2015.

consumption.[60] The cooperatives did not contribute to the development of a communal economy and were integrated (or forced) into chains of capitalist production for private enterprise.

In 2008, the Communal Social Property Company (EPSC) model emerged. Institutions and state companies began to adopt and promote this communal company model. With the 'Organic Law of the Communal Economic System' of 14 December 2010, a legal framework was created for EPSCs; today there are thousands of such companies at the communal level. While different kinds of EPSCs can be found in the communities today, their principal areas of activity correspond with the most pressing needs of the *barrios* and rural communities: the production of food and construction materials, and the provision of transport services. Textile and agricultural production companies, bakeries and shoemakers are also common.[61]

As a result of the workers' self-initiative, some state enterprises promote the creation of direct distribution networks under community control. This is the case with several state-owned cement companies, which promote community distribution of construction materials and help set up community production facilities for cement blocks, a material commonly used in construction. This way, speculation is reduced and prices are lowered through the elimination of intermediaries. In 2013, the paper products factory Invepal began to promote community stores for the direct sale of school supplies; some 40 stores run by communal councils and communes had been set up by the end of 2015. Beyond collective decision-making with regard to the structure and the goals of the EPSC, the issues that emerge as central for communities are the non-hierarchisation of activities (so that differentiation of tasks and abilities does not result in hierarchies of importance, status or pay); permanent training and mutual learning; rotation at work (according to each participant's abilities); and a social benefit for the community and beyond, where possible.

Some communities have even taken over abandoned production units and operated them as communal enterprises. This is, for example, the case with the former Brahma-AmBev beer brewing plant in Barquisimeto, Lara. On 18 March 2013, the directors of the plant told the almost 900 workers – of which 300 were subcontracted – that the plant would close down immediately, citing a supposed impossibility of maintaining commercial operations in Venezuela. Workers were advised to accept their compensation pay the next day. However,

60 RNC 2011; Mészáros 1995, p. 792.

61 Azzellini 2012; 2013, Azzellini and Ressler 2010, Sitrin and Azzellini 2013.

300 workers, knowing the LOTTT legislation was on their side, refused the offer and occupied the plant.[62]

Although the workers resisted and guarded the brewery, they were unable to continue brewing beer, since it requires considerable financial investment, the import of hops and malt and a broad distribution network. As time went by without any results, many workers left in search of a job. After almost one year, the remaining 60 workers contacted the commune José Pío Tamayo[63] to propose the registration of a communal enterprise with an activity that could generate an income. This contact marked the beginning of a fruitful cooperation: with the support of the commune, the workers were able to generate an income – with equal pay for each of the 60 of them. They started by commercialising filtered deep well water; later, they established a car wash and they opened a selling point for chicken, provided by worker-controlled company Beneagro on consignment. The company was registered as a communal enterprise under the title 'United Proletarians', but without any legal rights regarding the production site. To this day, it operates under workers' control and two spokespeople of the commune participate in the workers' assemblies; in exchange, two workers participate in the assemblies of the commune. However, the previous owners of AmBev found a judge willing to go against the workers; in August 2014, the opposition governor of the state, Henri Falcón, a former chavista who switched sides, sent the police to evict the former brewery. With the support of the community, the workers managed to resist the eviction attempt.[64] One year later, the community- and worker-controlled enterprise 'United Proletarians' was officially inaugurated. At present it has various contracts with state institutions for the delivery of drinking water with their own trucks to schools, institutions and communities. United Proletarians uses silos to store corn and at the end of 2015 it had almost finished building a corn-packing facility within the plant.[65] Moreover, they had plans to produce bottled water and a drink that contains moringa and stevia.[66]

62 Comuna Socialista Pío Tamayo 2014; Teruggi 2015.

63 Communes are direct-democratic, popular-power, self-governing structures which exist parallel to the institutions of liberal democracy. On communes see Azzellini 2013 and Azzellini and Ressler 2010.

64 Comuna Socialista Pío Tamayo 2014.

65 Correo del Orinoco 2015.

66 Teruggi 2015.

Conclusion

In Venezuela, most medium- and small-sized production facilities nationalised or recently founded by the state have been declared direct social property, which means that they should be managed directly by workers and communities or they should be preparing for it. Despite this fact, and in disregard of the government's official position in favour of workers' control, the great majority of social property companies are under the supervision of state institutions, not under the direct management of workers and/or communities. The centrality of petroleum in the Venezuelan economy foments state-centrism, centralisation of power and vertical structures.[67] The modality of state management has not altered in any way the social relations of production, much less overcome or abolished capitalist exploitation. State management is often afflicted by corruption and inefficiency; moreover, its hierarchical practices resemble those of the private sector.

The roots of this long-standing deformation lie in the rentier character of the Venezuelan economy and in the specific Venezuelan political and societal model this has forged.[68] The rentier model has fostered a working culture that is not based on continuity and expertise, but on fast money through often dubious business practices. Venezuela has an extremely monopolistic and oligopolistic market and practically no national bourgeoisie with a real interest in domestic productive activity. Given the fact that Venezuela relies on imports for a great part of what it consumes, everything that is produced domestically has a guaranteed demand in the market. The products of state-owned and worker-administered enterprises are distributed through state networks. However, the private sector has little interest in developing endogenous production, and even less so if profit is limited by government policies. Contrary to international propaganda, the state sector in 2014 accounted for 35.54 percent of the GDP, only 0.37 percent more than in 1999, when Chávez started his first presidential term. With almost 65 percent of the GDP, the private sector generates only 2–4 percent of the dollar influx, but spends in imports most of the total amount of dollars flowing into Venezuela. In 2012, the private sector had generated two billion dollars from exports, but consumed 30 billion dollar in imports.[69] Getting its hands on the oil revenue through fraudulent business with the state or selling overpriced imported commodities is much

67 Coronil 1997.

68 Coronil 1997.

69 Sutherland 2015.

easier for private national and international capital and has a higher profit rate than productive investment in the country. State industries are penetrated, undermined and sometimes even controlled by private interests, which promote mismanagement and corruption. Workers fighting for workers' control in the state-owned aluminium plant Alcasa, in the south-eastern region Bolívar, estimate that up to 40 percent of the aluminium production cost in Alcasa is actually caused by corruption.[70] As Blankenburg writes:

> For decades, mining and basic industries in Venezuela have been infested by clientelist networks. Foreign capitals, regional clans of rentiers and an elite of privileged workers have been operating in some kind of 'free robbery' paradise. Before 1998, the oligarchic state showed little interest in intervening in this situation. After 1998, the arm of the state has not been strong enough to overturn the clientelist control of the sector.[71]

Venezuela could not overcome the rentier economy. Even Chávez stated in his government plan for 2013–19, presented during the electoral campaign of 2012: 'We should not deceive ourselves: the socio-economic paradigm still dominant in Venezuela is of a capitalist and rentier character'.[72] When the oil price was high, the government could redirect huge parts of the oil money to social policies, but due to the dialectics of the capitalist dependent oil-based accumulation, the rentier model is strengthened when GDP grows. 'The fruit of dependency can hence not be anything else than more dependency, and its abolition requires necessarily the suppression of the relations of production it entails'.[73] Even though it unfolds within a rentier capitalist framework, a transformation in the ownership and management of the means of production directly touches upon the fundamental essence of the capitalist rentier model and the economic interests of powerful sectors of the Bolivarian process itself. These sectors are not interested in a real transformation and resist any change from the inside.

There is no common position within the government with respect to workers' control, but the great majority of government officials have been *de facto* opposing it. In addition to the rentier capitalist economic structures, private interests and corrupt bureaucracies, other sectors of the government oppose workers' control on the grounds that workers are not ready for it. Another

70 Aporrea 2011.

71 Blankenburg 2008, pp. 20–1.

72 Chávez 2012, p. 2.

73 Marini 1991.

strong institutional tendency sees workers' control as a mechanism by which the workers can keep the bureaucratic administrative structures in check and guarantee the materialisation of state policies – which are supposed to represent the common interest of 'the people'. When the CSTT workers' councils were established, institutions attempted to utilise them to institutionalise, limit, and control workers' struggles. By doing so, they have contributed to the forging of CSTTs into one more vehicle in the struggle for workers' control.

Workers' struggles have erupted in most of the nationalised companies, in other state companies as well as in state institutions. The conflicts revolve around the claims of the labour force to greater participation in the organisation of work and the administration of the companies. Some struggles spring from the demand for workers' control, while others develop that perspective during the conflict.

Reliable data on the total number of recuperated or worker-controlled companies are not available. In 2015, the government created the 'Presidential System of Recuperated, Occupied, Nationalised, Created and Allied Enterprises' (Ronca), which was devised to organise a coordinated support for the companies in question. The system is responsible for some 300 companies, which are in fact 500 companies if every single company of each business group is counted. According to Juan Arias, director of Ronca, only 10 percent of the 300 companies are highly profitable, among them Venvidrio – which earns enough to cover its operational costs, help other companies, export to other markets and guarantee technological innovation – and Sanitarios Maracay, which was able to reduce the percentage of imported raw materials it uses to only 12 percent. Both companies are worker-recuperated, under workers' control and the result of long struggles. 30 percent of the companies have an acceptable productivity and do not produce losses. The majority, however, around 60 percent, cannot cover their operational costs, for different reasons. Most of them are highly dependent on imports.[74] Workers' control or struggles for it exist also beyond these companies, most notably in several state institutions and state-owned companies (such as the basic industries pertaining to the CVG group), in worker-recuperated companies turned into cooperatives and in community-managed EPSCs.

The struggles at Industrias Diana and Landes have placed ideological and political questions at the heart of the national public debate. Their struggles, which weave alliances with communal councils, communes, community media and grassroots organisations, are profoundly rooted in territory. The main

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74 Arias 2015.

strengths of these struggles are great unity among workers and a high level of organisation. Mobilising these elements, the workers have achieved what – despite the official discourse in favour of workers' control – state institutions have not.

The defeat of the government forces in the parliamentary elections of 6 December 2015 will probably intensify labour struggles in general and specifically struggles for workers' control in the state sector. Workers see themselves as the only actor capable of organising production for the benefit of the popular sectors of society. It remains unclear how the government and the institutions will react. The crisis of government chavismo, the need to increase production as quickly as possible and the efforts to avoid interference of the opposition could motivate the government to hand over company management to the workers. However, the opposite could also be true; government officials could try to tighten their grip on state companies even more, either because they consider hierarchical state administration to be more efficient than workers' control, or because they are corrupt and want to take more out of the companies before they lose control over them. Only a few days after the elections, workers from La Gaviota denounced the fact that, during a meeting with the workers, government officials spoke negatively about the union and suggested they should dissolve it.[75] At the same time, the old National Assembly, still under a chavista majority, voted in favour of granting broadcasting concessions for the TV and radio station broadcasting from the National Assembly to the workers, after the opposition had announced its intention to close them down.[76]

The Venezuelan movement for workers' control unfolds in a unique context: The state officially recognises the legitimacy of workers' control and promotes it, while at the same time it represents an obstacle to its materialisation. Over the course of the past 17 years, the Venezuelan government has introduced a number of new and diverse company models in order to democratise ownership and management of the means of production and overcome the rentier economy. While a certain democratisation within the boundaries of capitalism has been achieved, Venezuela could neither overcome the rentier economy nor set solid material bases for a new production model. As a consequence of the rentier character of Venezuela's economy, only workers and communities have an objective interest in building a productive economy. A growing number of workers are determined to take control of their workplaces. Their concrete

75 Prensa UNETE-CTR 2015.

76 Prensa AN 2015.

experience demonstrates that workers can do better than the state administration and they feel a historical responsibility to guarantee production. Available empirical data supports the conclusion that the more control workers and communities exercise in a company, the better its results – which, nevertheless, does not mean that the company does not need financial or technical support from the state. Generally, it is because of the workers that many of the companies still exist. Modernisation plans are often demanded and pushed forward by the workers. Companies with more workers' control have generally had better economic results than the ones where institutional management is prevalent. This is the case with several recuperated companies mentioned earlier, with many EPSCs and even with problematic cases such as La Gaviota, Inveval or Alcasa, where the degree of workers' participation in company management, as well as productivity, have oscillated wildly. However, in periods of more workers' participation or workers' control, productivity was higher and improvements to the production process were introduced. Companies under workers' and community control are very different from regular companies, for a number of reasons that go well beyond the financial point of view. The companies orient their production and distribution more towards the needs of the people, social relations in the workplace change, decision-making becomes directly democratic, interaction with communities and other struggles increases and new values are created.[77] The reluctance of the state administration to comply with the official discourse on workers' control has not discouraged workers and communities. On the contrary, the movements have been growing and building alliances, demonstrating that they are the bearer of a new society. Certainly that does not mean they will necessarily succeed. However, unlike in other revolutionary processes, not only do the movements remain undefeated after 17 years, but they are also still the supposed normative orientation of the Bolivarian process, a fact that allows them to wage their struggles from a position of moral and political legitimacy.

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77 Azzellini 2011; 2012; 2014, Cormenzana 2009.

PART 2

Non-Corporate Unionism and Social Movements

CHAPTER 6

Revolts on Goose Island: A Long Fight Pays Off for Chicago Window Factory Workers*

Kari Lydersen

It was the fall of 2008, and the economic crisis was on everyone's minds. More than 3.15 million foreclosures were filed that year nationwide, an 81 percent jump from the previous year. And in the Chicago area between one and four percent of households were in some stage of foreclosure.[1] Unemployment had escalated from under 5 percent in January 2008 to 6.5 percent in October (and it would continue to rise even higher).[2]

The presidential election campaign between Republican candidate John McCain and Illinois upstart Barack Obama was in full swing; meanwhile Congress was debating bailing out the banks which had largely caused the escalating crisis and people nationwide were terrified of losing their jobs and their homes. The about 250 mostly Latino immigrant and African American workers at Republic Windows and Doors faced the same financial pressures and fears as most working-class and middle-class Americans that fall, and their sense of insecurity was surely heightened by the strange things going on in the factory on Goose Island in the middle of the Chicago River.

Goose Island has a long colourful history. It is the Chicago River's only island, a 160-acre chunk formed in 1853 by the building of a canal. The name comes from the Irish immigrants who raised livestock, farmed and also worked in small factories on the island in its early days. Soon Polish and German immigrants joined them in worker housing built on the island. No bridge connected it to the mainland until after the Chicago Fire of 1871. By the late 1800s, the chunk of land was packed with heavy industry including two grain elevators, 11 coal yards and factories and plenty of taverns. Chicago was at this time a commercial and industrial hub for the whole country, thanks to its position on Lake Michigan and at the crux of rail lines, and Goose Island was right in the heart of it all. It was called 'Little Hell' for the billowing smoke and

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* This chapter is based in part on *Revolt on Goose Island* by Kari Lydersen (copyright 2009) reprinted courtesy of Melville House Publishing.

1 RealtyTrac 2009, 'Foreclosure Activity Increases 81 Percent in 2008', 15 March.

2 U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics, 'Unemployment in October 2008'.

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soot. People moved away and over time so did much of the industry.[3] Then in the 1980s as professionals who had fled the city for the suburbs gravitated back to newly trendy lofts and apartments downtown, there was a debate over Goose Island's future. Some developers envisioned it hosting prime luxury riverfront housing, even though the sluggish river was still polluted and unattractive. But then-Mayor Richard M. Daley and other politicians wanted Goose Island to return to its industrial roots, and Daley instituted a subsidy plan in 1990 to further this goal.[4] Hence Republic Windows and its neighbouring factories were part of a larger municipal vision for revitalising Chicago's legacy as the 'city of big shoulders'.

At first glance Republic Windows and Doors might have seemed one of those quintessential American and particularly Chicago success stories – a family business made good, a small operation becoming lucrative based on hard work, loyal customers, political connections and no shortage of hustling. Republic Windows and Doors was formed in 1965 by William Spielman, a small outfit on the southwest side of the city making low-cost storm windows and doors. Spielman's business grew quickly and he moved to a larger location in Lincoln Park on the north side of the city, which was then a hardscrabble neighbourhood home to many working-class Puerto Rican residents and a smattering of heavy industry. Spielman's nephew Richard Gillman started working as a salesman for the company in 1974.[5] During the 1980s the company expanded by leaps and bounds. A building contractor who was a former customer and long-time acquaintance of the family described it thus:

> Republic Windows had a target market of Chicago home improvement contractors. We were their bread and butter, and we as a group kept Republic buzzing with orders. It was in the mid 1980s that Republic decided to produce vinyl replacement windows and patio doors. That's a big step up in terms of cost of doing business, but Mr. Spielman rolled dice, and put his own money where his idea was. It caught on, and Republic continued to grow into a Midwest regional manufacturer.[6]

William Spielman died and his son Ron took over the business. The company moved to a new location, in an inconspicuous but sprawling, low-slung

3 Encyclopedia of Chicago History, available at: www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org.
4 Lydersen 2009.
5 Statement by Richard Gillman at bankruptcy creditors meeting, 18 January 2009.
6 Slate.com 2008, 'In the fray' chat room; posting by 'Schmutzie', 8 December.

warehouse-type building the company purchased a few miles away on Goose Island, offering ample space to continue expanding the operation. The company also got about US$10 million in taxpayer money to help, under the controversial Tax Increment Financing (TIF) programme, a federal initiative much-loved by Daley wherein property tax dollars can be siphoned off and reinvested in public and private projects meant to stimulate development and create jobs in 'blighted' areas. In Chicago as in other cities, wealthy and thriving areas that are hardly blighted end up being designated TIF zones, basically giving political leaders a slush fund to reward politically connected developers or lure major corporations. The TIF funding came with the stipulation that the factory maintain 549 jobs for at least eight years and make 'reasonable commercial efforts' to maintain more than 600 jobs until 2019.[7] It was a sign that political leaders saw a long and bright future for Republic Windows: that the family company had made it in Chicago.

But if there once was a feeling of camaraderie, family and a shared investment in success at Republic Windows and Doors, it had evaporated long before fall 2008. Workers at the company felt exploited and disrespected going back at least seven years, when they had organised a wildcat strike to protest long hours, low pay and general disrespect from management. At the time the workers were represented by a union called the Central States Joint Board, which made headlines for ties to organised crime[8] and was widely characterised as a company union meant to serve the owner's rather than the workers' interests. The union was so disconnected from workers that long-time worker Armando Robles didn't even know he was in a union until someone pointed out the membership deduction on his pay check. Though the wildcat strike in January 2002 was ultimately a failure, it got Robles and other workers in touch with immigrants' rights and workers' rights groups and led them into contact with the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE). After a hard-fought campaign, in 2004 the workers ditched the Central States Joint Board in a landslide election and officially joined the UE. There were 340 votes for the UE, fewer than 10 for the old union.

It was a 180-degree shift.

The UE was formed in 1936 at a conference in Buffalo during a heavy snow storm. A group of independent local unions and non-unionised workers in radio and electrical manufacturing had come together seeking to form a lar-

7 City Council Journal of Proceedings, pp. 27849–928: Redevelopment Agreement enacted 11 September 1996.

8 Simpson 1999.

ger, progressive organisation. They asked the American Federation of Labor (AFL) to recognise them, but the AFL turned them down, so the UE became the first union chartered by the newly-formed CIO (originally called the Committee of Industrial Organisations, later changed to Congress of Industrial Organisations).[9] Even though the CIO was more radical and militant than the AFL, in the 1940s it fell prey to the anti-Communist hysteria sweeping the nation. In 1947 Congress passed the viciously anti-union Taft-Hartley Act, which among many other things forced union officers to swear they were not Communists. At the end of World War II, the UE was the third largest union in the CIO with half a million members, its largest locals at General Electric factories in Pennsylvania. Its bottom-up structure, progressive ideology and various other political factors, however, caused CIO leaders and outside forces to label the UE a Communist union. In 1949 the UE withdrew from the CIO shortly before an anti-Communist purge wherein the CIO expelled 10 unions representing about a million members.[10] During the anti-Communist witch hunts of the 1950s, politicians, CIO leaders and business owners continued to attack and smear the UE in various ways, even trying to deport leader James Matles. Shop stewards were blacklisted and jailed, and the union ultimately lost about half its members. It slowly began to rebuild in the 1960s and 1970s, but then its manufacturing base was decimated by the deindustrialisation of the 1980s and 1990s. Holding tight to its progressive ideology and belief in a larger political context, the UE adapted to the changing landscape and branched out to represent workers in fields like teaching, speech pathology, nursing, clerical work and science, along with its traditional members in electrical manufacturing, metalworking and plastics.

As is always the case in UE shops, workers at Republic Windows were elected to the Local 1110 leadership and continued to work in the factory. For the first time the Republic Windows workers felt a genuine sense of empowerment and had a seat at the table with the company. They negotiated a contract with impressive gains, including a US$ 3 an hour raise over three years, a much better bonus system, and the right to have 19 stewards on the shop-floor instead of five.

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9 http://www.ueunion.org/uewh05.html.

10 Ibid.

Trouble Starts

After the contract between the company and the workers organised with UE was signed, there was stasis and relative harmony for a while. But during 2007 and 2008, workers could tell things were not going well at the company, and they felt the brewing crisis was being and would be increasingly taken out upon them.

The housing crash caused by the economic crisis meant not many people were in the market for new windows and doors. And as later became clear, Republic Windows' problems had started well before the housing collapse. It appeared that after the move to Goose Island the company had become too ambitious and moved too fast, setting its sights on becoming a massive regional supplier and neglecting the local customers which had been its bread and butter, according to some accounts. Some customers said quality of the product had dropped, and it seemed the expenses of the new facility became overwhelming. In late 2005 owner Ron Spielman stepped aside and turned the company over to his cousin, Richard Gillman, who took majority ownership without paying a penny but rather by assuming a debt load of about US$30 million.[11] Around this time the building was also sold to the Wrigley gum company, which owned a flavour development facility nearby, and leased back to Republic Windows. Gillman also secured a US$5 million line of revolving credit from Bank of America. Such credit lines are basically based on formulas determining the borrowers' ability to repay, backed by collateral and assets which will essentially revert to the lender if the borrower defaults. This line of credit would later play a starring role.

A Disappearing Factory

At monthly 'town hall meetings' in 2008, Republic Windows managers were constantly bemoaning how much money they were losing. By July 2008, the company had lost about US$3 million in just six months, according to Bank of America Midwest government relations manager Pat Holden.[12] Bank of America officials told Gillman that if he didn't get another lender he should 'start winding down their operations'; in other words, get ready to close the

11 Comment from Richard Gillman, to Kari Lydersen, 19 March 2009.

12 Interview with Bank of America Midwest government relations manager Pat Holden, by Kari Lydersen, 2009.

company and presumably sell off the assets to pay back the bank and other creditors. Gillman apparently ignored the advice, and continued asking for more credit. The bank said no.

The workforce had been nearly cut in half in the past few years, from about 500 to 250. Then in November 2008 workers felt they were seeing their jobs disappear in front of them, literally. The team that made the 'Allure' line of windows showed up one day with no machines to work on. Managers gave them vague answers about the machinery being sold to raise money or being sent away for repairs. Clerical (non-union) workers were also seeing their equipment and furniture disappear. Workers were ordered to load heavy machinery from the factory onto semi-truck trailers. Sometimes, they were first told to replace components on the machinery with new ones. They saw deliveries being unloaded at Republic Windows which weren't intended for their plant. One time, a brand new mysterious piece of machinery was dropped off after a plant engineer's mother said it could not be stored in her garage. The workers knew this equipment wasn't going to be used at Republic Windows, so what was the company up to?

Union representatives started filing written requests for information; under their collective bargaining agreement with the company, the union had the right to be advised of major operating decisions or changes. But they got no response. Workers got more and more suspicious and angry. 'I asked my supervisor, how can I work when I don't even know if you can pay me?' said Rocio Perez, a single mother of five and union steward. She felt like managers were treating them as gullible and naïve since they expected them to keep working as the factory was obviously being dismantled under their noses. 'It was like they were mocking us'. Only later would they find out that the equipment was destined for the small town of Red Oak, Iowa, where Richard Gillman's wife Sharon had purchased a window and door factory.

The Stakeout

Determined to find out what was going on, the workers organised a surveillance team which would keep watch outside the factory after hours and on weekends. One Saturday, Armando Robles – president of Local 1110 – and another worker were lurking in the parking lot north of the factory, with Robles's wife Patricia and their young, lively son Oscar in tow. They could see the plant's front entrance on Hickory Street just off Division Street, the famous Chicago thoroughfare that bisects Goose Island. Boxes were being loaded onto two trailer trucks. Robles and his friend hopped in their cars and followed the trail-

ers. As the first truck turned up the on-ramp to get on the highway heading south, Robles swore he could see the driver giving him a dirty look. He wasn't frightened or intimidated, only determined to see what the company was up to. The union's contract covers any activity within a 40 mile radius of the plant, and rumours were circulating that the equipment was being moved to Joliet, an industrial town exactly 40 miles outside Chicago.

They took note of the trucks' license plates and followed them for about 15 miles to a truck yard on the southwest side of the city, an industrial, grimy swath of land next to the highway. They parked just outside the yard and, keeping their eyes on the trailers, Robles called international union representative Mark Meinster, who advised them to sit tight until he got there. By that time, several hours later, it was dark and cold and Robles was ready for action. 'I have a friend who drives trailer trucks. We could steal the trailers, then they would have to negotiate with us', Robles suggested to Meinster. 'Or we could deflate the tires'. Meinster talked him out of such direct action at that moment, but they came up with another equally audacious idea: they could occupy the plant.

Old Tactics, a New Era

There was a time in the US that occupying a plant would not have seemed so unusual or radical. The sit-down strikes in the auto industry in the 1930s were legendary, and in days past workers regularly clashed physically with managers and scabs during strikes, lockouts and other labour disputes, often with the full backing of the country's major unions. Old Chicago steelworkers still tell tales of barricading doors, blocking trucks and playing cat and mouse with managers during labour conflicts.

But organised labour had seen its power gutted in the decades leading up to the economic crisis. Unionisation rates in the private sector had plunged over the past few decades, to 7.7 percent in 2008.[13] Much manufacturing had gone overseas to Asia, across the Mexican border or to the US deep south in search of cheaper labour and laxer regulations; so the steel mills, factories, packing plants and other proud union workplaces that once dominated the Chicago area had largely disappeared. The American social and political discourse had been shifted to celebrate the hard work and ingenuity of the individual

13 Zipperer 2009. Private sector unionisation rates rose 0.1 percent between 2007–8, while public sector unionisation also increased; however compared to levels of decades past these numbers are still very low.

striving worker, rather than the power of collective organising, solidarity and class analysis. And many major unions had developed cosy relationships with employers, business interests and politicians, so workplace takeovers or other bold actions had not been a common occurrence for quite some time.

It was a different story in other countries of course. In Robles's native Mexico and other Latin American countries, factory occupations and other physical confrontations and standoffs between workers and bosses happened fairly often throughout the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. The famous wave of factory takeovers following Argentina's economic crash were less than a decade in the past. And just in the past two years Canadian auto workers had staged occupations, including one in July 2008 at an auto parts factory near Toronto that closed abruptly without giving workers notice or severance pay.

So the idea of an occupation didn't seem so outlandish to Robles or Meinster, who had been following the Canadian struggles. But it wasn't something to be undertaken lightly. Occupying the factory would likely mean arrests, and there was no guarantee it would work or even gain popular support. Much of the general public were unaware of the sit-down strikes and the general spirit of labour militancy that was once strong in cities like Chicago and Detroit. Most Chicagoans didn't even know that their city was the crucible over a century ago where fearless immigrant workers won the eight-hour day and lost their lives in the Haymarket Affair. So gaining crucial public backing or even public interest in an occupation was a wild card. And given the UE's independent stance and the fact it was not part of the AFL-CIO, there was also no guarantee of strong support from organised labour. An occupation would surely be breaking the law and would pose extra risks for immigrant workers who might lack legal documents, or for workers with past arrest records. And it wasn't exactly the most pleasant time of year to start an occupation that likely would mean long hours in an unheated building or rallying outside – it was getting cold.

'It's about Our Dignity'

Most of the Republic Windows workers were not at all surprised when on Tuesday, 2 December 2008, plant operations manager Tim Widner called them to a meeting in the cafeteria. He gave them the news most had been expecting to hear for some weeks now: the plant was closing. In just three days. They would not get severance pay, nor pay for their accrued vacation time. Many workers had deferred vacations specifically at managers' request, since fall is a busy season in the window industry. In all the company owed almost

US$150,000 in vacation pay, with as much as US$6,000 due some workers.[14] Their health insurance would also end in just two weeks, a devastating blow for many workers with young children and some with serious health problems. Widner blamed the impending closure on Bank of America 'cutting off credit' to the company, and then made a quick getaway, telling workers they'd get their final pay checks Friday.

Many of the workers headed directly over to the UE hall – about two miles away – to decide how to proceed. Their anger and anxiety over the prospect of losing their jobs – in such a harsh economy and so close to Christmas – was tempered by a rising sense of determination and excitement about what they were about to do. Workers were angry that owner Richard Gillman had not even ventured down from his office to break the news himself. This only fuelled their desire to take matters into their own hands.

Around that time union Local 1110 vice president Melvin 'Ricky' Maclin remembers UE organiser Leah Fried saying, 'If you guys let them close the doors Friday, that's it. Can you live with that?' 'No', he said to himself. He decided he would be part of the factory occupation. It wasn't a decision he made lightly. As a young man he had made some bad choices and ended up in jail, an experience he never wanted to repeat. Now he was consciously making a move that could put him back behind bars. It wasn't easy convincing himself, and convincing his wife was even harder. 'She thought I had lost my mind!' he said. With six adult children and 16 young grandchildren looking forward to the holidays, Maclin felt like his family was on the line. 'If we fight and lose at least we'll know we fought', he told his wife. 'It's about our dignity'. By the end of the meeting, at least 30 other workers agreed with Maclin and promised to physically occupy the factory. Almost everyone else was ready to picket outside.

The Bank

Unlike the auto industry sit-down strikes of the 1930s, the workers did not necessarily have much to gain by holding the window factory's machinery hostage and stopping production. The factory was already about to close and management had no hope of fulfilling many outstanding orders and no desire to get new customers, so blocking production or the movement of completed windows and doors would not give workers a lot of leverage. The occupation

14 Schedules filed in bankruptcy case 08–34113, 12 December 2008, U.S. Bankruptcy Court for the Northern District of Illinois.

would rather be a way to get public attention and solidarity, a way to shame the company into paying the workers the money due them, or ideally even finding a way to get new investment and keep the plant open.

Since success basically depended on public awareness and support, the workers needed a finely crafted message. Vilifying the company and Richard Gillman would not cut it. Few Chicagoans would know or care about an obscure window factory owner, another tale of cheated workers at a time when people were losing jobs and homes left and right. So they needed to make the occupation into a symbol of something bigger.

That's where Bank of America came in.

In October 2008 Bank of America was granted US$25 billion in bailout funds as part of the controversial US$700 billion federal bailout, otherwise known as the TARP – the Troubled Assets Relief Programme. Congress and the Bush administration said the bailout was needed to prop up financial institutions 'too big to fail' and prevent a massive economic depression. But many people saw the bailout as throwing money at banks while doing little to help distressed mortgage holders, or regular people in general. Like most banks, Bank of America did not use the bailout funds to make more loans and get the frozen credit market flowing again, as had been vaguely promised to taxpayers. Instead Bank of America used its bailout money in part to acquire Merrill Lynch, the once mighty brokerage firm then facing collapse as part of the larger Wall Street meltdown. (In January the US Treasury would grant Bank of America an additional US$20 billion in TARP funds to help with the rocky Merrill Lynch takeover.) As Bank of America was preparing for the takeover, Merrill Lynch CEO John Thain was trying to get some last minute perks in. He lobbied to be paid a multi-million dollar bonus, even as his company was reporting US$15.3 billion fourth-quarter losses. He completed a million-dollar office redecoration, and then took a vacation to Vail.[15] Thain became a timely symbol of the type of top-heavy and greedy businessman that many blamed for getting the country into this mess.

And on Goose Island, Bank of America would become a symbol of a cold-hearted financial institution cutting workers loose right before Christmas because, as the union would describe it, the bank 'refused to extend credit' to keep the window factory alive.

15 Saporito 2009 and other media reports.

The Occupation

There was a moment of shocked silence at the Friday evening benefit for the Latino Union grassroots group in the musty but grand second floor ballroom on the city's north side, after the announcement was made from the stage. Workers had taken over a factory? A real sit-down strike in progress? Soon the room was buzzing as immigrants' rights and labour activists tried to make sense of what they had just heard. Many decided to head over to Goose Island to see for themselves what was going on.

A similar scene was unfolding that evening at the Illinois Labor History Society gala, titled appropriately 'A New Deal for Workers: Past, Present, Future'. Reverend C.J. Hawking, an outspoken workers' rights advocate, had just given the crowd the news. 'You have a room full of labour historians, and labour history is being made', remembered Hawking. 'There was a collective gasp of excitement'.

Several hours earlier, Republic Windows workers had taken over the factory. Not just about 30 workers, as had been originally planned, but a majority of the workforce. After reporting to work that morning they'd been given impersonal packets describing their options and thanking them for their service. They were told to leave the building by 5 p.m. They were not given accrued vacation pay due them or severance pay that is mandated under the federal WARN Act if a business closes or has mass lay-offs without giving workers 60 days' notice. Workers voted on the spot whether to go ahead with the occupation, and the results were nearly unanimous.

UE organisers, other labour leaders and supporters wasted no time in getting the word out. By that evening the icy, snowy sidewalk outside the factory was clogged with journalists and supporters, chanting, singing, cheering, holding candles and distributing food and warm drinks. Many local politicians had no problem deciding which side they were on. Congressman Luis Gutierrez, a Puerto Rican known for fighting for immigrants' rights and protesting the Navy's test-bombing on the island of Vieques, cancelled a planned trip to Puerto Rico so he could be with the workers. Several city councilmen had been briefed in advance and had already reached out to the Chicago police to ask that they take a hands-off approach. As much as the labour movement had taken a beating in past decades in Chicago, as nationwide, at a moment like this Chicago harkened back to its history as a 'city of big shoulders' built by organised labour. Over the next few days of the occupation other prominent leaders would make appearances, including the Reverend Jesse Jackson and Illinois Governor Rod Blagojevich – whose visit to the factory turned out to be his last public event before his early morning arrest on serious federal corruption

charges. On Sunday, Barack Obama was asked about the occupation during a press conference. Workers watching on a TV inside the factory held their breath and then cheered wildly after hearing the President-Elect's response: 'When it comes to the situation here in Chicago with the workers who are asking for the benefits and payments that they have earned, I think they're absolutely right', he said. 'These workers if they have earned these benefits and their pay, these companies need to follow through on their commitments'.

Media coverage was also overwhelmingly positive – even Fox News did sympathetic stories about the workers. News outlets from Latin America, Europe and the Middle East carried stories about the gutsy Chicago workers taking over the window factory. The workers were elated, the world was on their side.

Negotiations and Triumph

Despite widespread media images of a spontaneous takeover, the occupation had actually been painstakingly planned over the previous weeks, with long hours spent on logistics and strategy. Meinster even got advice from Canadian autoworkers fresh off their own occupations. The preparation paid off. As previously agreed, only workers, their families and a few key allies (and filmmaker Michael Moore) were allowed inside the factory. The workers had vowed to keep all the equipment safe and clean, and the occupation and pickets outside were to be completely non-violent. Elaborate systems were established to provide security, interact with media and deliver food and other necessities. Over the weekend and into the next week, community support remained high and despite frigid temperatures and falling snow, there was always an energetic presence in the factory's cramped lobby and on the sidewalk outside. Meanwhile negotiations had started between Robles and other workers and UE organisers, company officials, select politicians, Bank of America and JP Morgan Chase bank, which owned a minority stake in the factory. Bank of America was clearly caught off guard and not pleased by being cast as the villain. In terse statements to media, bank officials stressed that the bank itself did not owe the workers a dime, and they were actually right. The union's line was that Bank of America had coldly 'cut off credit' to the company. But as became increasingly clear in the months following the occupation, it was totally understandable that the bank would decline to extend more credit to a company that was clearly failing and where, as a state indictment would later reveal, alleged fraud was rampant. The bank had already warned Gillman multiple times that he would need to find other sources of investment or begin an orderly process of closing the business. Gillman had appar-

ently ignored these warnings, failed to give workers legally required advance notice of the closure he knew was coming, and surreptitiously moved equipment to the Iowa factory including equipment that the company didn't legally own.

But during the occupation the workers and union organisers weren't interested in parsing these facts and arguments, and indeed much of the tangled financial background did not become clear until months later during messy bankruptcy proceedings and eventually the indictment. The bottom line was workers were owed about US$1.75 million in severance and vacation pay, and they were out of jobs in a vicious economy right before the holidays. Someone had to pay them the money they were owed, or they were not leaving the factory.

By Wednesday 10 December, on the sixth day of the occupation, a settlement was reached. Bank of America and JP Morgan/Chase together would pay the workers their money, contributing about US$1.35 million and US$400,000 respectively. Workers, supporters, politicians and other union members from around the city made the announcement in the chilly darkness outside the factory that evening, and a joyous celebration ensued.

The workers streamed out of the plant into the expectant crowd of supporters, pumping their fists and chanting 'Yes we can', then segueing into 'Yes we did'. 'The occupation is over', Robles announced gravely. 'We have achieved a victory. We said we would not go out until we got justice. We have it'.

'This is about more than just money', added UE regional president Carl Rosen. 'It's about what can be achieved when workers organise and stand up for justice. It's also a wakeup call to corporate America that the rules have changed in this country, and there needs to be a greater measure of economic justice for working people'.

It was a massive victory. Officials at the banks and other financial institutions probably hoped that not too many people actually understood quite the nature of it. The two banks indeed did not legally owe any money to the workers, yet they had agreed to pay $1.75 million. Though the amount was a drop in the bucket to such institutions, the symbolism was massive. By occupying a factory and garnering worldwide support, a few hundred largely immigrant window factory workers had forced two of the country's most powerful banks to give them money. Though the phrase would not become common parlance for another few years, it was clearly a victory for the 99 percent.

As congressman Gutierrez said, it was a 'Chicago Christmas Carol'.

The Morning After

As usually is the case, the triumphal end to the occupation was really just the beginning of the story. Workers had secured their money and the adoration of the nation, but they were still without jobs and facing bleak prospects. This of course had been much discussed during the occupation and its lead up, and thrilled as the workers were with getting paid, their ultimate goal was much loftier. They aimed to keep the factory open, ideally by taking it over and running it as a workers' co-operative. A fund dubbed 'Window of Opportunity' was launched for this purpose. Donations poured in, some large and mostly small. The fund grew, but the amount they would need to even begin to purchase the equipment and inventory was daunting. Not to mention that the company was in such a mess: many customers had fled, countless debts were owed, equipment had been spirited away and finances and records were in total chaos. Also as part of the settlement Bank of America had insisted that it would put the company, which it basically owned at this point, into Chapter 7 bankruptcy proceedings. That meant the assets would be liquidated to pay off creditors including the bank, greatly complicating the aim of keeping the factory open.

The workers were probably relieved when they were approached by something like a knight in shining armour. That would be Serious Materials, a California company specialising in highly energy efficient windows and drywall, run by an earnest venture capitalist-type from the Bay Area. CEO Kevin Surace had heard about Republic Windows on the news. He was touched by the workers' struggle, and he was also looking to expand operations in the Midwest. Serious Materials had already bought a defunct window factory in the former steel town of Vandergrift, Pennsylvania. Shortly before Christmas Surace tracked down Robles' cell phone number and gave him a call, then in January he toured the plant. He ultimately struck an agreement with the union and convinced Bank of America it was in their interests to let him buy the company rather than liquidating it. Hence Republic Windows and Doors became Serious Energy Chicago. (Serious Materials's name was later changed to Serious Energy). Surace promised the union that workers would eventually all be hired back and that he would essentially honour the previous union contract and continue to work with the union. A skeleton crew was hired for starters, and they slowly began to get the plant back in shape. In April – as pale green leaves were unfolding on trees outside the factory, nicely complementing the new green Serious Energy sign on the building – Vice President Joe Biden paid a visit. Standing on a makeshift platform inside the factory with Robles and other workers and union leaders around him, Biden described the factory as

a poster child for the promise of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) or Stimulus shepherded by new US President Barack Obama. Funds for energy efficiency audits and retrofits under the Stimulus were expected to spark much demand for energy efficient windows and create scores of jobs in the process.

Attendees cheered and imagined the factory soon humming, as union workers rolled out new lines of the country's most energy efficient windows.

A Serious Slog

The reality proved less sunny.

After Biden's visit the months dragged on and former workers who thought they'd soon be walking back through the factory doors were still out of luck. Getting the plant back in action, cleaning up Gillman's mess and getting new customers for Serious Energy's different line of products proved much more difficult than expected. Demand for energy efficient windows also didn't skyrocket because of the Stimulus or other government incentives, as many had expected. The process for getting an energy audit and subsidies for new windows was too bureaucratic and complicated, many complained. And the continuing economic crisis meant few buildings were being constructed or rehabbed. The summer came and went, as did the fall, and then the one-year anniversary of the occupation. At Christmas Surace presented gift baskets to all the workers, a gesture some said was greatly appreciated. There was vague talk of important contracts to replace the windows in famous skyscrapers in Chicago and New York; if these contracts materialised Serious Energy would see its fortunes rise.

Workers were still hopeful, but little was changing. The next year passed by in much the same way. Most of the former workers found new jobs or otherwise moved on, their hopes of being rehired at Serious Energy drifting away. Meanwhile Robles and some other workers channelled their experience with the occupation into other UE campaigns, including Warehouse Workers for Justice, wherein the low-paid, largely temporary workforce of sprawling warehouses in the Chicago suburbs began organising for permanent jobs and better pay.

In September 2009 Republic Windows was again in the news, as the Illinois State's Attorney released a damning criminal indictment of Gillman alleging he ran a 'financial crimes enterprise' involving a complicated web of fraud. Among other things, the indictment outlined how Gillman and his associates created a host of shell companies that would purchase products from Republic Windows without ever paying for them, so those companies could turn a profit

and let Republic Windows take the loss, apparently with the understanding that it would eventually be driven into the ground and declare bankruptcy. The indictment also described how Gillman moved equipment that the company did not actually own to the window factory Sharon Gillman had bought in Iowa – a factory that ultimately closed a few months after Republic Windows, putting about 100 people in the small town out of work. The window factory Sharon bought had been operating for 15 years and seemed to be in decent health, so the Iowa workers blamed the Gillmans for destroying what had been an economic and social mainstay of the community.

Gillman's bail was set at US$10 million, showing how seriously the state took the case. Gillman retained famous criminal defence lawyer Ed Genson, who had also represented former Governor Blagojevich, rapper R. Kelly and media tycoon Conrad Black. In March 2010 it was reported Gillman had sold his multi-million dollar condo. Then in December 2010 Gillman and his cousin Ron Spielman, who had founded another window company called Sound Solutions, were served with a lawsuit by a federal bankruptcy trustee alleging serious fraud. Among other things it described the allegedly illegal transfer of assets between the two companies and said that Republic Windows was intentionally kept open just long enough to avoid penalties related to the TIF funds it received from the city and the state statute of limitations on fraudulent transfers. The suit said the two 'started focusing on looting the assets of the company for themselves' and described the role of another prominent Chicago developer who transferred his own stake in Republic Windows to 'Tin Man Extraordinaire Trust', one of a host of colourfully named business entities created to apparently mask and shield Republic Windows's questionable dealings.[16]

Former Republic Windows workers surely felt vindicated by the exposure of Gillman's shady dealings, but it didn't do anything to help those whose unemployment benefits had long ago run out and who had not found solid jobs to fill the gap.

By the turn of 2012, things were not going well at all. The stimulus programmes once expected to spark demand for Serious Energy's products had expired, the economy was still flagging. At one point 75 workers had been hired back at Serious Energy, but there had been lay-offs and by early 2012 there were only 38 employees.[17] Even with an economic recovery supposedly underway, unemployment nationwide now was much worse than during the Republic Windows factory closing – over 9 percent.[18]

16 Lydersen 2010.

17 Slaughter 2012.

18 'U.S. Unemployment Up in February', Gallup Economy, 8 March 2012.

Then on the morning of 23 February 2012, Serious Energy workers were called to a meeting in the offices of a notoriously anti-union law firm. There they were notified that their jobs were over, effective immediately. The factory was closing. Lawyers told the workers they would get severance pay, but their services would no longer be needed.

Occupation 2.0

The scene in the law office was *déjà vu* for the workers. Soon other Chicagoans plugged into the labour scene had a sense of *déjà vu* as well. Workers were occupying a window factory on Goose Island.

The situation got less press and widespread attention this time. There was no Bank of America involved, no vacation and severance pay owed, no holidays without gifts for the children looming. Unlike the first occupation there was also almost no time to prepare; as workers were debating their next move, police reportedly told them they had five minutes to decide whether to stay or go. They decided to stay, even without sleeping bags, food or other necessities. But the network of supporters that the workers had built with the first occupation and maintained over the ensuing years was ready to snap into action. The coalition of labour and community groups Standup Chicago! delivered pizzas. Activists with Occupy Chicago brought tacos, tents and other supplies. Window factory workers who had already been laid off from Serious Energy returned, and soon there was a crowd of about 65 inside the plant and 100 outside. UE organiser Leah Fried described the spontaneous occupation as 'ground zero' of the Occupy movement which had sprung up since the 2008 standoff, honing the message floated early on by the Republic Windows workers that the huge financial institutions which essentially caused the economic crisis should be held accountable. The workers demanded that Serious Energy give them time to find an investor or to buy the plant themselves. This time it took just 11 hours.[19] By 1 a.m. the next morning, after the intervention of top Serious Energy officials in California, the company agreed to keep the plant open for 90 days longer while the union looked for a buyer or got funds to buy the factory themselves.

Supporters again cheered the victory and set about trying to raise money. By early summer the workers had formed a cooperative limited liability corporation, New Era Windows LLC, and raised about half a million dollars. Each

19 Slaughter 2012.

worker-owner contributed US$1,000, with the help of family and friends.[20] Workers took cooperative management classes and received support from the New York non-profit organisation The Working World, which provides capital and technical assistance for worker-owned cooperatives. Its website describes the group as 'venture capitalists with a radical social mission: to lend people the tools to democratically build lasting wealth for themselves, their businesses, and their communities'.[21]

Things seemed to be going well, then on 1 July they were notified during a conference call that Serious Energy was planning to auction off the business, and bids were due immediately. It appeared clear that almost any bidder or Serious Energy itself would liquidate the operation and sell off the assets. With US$500,000 cash on hand, New Era made a hasty bid of US$1.2 million. Serious Energy said it wasn't enough. The union launched another public relations push and convinced the company to delay the auction. Instead of invoking Bank of America as the corporate villain, they targeted Mesirow Financial, which had invested US$15 million in Serious Energy in 2009. A Mesirow senior managing director also sat on Serious Energy's board. The workers appealed to Mayor Rahm Emanuel for help, citing his promises to create jobs, his close ties to top Mesirow executives and his 'Retrofit Chicago' plan for scores of energy efficiency upgrades on public and private buildings.[22]

Ultimately the auction was delayed long enough for the workers with investment from Working World to buy about half the equipment and inventory from Serious Energy, with plans of relocating and opening their cooperative.

They found a new home to lease on the southwest side, in an industrial stretch between the largely immigrant Little Village and Pilsen neighbourhoods and near the sprawling county jail. The old Campbell's Soup factory at 2600 West 35th Street had been revamped as the Chicago Business Centre, a spacious and still partially empty complex of warehouse, factory and office space.

The workers set about packing up the equipment on Goose Island, rented trucks and moved most of it themselves, spending just US$18,000 instead of the US$100,000 originally planned for the move. The Working World founder and director Brendan Martin saw it as an example of how their pragmatic, can-do spirit boded well for their survival as a cooperative.[23] Many of the workers

20 http://www.theworkingworld.org/us/what-we-do/.

21 Flanders 2012.

22 Ibid.

23 Interview with Working World founder and director Brendan Martin.

also spent the summer and fall taking business management classes at the UE union hall, acquiring the new skills they would need for their expanded roles as worker-owners.

A Factory Full of Promise

By November 2012, the New Era workers were chomping at the bit to open the shop.[24] Workers had been spending long days getting the factory in order, and one could envision windows being made there soon.

Entering the factory through a loading dock, there was a bright new indoor soccer pitch with artificial grass, surrounded on all sides by stacks of materials for making windows. (Doors would no longer be part of their product line). In the adjacent cavernous space, a colourful array of mattresses from a past tenant was piled 50 feet high, creating a somewhat surreal backdrop to the array of strange-looking contraptions scattered still haphazardly on the concrete floor – the wheels, blades, presses and other machinery needed to make energy efficient windows.

One morning in late November 2012, about 20 workers crowded into a makeshift office just off the factory floor, squeezed between a chunky black refrigerator and wire shelves holding four microwaves. They talked excitedly in English and Spanish, below a whiteboard with the layout of the factory floor and pieces of butcher paper with bilingual lists of tasks.

Robles wore a 'Troublemakers' T-shirt from the progressive union Labor Notes conference held in Chicago earlier that year. An embroidered UE logo peaked out at the collar, from another shirt underneath.

This tight-knit group – men and women, African American and Latino immigrants who had worked together for more than a decade – were on the cusp of, in Robles's words, 'becoming CEOs'. When a few more documents were signed, they would officially be the co-operative owners of a functioning window factory.

They discussed logistics like insurance, electric wiring, the location for the permanent office and restrooms, the number of heating units they'd need during the coming winter. Whether to elevate the air compressors on a platform, to cut down on noise and open up more space. How to locate the office so visitors would not need to walk through the factory without safety goggles. Such pragmatic details came naturally, familiar as they were with the inner workings

24 Interviews with New Era workers during a visit to the factory, November 2012.

of a window factory. They knew launching and running a company wouldn't be easy, but especially given their deep knowledge of the industry and their personal investment, they were confident they could do it. A tangible current of excitement ran through the room.

Brendan Martin had much experience with workers co-ops around the world, including during his seven-year stint in the cooperative hotbed of Argentina. He said he had seen few groups as promising as New Era.

'The incredible thing is the ownership they already feel', he said. 'They're doing an incredible job – it shows that when workers have true control they can do things like finding ways to save costs. They aren't just the raw material, they are the protagonists. They're making capital work for people, not people work for capital'.

As the November meeting wound down, Robles pulled a dark bottle of liquor out of the refrigerator and someone found a stack of shot glasses, including one with a red light blinking inside it. Robles had an almond concoction he'd brought back from his recent trip to visit workers' cooperatives in his native Mexico, on a strip known as the 'Road of Co-ops' near Mexico City. He visited a co-op that gave gondola rides to visitors; one that made ecologically-friendly clay pottery in home-made kilns; one that created varnished, weathered pictures of 'families, horses, the Pope'; one where women who reminded him of his mother did beautiful embroidery on textiles; and one on top of a hill where worker-owners made exotic liquors from fruit and nut trees and trained 'dancing horses'. He also visited a sandal factory where workers had been on strike for two years and the owner was trying to get the government to declare the strike illegal, which would deny workers the strike pay otherwise due under Mexican labour law. The sandal workers would likely form a co-op, Robles said. He also visited a building cooperative; he dreamed New Era could sell them windows.

'I saw how people did these different things to survive', Robles said of the trip. 'Instead of working for someone, they create these things of their own'.

The workers passed around the liquor and toasted to New Era. Then it was time to go sign the five-year lease on the space, making it truly their own. They filed upstairs to a lushly decorated office, smelling of perfume, where they greeted the building owner, himself a Mexican immigrant.

Waiting on the couches in the office lobby, Robles clowned around and told the more reserved workers, 'you can talk, it's not like church!'

Robles and Melvin 'Ricky' Maclin noted that their company would have no president or hierarchical structure – they would all be owners. 'It's a lot easier for a worker to become an owner than an owner to become a worker', laughed Maclin. He described all the cooperative members as 'handpicked.'

'When you have a cooperative it's not just about your skills', he continued. 'You have to really get along, have the ability to work together. You're like a family.'

While the new factory opening had originally been scheduled for fall 2012, various tasks and challenges took much longer than expected. The workers had become used to this sort of thing, and didn't lose hope. On 9 May 2013, New Era finally celebrated its grand opening. The workers talked with reporters and well-wishers from around the country, and invited the public to an afternoon celebration in the factory. 'Some people thought we were crazy, but we did it', Robles said.

Their first new line of windows was called 1110, after their UE Local.[25] The cooperative website describes the attributes of the 1110 line and the 2220, along with the company's efficient glass and design services. It also says:

> We are proud to keep advanced manufacturing in Chicago. There's no reason that our technology and jobs can't stay right here. Our manufacturing techniques let us make windows that are among the best in the industry in terms of energy efficiency standards. And we're here to pass our nearby communities the savings that result from them.[26]

Justice at Last

On 5 December 2013, five years to the day after he had closed Republic Windows and sparked the occupation, Richard Gillman was sentenced. He pled guilty to Class One Felony Theft and went before a judge to receive his punishment.

He was sentenced to four years in prison and a US$100,000 fine[27] – far less than he had cheated his workers and creditors out of, but a significant statement nonetheless. Prosecutors had said Gillman could face six to 30 years in prison if he went to trial. He initially turned down their plea bargain offer, then decided to accept it.[28]

'It is a just and fitting sentence given the devastating impact that these financial crimes had on so many working Chicagoans', said Cook County State's Attorney Anita Alvarez in a statement.[29]

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25 Heffernan 2013.

26 www.newerawindows.com.

27 Cook County State's Attorney's Office 2013.

28 Hirst 2013.

29 Cook County State's Attorney's Office 2013.

Before the sentence was handed down, the judge asked if there was anything Gillman would like to say. Armando Robles and Melvin 'Ricky' Maclin were in the court room. Gillman turned toward them, and apologised. The moment showed how much the tables had turned. Now Gillman was headed to prison, his financial affairs in tatters and his reputation demolished. Robles and Maclin meanwhile had moved on. They were now co-owners of a factory, and it was humming.

Literally humming – as demonstrated on a Monday morning after Gillman's sentencing – with the whir of machines providing a backdrop to Mexican music and the friendly conversation among workers who had spent years on the roller coaster that finally culminated in what one described as a 'gran victoria' – a great victory.[30]

'I can't believe a dream became a reality', said Alberto Ocegueda, who had worked at Republic Windows for 15 years, as he worked on a window line and joked with a colleague who had a quarter century at Republic Windows. As of the turn of the New Year in 2014, 17 men and women own and run New Era, along with assistance from a Working World staffer. 'Almost no one else has done this, it's unprecedented', Ocegueda said.

Robles and Maclin noted that while Gillman's sentencing gave them a sense of closure and justice, they harbour no animosity toward him.

'I'm a Christian, I had already forgiven him even if he had not apologised to us', said Maclin with his trademark warm smile, as he worked on books in the New Era office below a brightly decorated Christmas tree. 'You can't hold on to negativity if you want to move in a positive direction'.

'I don't feel good about it, because he's a human being', added Robles. 'But I'm pretty sure he didn't feel sorry for the 270 people he hurt in 2008'.

Robles and his co-owners echoed the sentiments voiced back when Gillman was charged – that the wheels of justice would have turned quite differently or not at all had it not been for the occupation and the widespread support it drew. 'In the whole United States we almost never see something like this, always the owners run away, and nothing happens to them', Robles said. 'In this case it was the courage and the organisation we had that made the difference'.

'Too often financial crimes go unpunished, but when union workers fight back and have the support of a team like this, we can win justice', noted UE western region president Carl Rosen.[31]

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30 Visit to the New Era factory, 16 December 2013.

31 UE Press Release 2013, 'UE Statement on the Conviction of Republic Windows and Doors CEO Rich Gillman', 5 December.

The Fight Goes On

New Era got lots of orders in the months after opening. But the co-owners know that really getting the business going, expanding their product line and hiring more workers will still be a significant and ongoing struggle. They will need to keep learning and experimenting as they forge new ground and respond to market challenges. The US does not provide such fertile ground for cooperatives as places like Argentina – the financial regulations and structures are different, and there is not widespread support for or understanding of cooperatives among potential customers, suppliers and creditors. So it may be a difficult and long road for New Era … but it will also be one that helps pave the way for future worker-owned cooperatives.

Shortly after Gillman was sentenced, Robles went to a cooperatives conference in Cleveland, speaking with workers from across the US and the famous Mondragon cooperative in the Basque region of Spain. Such networking has helped him and the other co-owners master all the facets of running a business that they didn't have to deal with in the Republic Windows days – from book-keeping and various logistics to marketing, strategising and advertising.

'At Republic Windows we weren't involved in making decisions in the office, or buying materials, things like that', noted Anna Marquez, 44, who had worked at Republic for eight years. 'Now the change is drastic, and difficult but not impossible. Now we have to know how to make windows and to run the process in the office. It's a responsibility. Now we're not doing it for someone else, but for us'.

Winter is typically a slow period for the window industry, and as Christmas 2013 approached the New Era owners had seen their orders taper off. They said the cold months ahead would provide a chance to get machinery ready for the summer, to step up their marketing and move toward their goal of selling commercial windows. Robles noted that the cooperative had obtained its minority-owned business license, so once they get a commercial line off the ground New Era can expect business from the city of Chicago, including as part of the influx of building overhauls under the Retrofit Chicago plan.

All decision-making and planning for moves like introducing a new window line is done in a collective and consensus-based model. It can be a slow and sometimes tricky process, but it's the style that has sustained the workers through much bigger challenges in the past.

'We have some arguments, but we always come to an agreement', noted Robles. 'We like the process. Before we just heard from the supervisors, "This is how you do it". Now we're the ones making the decisions.' Maria Roman, 52, described the difference between her 12 years at Republic Windows and New

Era in even starker terms. 'Before we were like slaves, with so many demands on us', said Roman, who like all the workers 'does everything involved in making a window' – including cutting, welding and other steps. She noted that so far the worker-owners are not making great money. But it's a hopefully temporary sacrifice that they are willing to make. 'We have to invest our time and effort to be more prosperous, and then we'll have a better salary', she said. 'That's what it means to be owners … I feel very proud to be part of this organisation'.

Maclin agreed that starting the cooperative was and continues to be a financial struggle. He wishes the government would do more to support and subsidise cooperatives. 'It's a great alternative for the US, it's what we need to get back on track and be a country that builds things', he said. Maclin noted that at Republic Windows and Serious Materials, he never 'took my work home with me'. Now he does. He works weekends, and customers have his personal phone number, and use it often. But it's all worth it. 'It's exciting', he said. 'I'm excited every day to come here'.

So the story comes full circle, from one occupation to another. From a successful family-owned window company with workers who felt exploited and a union widely described as corrupt, to a worker-owned cooperative where – if things go as hoped – workers with a keen sense of solidarity and struggle will throw their experience and skills into producing top-notch energy efficient windows for a recovering housing market.

New Era Windows will ideally become an example and an inspiration for other workers at companies facing closure, or for workers who want to break free from exploitive situations and take their destinies into their own hands. The New Era factory is not on the Chicago River. But one can imagine that if it becomes a thriving worker-owned company years down the road, selling union-made energy efficient windows across the Midwest, it will still be known as the fruit of a revolt on Goose Island.

CHAPTER 7

The Egyptian Workers' Movement: Revolt, Revolution and Counter-Revolution*

Anne Alexander and Mostafa Bassiouny

The last ten years have reshaped the Egyptian workers' movement more dramatically than at any time since the 1940s. That short space of time has seen the ebb and flow of the greatest mass strike wave in Egypt for sixty years and the explosive growth of independent unions in a country where the dead hand of a state-run trade union bureaucracy had stifled workers' attempts at self-organisation for half a century. Collective action by organised workers played a fundamental role in the cycle of revolution and counter-revolution between 2011 and 2014. The pre-revolutionary strike wave helped to destabilise the Mubarak regime, paralysing the Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF), one of the ruling party's last remaining mechanisms for popular mobilisation. A strike wave in the final days before Mubarak fell sealed his fate, and the new peaks of workers' protests after 11 February 2011 played a key role in destabilising subsequent military-appointed and Islamist governments.

Throughout this process, the basic modes of workers' organisation at the level of the workplace have been highly democratic and participatory, and at times expanded the scope of their activities far beyond the routines of trade unionism to assert workers' authority over the process of production or service delivery itself. In some workplaces, particularly in the public sector, this assertion was combined with a struggle against not only the old ruling party, but the Armed Forces, which in Egypt is embedded at every level of the state's 'bureaucratic-military machine'.[1]

Yet, the political outcomes of this period have been contradictory. The massive wave of strikes and social protests during the period of Muslim Brotherhood rule under Mohamed Morsi did not pave the way for a deepening of the revolution, as many Egyptian worker-activists hoped, but instead it was the core institutions of the old regime which reasserted control of the state. The

* This chapter summarises some of the main arguments presented at greater length in our book, *Bread, Freedom, Social Justice: Workers and the Egyptian Revolution* (Zed, 2014).

1 See Alexander and Bassiouny 2014, Chapter 9 for more detail on this process.

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military deposed Morsi and launched a brutal counter-revolutionary offensive, initially targeted at the Muslim Brotherhood, but later broadening out to include revolutionary activists from the left and liberal youth movements. At the same time, the military leadership reached out to sections of the workers' movement, appointing Kamal Abu Aita, a leading figure in the independent unions, as Minister of Labour and promising the long-delayed implementation of a rise in the minimum wage. However, although such rhetoric was calculated to appeal to those who hoped that the military would usher in a new era of state-led development and social reforms, the regime continued neoliberal restructuring of the economy through subsidy cuts and hinted that privatisation of state assets would resume.[2]

In this chapter we will focus on the tense and complex relationship between democratic and bureaucratic forms of organisation in the Egyptian workers' movement, exploring in particular the connection between strike organisation and union formation. We begin with an analysis of how the shift towards neoliberal policies after 1974 undid the Nasserist social contract, leaving the state trade unions partially paralysed and unable to mobilise the semblance of popular support for the regime. We will analyse why and how a new trade union bureaucracy formed within the independent unions which emerged in the years before the revolution of 2011, despite the richness of the democratic culture of organisation at a workplace level. Our understanding of 'bureaucracy' here is two-fold: firstly it refers to dominance within the trade unions, of a specific layer of officials, for whom the maintenance of their own position as mediators between the state, employers and workers becomes an overriding concern. Secondly, we contrast bureaucratic and democratic forms of leadership within the Egyptian trade unions,[3] with bureaucratic leadership relying on passive mechanisms to consult members and centralising both organisational expertise and decision-making processes among a narrow, relatively professionalised layer. Democratic leadership, as Barker et al. suggest, is 'more diversely networked', relying on 'regular, open and authoritative deliberations with varied constituencies'.[4]

We argue that the experience of Egypt validates key elements of an approach to understanding the trade union bureaucracy which has been developed by Marxist and Marxist-influenced theorists.[5] Cliff and Gluckstein, in a classic statement of this approach, emphasise two central points. The first of these

2 Saleh 2014; Fick, Kalin, and Sassard 2014.
3 See Alexander 2010 for more on this issue.
4 Barker, Johnson and Lavalette 2001, p. 19.
5 Hyman 1975; Cliff and Gluckstein 1986; Darlington and Upchurch 2012.

is to argue that full-time trade union officials are positioned as a mediating layer between employers and workers, and subject to pressures from both sides, although they inevitably lean towards conciliation with employers in order to preserve the bargaining machinery on which their livelihoods and status depend.[6] The second point emphasises that a conflict of interests between the trade union bureaucracy and rank-and-file union activists is a permanent feature of trade unionism.[7]

Darlington and Upchurch expand on these points, arguing that four aspects of the trade union bureaucracy (by which they mean full-time officials leading national unions) are key to understanding their unique position: 'their social role, their bargaining function, their relationship with social democracy, and their power relationship with union members'.[8] Despite the differences between the British context analysed by Darlington and Upchurch in their article, and the Egyptian independent unions, an analogous combination of factors helps to explain the role of the bureaucracy in the Egyptian case. There, the ability to earn comfortable salaries and enjoy secure jobs as trade union officials were less important factors in accelerating bureaucratisation (because these opportunities were rarely, if at all, available), but rather relative isolation from the day-to-day pressures of the workplace and the status associated with their role. Moreover, the leadership of national union federations was able to mobilise resources which most workplace activists could not, including access to the national media, links to national politicians and employers' representatives and connections to the international trade union movement.

Constructing the Neoliberal Order

The policy of *infitah* (opening) which president Anwar al-Sadat initiated after 1974 marked a crucial turning point in Egyptian history. For the previous decade, under Gamal Abdel Nasser's leadership, Egypt's rulers had followed a development strategy which emulated the state capitalism of the Soviet Union, whose technicians they also recruited to build up heavy industries and whose weapons they bought to equip their armed forces. *Infitah* moved Egypt decisively into the orbit of the USA, and was rapidly followed by direct negotiations with Israel and a formal peace treaty. In practical terms *infitah* meant the lib-

6 Cliff and Gluckstein 1986.

7 Darlington and Upchurch 2012, p. 91.

8 Darlington and Upchurch 2012 p. 80.

eralisation of foreign trade, encouragement for private sector imports, banking reform and the reorganisation of the public and private sectors: with greater privileges for the private sector.[9] By the end of the 1980s Egypt was dangerously close to defaulting on repayments for US military loans incurred during the first years of *infitah*.[10] Once again, the shifting regional political balance created an opportunity for the Egyptian regime to trade political and military support for the USA for a partial bailout of the ailing economy. The Mubarak regime's support for the US-led attack on Iraq following the invasion of Kuwait in 1990 was followed by a massive debt write-off and the beginning of a full-frontal assault on the public-sector in the name of 'structural adjustment'. Law 203 of 1991 created 'Holding Companies' across large parts of the public sector, and tasked sections of the public sector bureaucracy with overseeing the process of breaking down the vertically-integrated production and distribution combines into saleable chunks which would attract the interest of local or international investors. Other key laws in the economic reform programme included Law 8 of 1997, providing corporate tax exemptions and protection from nationalisation for investors. A third vital element was the enactment of a new Labour Law (Law 12 of 2003). This legislation was not brought in until twelve years into the reform process, after hundreds of thousands of workers had already been forced into early retirement or seen their jobs transferred out of the public sector. The law reduced workers' rights to stable employment and protection against unemployment. Employers gained the right to renew fixed-term contracts on a rolling basis and much greater 'flexibility' in ending contracts. Workers theoretically gained the right to strike, although in reality this concession was meaningless as the only *legal* mechanism for organising a strike was to gain the approval of one of the sector-wide General Unions affiliated to the Egyptian Trade Union Federation, which was part of the bureaucratic apparatus of the state.

In 1991, at the onset of privatisation, around one million workers were affected directly by the Law 203 reforms, or around 20 percent of the public sector workforce (encompassing state-owned industries, local and national government and military-owned industries).[11] This state-employed workforce represented around 37 percent of the total labour force of 15.2 million. Ten years later, the workforce in state-owned enterprises affected by Law 203 had been reduced by more than half, to 453,000. The reduction in employment had been

9 Waterbury 1985 p. 70.
10 Alexander 2009.
11 Privatisation Coordination Support Unit 2002, p. 39.

achieved using a variety of mechanisms, including forced early retirement, sale to the private sector and a freeze on hiring new workers as employees reached retirement age. Workers who found themselves transferred into the private sector often faced significantly worse conditions and lower pay than in the public sector. During the first years of privatisation wage rates were largely synchronised between the public and private sectors, but after 2000 the gap began to widen.[12] Workers in the private sector also lost access to non-wage benefits such as health care, pension rights, shorter working hours and greater job security.[13] The assault on the public sector also broke up long traditions of strike organisation and histories of militancy, particularly in the textile sector, compounding a sense of defeat and decline among some sections of the working class.

Neoliberalism created a new consensus across the ruling class. While there were winners and losers – some sections of the public sector bureaucracy and the managers of the state-run trade union federation certainly saw their influence decline, for example – this process did not create unmanageable conflict at an elite level. By contrast, it was the eruption of resistance from below which triggered the destabilisation of the Mubarak regime, culminating in the revolution of 2011. The regime's failure to find new ways of managing workers' discontent in place of the corporatist institutions of the Nasserist era, such as the Egyptian Trade Union Federation, played a crucial role in this process. Ironically, neoliberal rejection of the basic principles of the Nasserist social contract, in which workers received social benefits in exchange for their political quiescence, loosened the ideological grip of the state over the workers' movement, convincing at least a minority that self-organised collective action was the only way to wrest concessions from their bosses and the state.

Egyptian Workers Rediscover the Strike

Fifteen years passed between the beginning of the Economic Reform and Structural Adjustment Programme and the explosion of a major strike wave. As the first decade passed, regime officials and their advisers in the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) congratulated each other on having apparently avoided a replay of the 1977 uprising, when thousands took to the streets in spontaneous protests against the removal of subsidies on basic goods

12 Hassan and Sassanpour 2008, p. 13.
13 Said 2004.

such as cheap bread.[14] Such optimism proved to be unfounded: the strike wave which erupted after 2006 played a key role in plunging the Egyptian state into its greatest crisis of modern times. The scale of workers' mobilisation confirms that the decades of neoliberal reform had restructured the working class, but not prevented workers from organising in order to deploy their collective social power.

The battle to establish or re-establish traditions of self-organisation which could endure beyond the moment of a strike or protest were central to this process. The years 2004–5 saw a rash of attempts to found branches of the official ETUF unions in new, private-sector workplaces, often accompanied or preceded by strikes. The turning-point however came in December 2006, with the strike by 24,000 textile workers at Misr Spinning in Al-Mahalla al-Kubra. Within a few weeks similar strikes were spreading between public and private sector textile producers, and from there to civil servants, teachers, municipal refuse workers and transport workers.

A distinctive feature of the post-2006 wave of collective action was the adoption of the strike (*idirab*) rather than a work-in (*itisam*). Work-ins were a common feature of workers' protests during the Nasserist era and the first phase of *infitah*, and meant that workers refused to leave the workplace after the end of working hours, continuing production in protest until the state intervened to shut down operations by force through cutting off electricity or water supplies and storming the buildings. This choice of tactics reflected the influence of an official discourse which emphasised that the public sector was the property of 'the people' and that workers were partners in the production process. Increasing, rather than ceasing production was therefore a way for workers to morally censure the state for its failure to abide by its obligations in this 'partnership'.

The Mahalla strike of 2006 began with another traditional form of protest: collective refusal to cash paycheques. However, it quickly escalated into a three-day strike, which was resolved through negotiations, with most of the workers' key demands being met by the state. The relatively long duration of the Mahalla strike had significant implications for the revival of workers' self-organisation. During the 1980s and 1990s workers' protests tended to last less than 24 hours and the authorities were often successful in preventing news of major strikes reaching the outside world until after they had quelled the unrest. The 1989 sit-in by workers at the Egyptian Iron and Steel Company in Helwan began at noon and ended at dawn the following day, for example.

14 World Bank 2000, p. 1.

Within a few hours it was impossible for workers to go beyond fairly embryonic forms of self-organisation: there was little opportunity for democratic debate or decision-making, no chance to take the message of the strikers to other workplaces or to reach a wider audience through the media. By contrast, a number of significant strikes in 2007 lasted days, or sometimes weeks, such as the nine-day-long strike by textile workers in Kafr al-Dawwar in February 2007, or a strike at Abu Makaram in Sadat City which lasted three weeks. A further strike in Mahalla in September 2007 lasted six days. Many of these strikes took the form of mass occupations of the workplaces, testing workers with the challenge of organising tents or sleeping arrangements, food and provisions for thousands of people, rotas of volunteer security teams to protect factory equipment. In many workplace occupations these tasks were carried out by committees elected by mass meetings, which were also the place where negotiators' decisions were referred for approval or rejection. The willingness of the state to enter into meaningful negotiations with strikers' representatives, rather than simply arresting them, dramatically changed the terrain on which the workers' movement could develop. This was not because of some overnight change of heart on the part of officials in the Ministry of Labour, after decades of acting to suppress workers' protests. Rather it reflected the breakdown or at least paralysis of the traditional mechanisms through which the state sought to relate to workers and the revival of workers' self-organisation from below.

For more than fifty years, the labour and professional unions which the Nasserist state created in order to monopolise workplace organisation continued to operate. Despite the state's withdrawal from the Nasserist social contract, the regime continued to rely on the Egyptian Trade Union Federation to police the workplace and mobilise workers' votes behind the dictatorship. The loosening of the ETUF's grip on the workers' movement and the paralysis of the federation in the face of the rising tide of workers' protests and eventually revolution, has to be understood in two dimensions: as a result both of pressure from above and of workers' creation of alternative structures of representation in the course of the strike wave. Workers' recovery of agency within the workplace has to be understood in the context of a wider 'culture of protest',[15] which spanned the mobilisations for Palestine in 2000, the mass protests against war on Iraq in 2003, the emergence of a new movement for democratic reform in 2004 and the revolt of the judges in 2006.[16]

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15 El-Mahdi 2009.

16 See El-Mahdi 2009 for more on the emergence of a movement calling for democratic reforms, including opening the presidential election to genuine competition and a halt

Strike Organisation and Independent Union Organisation before the Revolution

The Real Estate Tax Authority Union (RETAU),[17] Egypt's first independent union for more than fifty years, was established by activists in the Property Tax Agency in December 2008, in the wake of a successful campaign of strikes and sit-ins which ended in a historic victory in January 2008. The campaign was launched by activists in the Giza Directorate of the Agency in September 2007, and culminated in a sit-in outside the Ministry of Finance in central Cairo in December 2007. The activists' key demand was to reattach their jobs to the Ministry of Finance, rather than employing Property Tax Agency workers through local governorates. The negotiations which ended the strike saw the Ministry officials concede on this crucial point, thus winning massive improvements in pay and conditions across the Agency. Just over a year after the sit-in, thousands of tax collectors crammed into the auditorium at the Journalists' Union headquarters to launch an independent union, which claimed a membership of over 27,600 and boasted a network of named representatives in 234 Property Tax Agency offices nationwide.[18]

The relationship between the 2007 strike and the successful launch of the union a year later has to be understood in two dimensions. The first of these is the role of a model of democratic organising where delegates and negotiators were accountable to mass meetings and the self-activity of rank-and-file activists was the main motor which drove forward the campaign for parity in pay and conditions with the Ministry of Finance. Many of the activists who led both the Higher Strike Committee, and the independent union after the strike committee's dissolution, made a conscious attempt to carry forward these principles and practices into the new union. A second key element in the success of the project of building the new union lay in the project's political dimensions. The strike's leaders explicitly made a challenge to the authority of the state in the

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to plans by Mubarak to hand over the reins of power to his son, Gamal. Following an initial gathering in December 2004 this movement mobilised hundreds in repeated street protests under the slogan '*Kifaya!*' (Enough!). By 2006 discontent had spilled over into sections of the judiciary, as reform-minded judges rallied to the cause of Mahmud Mekki and Hisham Bastawisi, two vice-presidents of the Court of Cassation who were threatened with disciplinary action after leading a campaign to expose violations during the 2005 elections.

17 We have used the English version of the Arabic name (*al-niqaba al-ʿamma lil-ʿammilin bil-daraib al-ʿaqariyya*) adopted by the union and used in English correspondence.

18 *Nubat Sahiyan*, May 2009, pp. 12–15.

location of their protest. The mass sit-in outside the Ministry of Finance was also located near the Cabinet Offices so that the tax collectors' defiant chanting literally echoed through the corridors of power. The magnitude of their victory in securing agreement to their demands created a state of confusion and semi-paralysis in senior levels of government, giving activists the opportunity to transform the temporary organisational structures of the strike into something more permanent.

However, it was much more difficult to sustain the mutually-reinforcing relationship between democratic self-organisation and political challenge to the regime once the strike had ended. This was in part a reflection of the inevitable pressure towards the creation of a bureaucratic leadership which is inherent in trade unionism as a reformist form of organisation.[19] Although the space in which RETAU's leadership could mediate and bargain on behalf of their members with the state was extremely limited and fraught with contradictions, nevertheless in the wake of the strike it was possible for union officials to pursue negotiations over pay and conditions with some state officials. The union secured a kind of *de facto* recognition from the Ministry of Labour by presenting registration papers which were never challenged or rejected, despite the fact that these contradicted existing labour laws.[20]

Another key factor, however, was the influence on the independent union leadership of two intersecting forms of bureaucratic organisation. The first of these was the model of trade unionism presented to them by the bureaucracy of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC). The new union quickly won support from the ITUC's powerful affiliate, the American Federation of Labor – Congress of Industrial Organisations (AFL-CIO). Kamal Abu Aita, RETAU's president, was invited by the ITUC to attend its second congress in Vancouver in June 2010.[21] The union also received the AFL-CIO's 2009 George Meany-Lane Kirkland Human Rights Prize jointly with the Centre for Trade Union and Workers' Services (CTUWS), a labour NGO with long-standing con-

19 Darlington and Upchurch 2012.

20 The legal position of independent trade unions in Egypt was (and remains) contradictory. According to the 1976 Labour Law union organisation outside the framework of the ETUF is not permitted. However, Egypt also remained a signatory to the 1948 International Labour Organisation (ILO) Convention on the right to organise, and it was to the rights enshrined there that independent union activists and their supporters appealed in their legal arguments. The presentation of RETAU's registration papers was timed to coincide with the presence of an ILO delegation in Egypt, in order to put the maximum pressure on the Ministry of Labour not to issue a challenge.

21 CTUWS 2010.

nections to international trade unions and civil society organisations.[22] CTUWS was founded by Kamal Abbas, a former steelworker, with the aim of supporting activists in the workplace campaigning for labour and trade union rights. From the beginning, the CTUWS oriented itself on creating links between international trade unions and civil society organisations outside Egypt and labour movement activists within Egypt.[23] The organisation was very successful in gaining international recognition and funding for its activities, winning support from the American union federation AFL-CIO, Oxfam and British public sector union UNISON among other organisations.[24] Officials from the ITUC's national affiliates and the Global Union Federations presented a model of trade unionism which depended on the presence of a large, resource-rich and stable bureaucracy which could generally rely on employers and the state to recognise it as a legitimate negotiating partner: the contrast with RETAU's meagre resources and precarious existence in the face of a hostile state could hardly have been greater.

The second bureaucratic model available to independent trade unionists in Egypt was one we have labelled 'NGO trade unionism'. In this model, which was most strongly evident in the development of the national federations of independent unions after the 2011 revolution in Egypt, the emerging trade union bureaucracy functioned largely as a campaigning and lobby group, rather than by playing a mediating role in the process of bargaining with employers. This was a form of organisation which was strongly influenced by the presence of Egyptian NGOs, including CTUWS, which offered a range of services to Egyptian workers involved in collective action, including legal advice, lobbying politicians, mobilising international solidarity and external pressure on the government, as well as helping them access local and global media.

Yet, despite all the pressures, RETAU survived, and the union's consolidation accelerated the development of other independent unions and proto-union networks among teachers, public transport workers, postal workers and health technicians. With the exception of the health technicians, strike organisation played a central role in creating the foundation for independent unions. An independent union for school teachers was founded in 2010, in the wake of strikes and protests around the imposition of a new national pay and grading framework in 2007.[25] Strikes in the Post Office were also triggered by disputes

22 AFL-CIO 2010.

23 CTUWS 2013b.

24 CTUWS 2013c; UNISON 2007; SOLIDAR 2013; Essoyan 2013; Solidarity Center 2007.

25 Ministry of Education 2007, p. 32.

over a new national appraisal system and, like the tax collectors' strike, generated a strike committee which began to take on some of the aspects of an independent union.[26] The Property Tax Collectors' experiences therefore provided a model for activists who were facing similar problems in their own workplaces, and significantly raised their expectations of what could be achieved as a result of self-organised strike action.

Strikes and Union Formation during the Revolution

The eruption of a popular uprising against the Mubarak regime in January 2011 opened the door to an even broader and deeper wave of collective action by workers than the peaks of the pre-revolutionary mobilisations. Workers also played a critical role in the consummation of the first phase of the uprising: providing large numbers of the dead and injured during the initial stages of the uprising, refusing to heed the call of the ETUF officials who tried to mobilise their rank and file to attack protesters in Tahrir Square, and finally with a wave of strikes which was rapidly escalating by the day that Mubarak fell. The toppling of the chief symbol of the old regime was followed not by an orderly return to work, as many mainstream politicians from the Islamists to the Liberals hoped, but by a new tidal wave of strikes and workplace occupations, with nearly 500 separate episodes of collective action by workers recorded in the month of February 2011 alone.[27] Thereafter the rate of protests slowed, before building up to another peak in September 2011 with national strike action by teachers and sector-wide or local strikes across a wide range of sectors. The ebb and flow of strikes continued over the following two years, and played a significant role in destabilising the military and Islamist governments which succeeded each other before the crisis of June and July 2013. Massive street protests, combined in some places with strikes, were followed by a military coup against the Muslim Brotherhood president Mohamed Morsi on 3 July 2013 and the launch of a counter-revolutionary offensive by the key institutions of the old regime: the Armed Forces, the Ministry of the Interior, the judiciary and the media.

The waves of strikes were intertwined with processes of union formation, with hundreds of independent unions declaring themselves in the first few

26 Abu Aita 2009.

27 Mu'assisat Awlad al-Ard and Markaz al-Masry lil-Huquq al-Iqtisadiyya wa al-Igtima'iyya 2011.

months of 2011. These processes need to be understood from two different directions. A perspective 'from above', that is to say, through the lens of changes in the legal framework governing workers' organisation and changes in the state apparatus, shows that important changes took place in the wake of Mubarak's fall. Ahmad al-Borai, Minister of Labour in Essam Sharaf's government, appointed in March 2011 by the ruling military council which took power from Mubarak, created a legal process through which independent unions could register formally with the state for the first time. This was considered a significant victory by large layers of labour movement activists, who rushed to take advantage of the new registration process. Al-Borai also appeared to meet a long-standing demand from sections of the independent workers' movement, by ordering the dissolution of the upper levels of the Egyptian Trade Union Federation in August 2011 following a court ruling which declared the 2006 ETUF elections invalid.[28] ETUF was not, however, disbanded and the caretaker executive which Al-Borai appointed included former ETUF officials and senior figures in the Muslim Brotherhood's labour apparatus, but very few independent worker activists. ETUF thus survived, and slowly restabilised over the following year.

Seen 'from below', that is to say from the perspective of workers engaged in organising collective action at a rank-and-file level, the first few months of 2011 were a ferment of self-organisation. As before the revolution, strike organisation was not simply interchangeable with the emerging independent unions. Strike organisation differed from union organisation across several dimensions: it was generally *broader* in that it involved large layers of workers who had not necessarily signed up to the new unions, *deeper* as it was able to claim greater authority over the workplace and greater engagement from participants in the strike than most trade unions were able to achieve, but also more transient. However, it would be mistaken to conclude that therefore no organic relationship between these forms of organisation existed. On the contrary, the drive to form independent unions played a catalysing role in the transition from localised grievances to institution or sector-wide action, and as in the pre-revolutionary period, the strike committees which organised collective action often transformed themselves into the leadership of independent unions.

The Public Transport Authority in Cairo was the scene of a number of politically-charged strikes during the 18 days uprising of 2011 and following the fall of Mubarak. The first of these strikes were largely led by a network of activists which had formed to organise the 2009 bus workers' strike, many of whom also played leading roles in the independent union which declared

28 Al-Anwar and Sharif 2011.

itself in May 2011. The union claimed a membership of around 16,000 out of a total workforce of 42,000 by the autumn of 2011; however, participation in the strikes of September 2011, March 2012 and September 2012 was much broader than the independent union's membership. Ahmad Mahmoud, president of the independent union's strike committee, argued in an April 2012 interview that the fact that independent union members were a minority within the workforce required the creation of forms of organisation open to any striking worker.

> We elect a Negotiation Committee of 10, a Strike Committee of 10 and a Security Committee of 10 because the police might set the buses on fire. The committees are not only union members. I will take any workers who are on strike. We say 'welcome' to them. I want them to feel part of the strike, to encourage them to be part of it. They are angry, they want us to win.[29]

Ahmad saw the mass meetings at the bus garages convened during the course of the strike as sovereign, rather than subordinate to the structures of the independent union.

> In any strike, the negotiators must be an elected committee of strikers. If you have an appointed committee it won't get the workers their rights. If it is an appointed committee of salaried officials its job will be to stop the strike. The goal of an unelected committee of negotiators is to stop the action.[30]

Leading figures within the independent union, including Ali Fattouh, the union's first president and a key figure in the 2009 strike, found the authority of such meetings did indeed override that of their official position in September 2011. Fattouh's attempt to settle the dispute was rejected at mass meetings and a new president was immediately elected to replace him. Such mass gatherings did not always take formal decisions, and sometimes nominated negotiators by acclaim. For Tareq el-Beheiry, this was the route by which he moved from an official position in the ETUF-affiliated Land Transport Union into the leadership of the independent union. In contrast to Ahmad's perspective, El-Beheiry suggested in interviews that union officials' authority was related to their abil-

29 Interview with Ahmad Mahmoud, Cairo, in Arabic, 5 April 2012.
30 Ibid.

ity to wrest concessions from management, rather than a democratic mandate from below.[31]

The nation-wide teachers' strike in September 2011 provides another example of how strike organisation stretched beyond the ranks of the independent unions. Hala Talaat, vice-president of the Giza Committee of the Egyptian Teachers' Federation, describes here how locally-organised protests by teachers in the first half of 2011 generated the momentum for national action, which was co-ordinated by the emerging independent unions and school-level strike committees.

> Groups of teachers would organise a protest in front of the local branch of the official teaching professions union demanding their rights, calling for permanent contracts and so on. Or they would go to the Ministry of Education with these demands. There were sit-ins and protests, and we, the activists, would go and join them. This was happening constantly but the numbers were not very large. Then the numbers started building up from two to three hundred, then five hundred and a thousand, until by the end of August there was a big protest in front of the Cabinet Offices with four thousand teachers.[32]

It was supply teachers and young teachers without permanent contracts who often took the first steps in mobilisation at a local level, but the intervention of the independent unions was critical in transforming spontaneous local protests into nationally-coordinated action.

> Then we really started to get organised, and set up a co-ordinating committee across the different governorates which brought together the Egyptian Teachers' Federation and the Independent Teachers' Union and other independent teachers' groups. We started to meet and to co-ordinate regularly and we set the date for 10 September as a big protest and agreed we'd go for a strike at the beginning of the school year.[33]

A demonstration of around 40,000 teachers on 10 September followed, while estimations of numbers participating in the strike after 17 September range between 250,000 and half a million. The co-ordinating committee conduc-

31 Interview with Tareq Al-Beheiry, Cairo, in Arabic, 1 November 2012.

32 Interview with Hala Talaat, Cairo, in Arabic, 5 April 2012.

33 Ibid.

ted negotiations with the Ministry of Education and acted as the voice of the strikers to the media and the public at a national level. Strike organisation massively expanded at school-level, however, with new forms of co-ordination emerging, such as the 'Conference of the Teachers' Strike Committees' in Al-Arish, which brought together delegates from school-based strike committees.[34] Facebook was a particularly important platform for strike organisers, with hundreds of local Facebook groups and pages acting as the co-ordinating mechanism for mobilisations in the mass marches in Cairo and for other forms of action.[35]

It proved much more difficult for the leadership of the independent unions to sustain the pressure on the government once the first wave of mobilisation produced limited concessions. A majority on the strike's Co-ordinating Committee were in favour of suspending the strike, a move which seems to have been broadly supported by striking teachers. However, the government then reneged on most of the deal, but it proved difficult for the independent union leaders to revive the momentum of the strike.

Tathir: The Struggle to Cleanse the State

Large-scale strikes organised by public transport workers, postal workers and teachers were not the only form of collective action by workers during the early period of the revolution. For more than a year after the fall of Mubarak, thousands of workplaces across Egypt were the site of intense battles for *tathir* ('cleansing'), as workers attempted to force out the ruling party's cronies from senior management positions in state institutions. As the table below illustrates, strikes and protests where workers raised demands for *tathir* were a common occurrence during the first few months of the revolution.

In a number of workplaces, such struggles went beyond the confines of the routine skirmishes between trade unions and employers. A number of public hospitals in Cairo, such as Manshiyet al-Bakri General Hospital, were the scene of attempts to assert workers' control over management to a much greater degree than had been possible before the revolution. The leadership of the newly-founded independent union called an election to select a new director, after mass protests and strikes forced the old director to resign. Union members across the hospital participated in the vote, which was supervised by observers

34 Al-Lagna al-Tansiqiyya Lidrab al-Arish 2011.

35 Interview wirh teacher activists, Cairo, in Arabic, 10 September 2011.

TABLE 7.1 *Number of strikes and protests where workers raised demands for tathir in 2011*

Month (2011)	Total number of protests	Number of protests raised demands for *tathir*	Estimated number of workers raising demands for *tathir*
March	123	36	15,800
April	90	12	9,369
May	103	15	53,450
June	95	6	650
July	75	9	1,265
August	89	21	17,650
September	58	12	395,450
Totals	633	111	493,634

Source: Compiled from data collected by the authors from monthly reports by the labour NGO Awlad al-Ard, March–September 2011.[36]

from the Public Transport Authority workers' independent union. The elected director's appointment was confirmed reluctantly by the Ministry of Health under threat of more strike action.[37] In July 2011, council workers confronted the unelected general who ran the local council in Western Alexandria, literally running him out of the building. They set up a committee formed of council workers to oversee the work of the local authority.[38] Civil Aviation workers at Cairo Airport also scored a notable victory – forcing the demilitarisation of the Airport Director's post. Instead of the general, they insisted that the ruling Military Council should appoint a civilian for the first time – again backed up by the threat of further well-organised strike action.[39] These experiments were transient and fragmentary; nevertheless they represented the first attempts to apply the logic of the democracy of the workplaces in new ways and in new contexts.

36 See Alexander and Bassiouny 2014, p. 213.

37 Interview with Fatma Zahra'a Abd-al-Hamid, Cairo, in Arabic, 27 October 2011.

38 MENASolidarity 2011.

39 DPA 2011.

Bureaucratic Competition and the Development of the Independent Union Federations

The forms of union organisation we have described so far were intimately connected to the tasks of industrial action. These tasks inevitably created the conditions for a layer of officials to emerge as mediators so long as employers and the state felt compelled to concede space for them to operate. As we discussed above, even before 2011, well-organised industrial action followed by union formation had, in the case of the tax collectors' union RETAU, forced the state to grant at least *de facto* recognition to just such a layer of union officials. The crisis of the state in the wake of the uprising of 2011 which toppled Mubarak temporarily accelerated and widened this process. The disruption of the State Security apparatus, which had traditionally played a central role in direct negotiations with striking workers, opened spaces for other state officials to fill the gap and experiment with new approaches. However, the strength of democratic traditions of organisation at a workplace level which we described above placed some limits on the autonomy of officials, compromising the effectiveness of mediators who were disconnected from their own workplaces. Significantly, within the context of strike organisation, there were well-established mechanisms for rank-and-file union members to assert their authority over their representatives, such as mass meetings at factory gates or in occupied workplaces during which decisions taken in negotiating meetings could be overturned.

By contrast, the development of national federations of independent unions created the space for the emergence of a different kind of bureaucracy, which was less concerned with the mediating and bargaining tasks associated with industrial action, and more focussed on campaigning and lobbying activities. These kinds of activities could be carried out on behalf of striking workers in different workplaces, and rarely involved the same degree of active, democratic intervention by rank-and-file union members that workplace-based organisation demanded. This process, we will argue here, affected both of the principal independent union federations despite differences between their founding activists which were initially expressed in terms of contrasting stances towards the role of NGO staff and non-union member activists in decision-making capacities within the federation. In addition, the creation of a legal mechanism through which independent unions could be registered relatively easily, allowed some activists to take organisational shortcuts, sometimes declaring independent unions which counted large memberships on paper, but lacked an organic connection to workplace activity and in particular to strike action. Competition between the leaderships of the two main independent federations over the number of unions affiliated and their respective member-

ship rolls exacerbated the negative effects of this process. An equally important factor intensifying this bureaucratic competition was the continued existence of the state-run trade union federation ETUF, which, as we noted above, was saved from collapse by the intervention of the Ministry of Labour in August 2011. As ETUF's fortunes revived, thanks in part to collaboration between old regime trade unionists and the Muslim Brotherhood during 2011 and early 2012, this competitive pressure on the independent union federations increased.

Despite this, it would be a mistake to conclude that either of the two federations was entirely unrepresentative of the ferment of activity in the workplaces: both attracted well-rooted and powerful workplace-based unions. Nor can we draw an artificial distinction between the two layers of union officials we identified above: neither federation had the resources to sustain a full-time staff beyond a handful of individuals. So EFITU's leadership, for example, was composed almost entirely of union activists working a 'second shift' in the federation offices after their own working day had finished.[40]

The two major federations which emerged during 2011–12 were the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU) and the Egyptian Democratic Labour Congress (EDLC). EFITU was formed in Tahrir Square on 30 January 2011 by representatives of the four existing independent unions: the Property Tax Collectors' RETAU, the Health Technicians Union, the Independent School Teachers' Union and the Pensioners' Union. EFITU claimed the affiliation of 72 unions with a combined membership of 1.4 million workers by October 2011. The federation's founding congress took place on 28 January 2012, with the affiliation of 24 'general unions' (representing workers across an entire institution or several workplaces), 118 workplace unions, and one regional union federation (Alexandria).[41] Regional federations of independent unions affiliated to EFITU also began to develop in a number of provinces including Suez in January and Daqahiliyya in May 2012.[42] The EDLC was announced in October 2011 with the affiliation of 149 founding unions.[43] By the time of the EDLC's founding congress in April 2013 the federation claimed 300 member unions, and a number of affiliated regional federations.[44]

Kamal Abu Aita of the tax collectors' union RETAU and Kamal Abbas of the CTUWS (Centre for Trade Union and Workers' Services), a labour NGO, were

40 The relatively short working hours in Egyptian public sector clerical workplaces was one factor which made this arrangement possible.

41 Interview with Fatma Zahra'a Abd-al-Hamid, Cairo, in Arabic, 27 October 2011.

42 Muhammad Ali 2012; Al-Naggar 2012.

43 CTUWS 2011.

44 CTUWS 2013a; Wahba 2013.

heavily involved in the formation of the two federations and had originally worked together to found EFITU in January 2011, before CTUWS withdrew its support for the new federation in July 2011. Abbas and the CTUWS then went on to play a key role in supporting the formation of the EDLC, which announced its existence in October 2011. The differences between Abu Aita and Abbas were initially expressed in terms of a debate over the role and influence of non-elected officials within the EFITU structures, with Abu Aita charging that Abbas and other CTUWS staff wanted to take decisions about the development of the federation which should have been reserved for elected union officials. Matters came to a head in early July 2011 and CTUWS officially withdrew from EFITU, after a meeting by representatives of 15 independent unions adopted a statement of principles asserting that only officials elected by member unions' general assemblies had any right to speak on the unions' behalf.

> The independent unions confirm that they only follow the wishes of the general assemblies of their members and that the principle of independence is a general principle which applies to all without exception. In the same vein, the independent unions assert that only elected representatives from the base of the unions have the right to speak on behalf of the trade unions and declare their positions, and that no outside parties have the right to do so, unless those positions have been agreed by the elected representatives of the independent unions.[45]

Although the initial reasons for the split were framed by Abu Aita as substantive differences over the practice of trade unionism, in reality the organisational and political trajectories of EFITU and EDLC broadly mirrored each other. The leadership of both federations were strongly supportive, for example, of the military coup which overthrew Mohamed Morsi in July 2013 and gave their assent to then-Minister of Defence Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi's demand for a 'mandate' to crush the Muslim Brotherhood in the name of a 'war on terrorism'.[46]

The Limits of Trade Unionism

Egyptian workers' revival of self-organisation before and during the revolution is, on many levels, an astonishing feat. Factory and office workers created

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45 EFITU 2011.

46 Ramadan 2013.

thousands of workplace organisations, despite conditions of acute repression and the lack of material resources. There have been few examples on this scale of a revival of popular organisation in the Arab world for decades. Nevertheless, the workers' movement also suffered from a number of weaknesses. We have indicated some of the organisational weaknesses of the independent unions – particularly those which were formed without any organic connection to strike organisation, and in the midst of bureaucratic competition between different sections of an emerging trade union bureaucracy.

One of the greatest weaknesses of the movement was political, rather than organisational, however. The independent unions, despite the success of strike action at a workplace level, particularly during the first year of the revolution, in winning improvements in pay and conditions, were unable to impose their demands on the agenda of national politics. Their leaders did not score victories at that level on the question of raising the national minimum wage, or forcing a lasting retreat from privatisation, or even of securing full legal recognition for the independent unions themselves. Nor did they find other political forces to effectively champion their cause. Instead, the most prominent of the independent trade union leaders to become well-known in national politics, Kamal Abu Aita, ended up being co-opted by the military and serving in the cabinet appointed in the wake of the overthrow of Mohamed Morsi in July 2013.

However, this does not mean that the situation has returned to the picture confronting worker activists before the early 2000s, when the workers' movement had yet to revive. The experience of democratic organisation at a workplace level that we have outlined in this chapter cannot easily be forgotten or snuffed out by repression. The resilience of the Egyptian workers' movement lies precisely in this kind of organisation. The question which will confront the next generation of activists is whether that resilience and creativity at a workplace level can be forged into a weapon with which to confront the state.

CHAPTER 8

Bosnia and Herzegovina: From Workers' Strike to Social Uprising

*Chiara Milan**

> Nobody is interested in the class struggle/In the cauldron Bey's soup is boiling/Which revolution and Paris Commune!/Here there are ten sausages on half *somun*.[1]
>
> DUBIOZA KOLEKTIV

Sung by the famous alternative Bosnian band *Dubioza Kolektiv*, the sarcastic lyrics above refer to the Labour Day celebrations of May Day (*Prvi Maj*).[2] Before Yugoslavia withered away, May Day parades involved thousands of workers who took to the streets, decorated with flowers, Yugoslav flags, and pictures of Marshal Tito. Labour Day lost its celebratory meaning after the disintegration of Yugoslavia, turning into a mere occasion for out-of-town holidays and picnics. Recently, however, something has changed; not only has May Day regained its original meaning, but in 2014 it has also evolved from a workers' celebration into a lively protest.

* The author gratefully thanks Emin Eminagić and Adis Sadiković for their priceless contribution to the drafting of this chapter, as well as for giving her the unique opportunity of being introduced to the struggle for dignity of Tuzla's people. Special thanks also go to Stefania Milan, Alfredo Sasso and Dario Azzellini and Michael G. Kraft for the excellent feedback and suggestions on an earlier draft of this chapter.

1 Type of flatbread typical in the Southeastern European area, often served with *ćevapčići* (colloquially shortened in *ćevapi*), grilled sausages of minced meat.

2 *Nikog ne zanima ni klasna borba/krčka u kazanu begova čorba/Kakva revolucija i Pariska komuna/evo deset ćevapa u pola somuna* in the original lyrics.

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The evolution of the May Day celebration highlights the changes in Bosnia[3] following the 2014 February protests. Sparked by a 5 February 2014 workers' demonstration in the city of Tuzla, the protests gave birth to a grassroots democratic mobilisation. This movement spread to the major cities of Bosnia, and found expression in citizens' direct democratic assemblies, referred to locally as plenums.[4] The 2014 upheaval stands as a watershed in the history of post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina, since it is the first massive mobilisation to take place in the aftermath of the 1992–5 conflict.

This chapter explores the origin of the 2014 Bosnian uprising by discussing the source of the initial spark in Tuzla. In fact, laid-off workers from the industrial sector triggered the Tuzla protests. The first section of the chapter describes the bankruptcy of the workers' factories, a result of a mismanaged privatisation process. Included in this section is a description of the social and political context from which the demonstrations developed. The second section focuses on the workers' grievances that spawned the social insurgency. Next, the chapter describes how the workers brought about an upheaval involving several social sectors of the country. Finally, the chapter concludes by describing the outcomes of the wave of protests: namely, plenums and new practices of solidarity, among which the trade union *Solidarnost*.

At the Roots of the Rage: From Privatisation to the Plundering of Bosnian Industry

The workers of Tuzla set the stage for the social uprising (*socijalni bunt*) that consumed the country in February 2014 and resulted in the most violent demonstrations ever seen in post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina. Unsurprisingly, Tuzla boasts a long tradition of labour organising.[5] Located in the northern part of Bosnia, Tuzla's 120,000 inhabitants make it the third largest city in the country. A majestic statue of a miner holding a gun in place of a pick greets visitors arriving at the bus station. The monument celebrates the miners' armed rebellion of 1920 against industrial slavery. This is known as the Husino uprising (*Husinska buna*), named after the village near Tuzla where the revolt flared up. Standing as a reminder of the struggle against injustice and oppression, the statue is dedicated to the miners who fell during the revolt. As the statue demonstrates,

3 Throughout the chapter I refer to Bosnia and Herzegovina interchangeably as Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bosnia or BiH (acronym for Bosnia i Hercegovina, the official name of the country).

4 See Eminagić 2014a; Mujanović 2014.

5 See Milan 2014a.

Tuzla has an industrial history that dates back to Austro-Hungarian times. This tradition continued on throughout the socialist period. Under Yugoslavia, the importance of industry for Bosnia was emphasised also through the country's coat of arms, with its representation of two factory chimneys belching a plume of sooty smoke.[6] During this time Tuzla's industry included coal mining, power production, and chemical plants. Today, industrial production still represents the main source of income for the city and its population; however, the situation has worsened considerably compared to the socialist period.[7]

The roots of the poor situation currently experienced by Bosnian workers can be found in the recent history of the country. During the 1992–5 war the industrial sector was damaged, when not destroyed. In the aftermath of the war, nationalist profiteers engaged in asset-stripping and undervalued enterprises that were for sale.[8] Then what was left of the Bosnian industrial apparatus underwent a process of privatisation conducted in a non-transparent manner, and in the total absence of an appropriate institutional framework. As a consequence, in war-torn Bosnia many shareholders found themselves forced to sell their shares for next to nothing, owing to their inability to repay their loans. Key enterprises were divided and sold along ethnic lines through a corrupt struggle for power. This process discriminated against returnees and members of less powerful nationalities. Irresponsible agencies and badly written contracts facilitated the fraud. In some cases, the workers, who had taken out loans to buy shares of the state-owned part of their factories, sold them to buyers who promised to invest and restart production. Instead of revitalising them, these so-called 'nationalist managements' engaged in the asset-stripping of the enterprises, pulling them into debt.[9] In other cases, the government sold companies whose shares belonged to workers as though they were in full state ownership. Compounding the cronyism and corruption of those in charge of privatisation, the ruling political parties used the privatisation process as a tool to retain their grip on power by manipulating it for their own political ends.

Workers were thus impoverished and denied their rights as a consequence of the irresponsible and often illegal privatisations undertaken in the name of the transition to a market economy. Former state-owned companies that once guaranteed jobs to the majority of the population went bankrupt. This brought about dramatic job losses in the industrial sector. Among the struggling companies of Tuzla was a laundry detergent factory, DITA, which provided 1,400

6 Donia 1994, p. 174.

7 See Eminagić 2014b.

8 Pugh 2005, p. 451.

9 Ibid.

jobs before the war. After the privatisation of DITA in 2005, the situation of the workers started to deteriorate. The company's major shareholder began to pay them minimal wages and to issue meal vouchers only in bonds rather than in cash.[10] The workers of DITA had been struggling with the management since 2009, when they began protesting openly. Eventually, in August 2011, they staged their first strike, which lasted until March 2012. In the meantime, the company's owner had quit paying them pension funds and health insurance. Following the closure of their firm in December 2012, DITA workers started picketing the factory night and day. Since this strategy did not produce the desired result, they filed several lawsuits: first against Lora, a private company from Sarajevo and co-owner of DITA from 2005, that had burdened the factory with bank loans, and then against Beohemija, the Serbian chemical company that had temporarily taken over the production plant in 2013. Unfortunately, they did not succeed in prosecuting the owner. While the workers were waiting for the court to respond, the owner successfully filed a suit against the workers for striking illegally.[11] The struggle of DITA workers only came into the national spotlight in February 2014, when the police brutally repressed one of their demonstrations that was taking place in front of the canton court.[12]

On 5 February 2014 the workers of DITA marched alongside their counterparts from four other factories located in the Tuzla area, namely Polihem, Poliolchem, Resod-Guming, and Konjuh. The factories share a similar story. Polihem was a one-time leader of the chemical industry in BiH that employed 1,200 workers. Privatised in 2000, Polihem first went bankrupt in 2002. After resuming production in 2004, the firm was sold in 2007 to the Polish Organika Malbork through its Bosnian subsidiary company Organika BiH. Allegedly,

10 Busuladžić 2014, p. 14.

11 Eminagić and Vujović 2013.

12 The Dayton Peace Agreement, stipulated in 1995 as Annex V to the peace agreement that ended the four-year long war in the country, divided the country into two distinct entities, Federation of BiH and Republika Srpska, and a third administrative unit, the autonomous Brčko district. As specified in the Constitution, BiH appears as a consociational state with a tripartite Presidency where every president represents its ethnic constituency. Three different nations, referred to as 'constitutive people', compose BiH: Serbs, Croats, and Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims). One of the Federal entities, the Federation of BiH (hereinafter FBiH), consists of ten cantons, each of them with its own constitution and government. In turn, every canton is divided into municipalities. By contrast, the other entity, Republika Srpska (RS), has no cantons, only municipalities. Whilst the majority of Serbs live in RS, the FBiH groups together Croats and Bosniaks. Social and economic policies are mostly the competence of the entities and cantons (in the case of FBiH).

unsatisfactory trends in the world market brought production to a halt, despite the promise of additional investments, recruitment of new employees, and payment of debts. The production plants shut down, layoffs followed, and the company properties were disassembled and sold as scrap metal.[13] Meanwhile, the workers of Polihem organised to resume production. Additionally, they struggled to reverse the privatisation of the Hotel Stella in the Bosnian seaside town Neum, in which they still retained shares.[14] Futhermore, two hundred former employees of the one-time chemical giant Poliolchem joined the DITA and Polihem workers on the picket line in February 2014. The Poliolchem factory had closed in 2012 owing to a mercury and chlorine leakage that almost provoked a human and ecological disaster.[15] Consequently, the company's equipment was dismantled. The dismissed workers sued the Polish company that had acquired their factory for unpaid wages, as well as unremunerated night and holiday shifts, meals, and transportation.[16] Although the workers won the lawsuit and the court recognised their right to disassemble and appropriate Poliolchem's assets, it was impossible for them to do so because the assets no longer belonged to the company.

Also joining the demonstrations in Tuzla were former workers from Resod-Guming, once producing rubber and plastics. Resod-Guming still owed these workers unpaid wages and pensions after the closure of the company almost sixteen years before. In this case, again, the litigation over the ownership of the firm was unresolved between the owners, the canton government and trade unions.[17] In the meantime, the company premises were abandoned and

13 BiH protest files 2014, '#konjuh| Bosnia-Herzegovina Protest Files', available at: https://bhprotestfiles.wordpress.com/tag/konjuh/.

14 Ekapija.ba 2014, 'Hotel Stella Neum: Besides Shareholders, Privatization Agencies in Conflict', available at: http://ekapija.ba/en/Vijest/investments/hotel-stella-neum-besides-shareholders-privatization-agencies-in-conflict/32084.

15 Rtvslon.ba 2012, 'U Firmi Poliolhem U Tuzli Obustavljene Sve Aktivnosti Zbog Prisustvu Žive I Hlora', available at: http://www.rtvslon.ba/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=7627:u-firmi-poliolhem-u-tuzli-obustavljene-sve-aktivnosti-zbog-curenja-ive-i-hlora&catid=1:vijesti&Itemid=5;%20http://www.sodalive.ba/drustvo/moguca-ekoloska-katastrofa-hlor-i-ziva-u-poliolhem-u/.

16 Bljesak.info 2012, 'Otpušteni Radnici Tuzlanskog Poliolhema U Novoj Kontroli Svoje Imovine', available at: http://www.bljesak.info/rubrika/business/clanak/otpusteni-radnici-tuzlanskog-poliolhema-u-novoj-kontroli-svoje-imovine/36581.

17 Each entity has competency in the areas of taxation, business development and general legislation. The entities separately regulate labour in their territory of competence. In the FBiH, cantons have their own governments, ministries and parliaments addressing labour issues, while in Brčko district an ad hoc department deals with labour and social issues.

repeatedly looted.[18] Finally, the fifth group of workers involved in the February protest belonged to the woodworking factory Konjuh, located in the town of Živinice, near Tuzla. Privatised in 2000, the factory operated successfully until 2007, when it fell into debt owing to company mismanagement. At the end of 2011 330 workers, whose salaries had not been paid since 2007, filed a lawsuit against the company. Over the years some of them resorted to radical means of protests such as hunger strikes, aiming to focus attention on the way that the privatisation of their factory had deprived them of their jobs and their dignity.[19] Furthermore, on several occasions, in order to make their voices heard, Konjuh's workers marched 110 kilometres from their town all the way to Sarajevo. In 2013, they pitched tents for a month in front of municipal headquarters in Tuzla to call for the restarting of production. As part of this action they were fined for blocking the Sarajevo-Tuzla regional highway.[20] Finally, in February 2014, they again took to the streets and voiced their displeasure with local authorities for not having done enough to prevent the failure of their firm.[21] Today, although production at Konjuh has resumed, only 150 workers are employed.[22]

All the above-mentioned factories went through poorly executed – when not completely illegal – privatisation plans. In all cases the grievances and demands that the workers have been articulating over the past year are very similar; they ask (1) for investigation of the questionable privatisation processes that destroyed their companies and livelihood, (2) to be compensated for unpaid wages, health insurance, and pensions, and (3) to restart production. In addition, in each case the workers lamented the ineffectiveness of the judiciary to prosecute the perpetrators of the privatisation. Unfortunately, despite a positive final court judgement, disenfranchised workers have often been unable to collect what they are owed.

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18 Tuzlarije.net 2011, 'Bivši Radnici Fabrike Resod-Guming U Stečaju. Mirni Protest Pred Zgradom Vlade TK', available at: http://bhstring.net/tuzlauslikama/tuzlarije/viewnewnews.php?id=42659.

19 See Lynch 2014.

20 BiH protest files 2014, 'The Root Cause of the Rebellion: Top Ten Privatisation Plunders in BH', available at: http://bhprotestfiles.wordpress.com/2014/03/10/the-root-cause-of-the-rebellion-top-ten-privatisation-plunders-in-bh/.

21 RTVTK 2013, 'Radnici Konjuha Živinice Osamdeseti Dan U Šatorima …', available at: http://www.rtvtk.ba/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=30642:radnici-konjuha-ivinice-osamdeseti-dan-u-atorima&catid=81:europe&Itemid=197.

22 Klix.ba 2013, 'Radnici Konjuha Noć Proveli U Šatorskom Naselju Ispred Općine Živinice', available at: http://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/radnici-konjuha-noc-proveli-u-satorskom-naselju-ispred-opcine-zivinice/130528010.

The Workers that Spawned the Social Insurgency

After protesting separately in the previous years, the remaining workers from the five companies decided to join forces on 5 February 2014 to protest the closure of their respective plants. Pushed back violently by the police, demonstrators started to hurl eggs and stones at municipal and canton property. The riot police, securing the entrance of the canton building, fired teargas and rubber bullets. This moment, when the police violently forced the demonstrators back, marked a turning point. In post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina violence had never been used to that extent during a public rally. The town of Tuzla was completely blocked. By the end of the day 27 people were arrested, and another 23 were injured.[23] Because the workers did not give up, two more days of unrest followed. On 7 February the number of demonstrators in the streets of Tuzla rose to 10,000 as a result of students and other citizens joining the workers. Protesters gathered in front of the canton government building and set it on fire, along with the rest of the municipal premises.[24]

The action resonated throughout the country. Within days, rallies in solidarity with Tuzla's workers took place across Bosnia-Herzegovina. Increasing discontent among the social groups suffering under government policies led tens of thousands to join in the main cities of BiH. Like a domino effect, the rage spread and the revolt escalated. On 7 February the government buildings of the cities of Mostar, Sarajevo, and Zenica were set ablaze by seething protesters. While politicians tried to hide the plummeting economic conditions of the country by constantly playing the ethnic card, the workers of Tuzla triggered wider social protests, arguing that rage and hunger do not recognise ethnic differences. The protests spawned a mass movement of solidarity that overcame the ethno-national divisions inside the country, travelling across the post-Yugoslav space. Rallies in support of the workers were reported in nearby Croatia, Montenegro, Serbia and Macedonia. Solidarity, which had supposedly disappeared with the breakup of Yugoslavia, was reasserted throughout the countries of the former federation.[25]

Before 2014, the workers of the bankrupted factories had often demonstrated in front of the government building, but their protests had been disconnected from each other, and their rallies poorly attended. As the prominent leader of the DITA workers, Emina Busuladžić, explains, in January 2014 the workers

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23 Milan 2014b.

24 Eminagić 2014b.

25 Balkan Insight 2014, 'Croats Rally in Support of Bosnia Protests', available at: http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/croats-rally-support-bosnia-protests.

decided to combine their protests to increase their numbers and strength – although unaware of the snowball effect their rally would generate.

> We [the workers of DITA] changed our strategy and called on other factories in the town to come out and join the strike. The strike not only spread to other companies, but for the first time, we called on pensioners, the unemployed, and students to join us. And that is how the first demonstration of February 2014 broke out when the masses came out on the streets in thousands ... There were not only all the factories in Tuzla, but also villagers from the area that turned up.[26]

The small size of Tuzla fostered the creation of a workers' network, and personal relationships among the workers facilitated its development. Many of them already knew each other because three out of five factories stood under the aegis of a holding company called SODASO, which produced salt for domestic and industrial consumption until it ceased to exist in 2002. A coordination meeting among workers' representatives of the five factories took place before the mass protest of 5 February. However, organisational resources were poor, and no particular strategy was developed apart from the idea to widen the front. Although they lacked material resources, interpersonal contacts proved to be the key element binding workers together with their counterparts in the area.

Waking Up from the Dream of Transition: From Workers' Struggle to Civic Insurgency

A few days after the violent reaction of the police to the workers' demonstration, the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina channelled their collective rage into a constructive experiment: direct democratic assemblies set up across the country called plenums. The citizens gathered in leaderless, consensus-based assemblies where everybody had the right to one vote and nobody could speak on behalf of other people. The workers, active in particular in the plenum of Tuzla, participated as individuals, and not as representatives of their trade unions or factories. The adoption of plenums as a form of political organisation did not come out of the blue. This kind of horizontal method of direct democracy

26 Entente Internationale de Travailleurs et de Peuples 2014, 'Bosnia-Herzegovina: Interview with Emina Busuladžić', available at: http://international-liaison-committee-of-workers-and-peoples-eit-ilc.blogspirit.com/archive/2014/09/29/bosnia-herzegovina-interview-with-emina-busuladzic-tuzla-bosnie-herzegovine.html.

had been used during the student occupation of the universities in Zagreb, Belgrade, and Tuzla in 2009.[27] Furthermore, the method draws on the often forgotten and overlooked tradition of assemblies during the period of workers' socialist self-management.

While young people had been particularly active during the clashes against the riot police in February, their participation in the plenums was infrequent.[28] Generally, the older generations took part in these meetings and engaged in the animated debates, while young people born right before or after the 1992–5 war were more involved in 'wrecking the symbols of the state',[29] and went rampaging through the town rather than joining the plenums. Three factors account for such a massive participation of middle-aged people. First, although heavily affected by economic hardship, they still remembered the rights they enjoyed during the socialist period. Second, the similarities between the decision-making dynamics of the plenums and the socialist workers' assemblies introduced an element of familiarity.[30] Third, these pensioners have nothing to lose from their direct involvement in street actions. In a society where clientelistic networks mostly regulate access to the job market, direct involvement in demonstrations can seriously put at risk one's job.

The revolt of Tuzla thus turned from a workers' protest into a civic insurgency (*građanski bunt*), involving people from all walks of life.[31] An activist made explicit the emancipatory significance of the February protest by claiming that 'it was as if, all of a sudden, we woke up from the dream of transition'.[32] The workers laid-off in Tuzla called attention to the negative impact of neoliberal privatisation, not only on their lives, but on virtually all sectors of society. In the streets, there marched alongside them other groups who had been affected by the transition to a market economy. In addition to a substantial increase in unemployment, the closure of companies in fact created other social problems that called into question the capitalist model that had been imposed on the country in the aftermath of the war.

The role of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) during the protests and the assemblies deserves further attention. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, the non-

27 See Eminagić and Vujović 2013.

28 Balkan Insight 2014, 'I and My Fellow "Hooligans" Can't Stop Now', available at: http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/blog/i-and-my-fellow-hooligans-can-t-stop-now.

29 Interview with Svjetlana Nedimović, plenum Sarajevo, April 2014.

30 Public talk of two participants in a plenum Tuzla on Face TV, broadcast on 14 February 2014, available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rYb7-0jCmnA.

31 Štiks and Horvat 2014.

32 Interview with Emin Eminagić, plenum Tuzla, April 2014.

governmental sector is a target of criticism from society at large, and relationships between NGOs and the wider society have been defined as almost antagonistic. Whereas NGOs did not attend the February 2014 mobilisations, they were active in the July 2013 wave of protests known as #JMBG, or baby revolution.[33] The protests of July 2013 lasted for almost a month and were informally led by a group of NGOs later accused of having hijacked the protests.[34] It was mainly due to fear that NGOs might once again monopolise the scene that they were explicitly denied access to the work of the plenums in 2014. Furthermore, the 'one head, one vote' direct democratic rule adopted in the plenums did not allow for the representation of formal actors such as NGOs, political parties, or trade unions.[35] Moreover, the NGO sector carefully avoided any formal involvement in the February protests, ostensibly owing to fear of being associated with violence.[36]

The non-attendance of the NGOs at the February 2014 protests allowed for a radicalisation of the repertoire of actions, resulting in acts of violence against mainly public buildings. By contrast, during the July 2013 demonstrations, the presence of NGOs at the forefront resulted in the adoption of an explicitly peaceful repertoire throughout the whole month of protests. Indeed, in 2013 NGOs strove to – and succeeded in – distancing any potential disruptive actors from the rallies. By contrast, in 2014 the lack of a bulk of organised, openly peaceful actors leading the demonstrations left room for so-called hooligans and other groups to plunder public buildings and to clash with the riot police. On the other hand, the absence of well-known NGO leaders and the rejection of principles of hierarchy and representation facilitated the creation of horizontal assemblies in 2014, as well as the adoption of direct democratic means

33 The terms #JMBG or baby revolution (*bebolucija* in local language) refer to the protests taking place mostly in Sarajevo from 6 June to 1 July 2013. Stemming from the failure of the national parliament to solve a deadlock in the disbursement of national ID numbers, the stalemate translated into the impossibility of providing babies born after February 2013 with ID numbers and, therefore, with documents to travel abroad. In the face of a situation in which it was impossible for a sick kid in need of urgent medical treatment outside of Bosnia to leave the country, owing to the inability of the Ministry of the Interior to provide her with an ID number, thousands of citizens occupied the square in front of the national Parliament claiming the right for their children to travel abroad and to receive medical treatment not available in Bosnia. See Milan 2013 and on the #JMBG demonstrations see also Milan and Oikonomakis 2013.

34 Milan 2014.

35 Public talk of two participants in the plenum Tuzla on Face TV, broadcast on 14 February 2014, available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rYb7-0jCmnA.

36 Interview with Svjetlana Nedimović, plenum Sarajevo, April 2014.

of decision-making. Additionally, it sparked dialogue among peers in the plenums. The lack of an affiliation with an NGO did not prevent NGO members from participating as individuals in the assemblies. Activists with an NGO background played a prominent role by boosting activism owing to the networks in which they were embedded, and opened up channels of communication between different subgroups of the movement, performing by this means a brokerage function that helped to attract wider support.

The Workers' Mobilising Potential

As the blossoming in the number of plenums had shown, the February 2014 uprising awakened something new in the post-war Bosnian environment. The failed transition towards a market economy affected the vast majority of the population, and, for the first time since the war had ended, socio-economic issues became the binding force uniting different social groups. In contrast, the previous June 2013 wave of contention did not turn into a massive uprising, remaining mostly confined to the urban centres. This is also because its initiators were careful to frame it as a civic action right from the beginning. They were, in fact, afraid that their protests would be discredited as an ethnically driven movement if their issues were framed in more political terms, as an activist explains:

> There was this fear that if you say politics it would have been understood as politicising the issue. Such a cautious rhetoric resulted in the debilitation of the potential movement; the social [dimension] remained very much in the background. [#JMBG] painted a very innocent picture like 'we are doing that for the babies'. This, in a sense, defused the movement.[37]

When asked why the workers' grievances boosted solidarity across the country, unlike the ID number issue the previous year, the same participant in the Sarajevo plenum asserted that the workers played a crucial role in initiating the 2014 uprising owing to the prominent position they once occupied, which makes them 'qualitatively different from the third sector, the disappointed intelligentsia, or other categories in social need'.[38] Workers, as a social group, were also less likely to be manipulated by an ethno-national rhetoric. Indeed, despite the

37 Interview with Svjetlana Nedimović, Plenum Sarajevo, April 2014.

38 Interview with Svjetlana Nedimović, Plenum Sarajevo, April 2014.

fact that since the transition to capitalism the worker as an ideological figure has disappeared from public spaces, billboards, and banknotes, 'labour still has a lure, attraction and mobilising potential'.[39] Furthermore, the addition of an economic dimension to the social discontent, already present during the baby revolution, facilitated the formation of collective solidarity.[40] Thus the socio-economic grievances stemming from the workers' struggle proved to be more appealing and resonant to the wider population than the ID numbers issue.

The workers constitute a central tenet of the collective imagination in Bosnia. The cultural socialist heritage of former Yugoslavia differs from that of Western countries: during the socialist period, workers were an essential means 'for constructing a cosmopolitan, internationalist, modern, and supranational identity of Yugoslavs'.[41] Their role declined dramatically following the collapse of Yugoslavia and the privatisation and asset-stripping of its factories, result of the transition to a market economy. Hence, from being a constitutive element of society, workers were turned into the most vulnerable social group, on the fringes of society and deprived of their very means of subsistence. In socialist times, these workers were celebrated as heroes of work, and yet today they are victims of capitalism.[42] Nevertheless, the social and economic rights that workers experienced under socialism were still vivid in their minds, just as the Yugoslav socialist heritage was still part of the personal biographies of these middle-aged people who marched on the streets and populated the plenums. A photograph shot in February 2014 on the streets of Tuzla expresses the sense of defeat felt by workers. The photograph portrays a gloomy laid-off worker. Behind him several tyres are burning. He leans on a billboard that reads: 'Get up Tito from the cold land to look at what your pioneers are doing!'[43] This message connects the current workers' struggle to their 'glorious past', and portrays it as a legitimate fight. It implies that even Tito, who entrusted the factories to the workers through the self-management system, would have been proud of this struggle.[44]

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39 Petrović 2013, pp. 97–8.

40 Milan 2014.

41 Petrović 2013.

42 Ibid.

43 *Ustaj Tito iz te zemlje hladne, pa da vidiš šta nam tvoji pioniri rade* in the original.

44 After the 1950s, factories in former Yugoslavia were managed according to the workers' self-management model, milestone of the entire Yugoslav economic system. Although undergoing different phases, the self-management system envisaged Yugoslav factories as being socially-owned by workers, organised in workers' councils acting as advisory bodies in charge of managing the enterprises, setting broad production goals, and handling

The socialist legacy of the workers' heroic position played a two-fold, and to some extent, contradictory role during the February 2014 protests. On the one hand, workers gave legitimacy to the protests owing to the credit deriving from their previous prominent role as the backbone of Yugoslav society. On the other hand, workers' rights had been guaranteed and celebrated under socialism, not reclaimed. Therefore, the lack of a widespread tradition of labour struggle, aside from the case of Tuzla, resulted in a reduced potential for sustained mobilisation. In her interview, Emina Busuladžić stresses that workers in Bosnia Herzegovina are not used to standing up for their rights, making them easy to manipulate:

> For our generation, it is the state that should guarantee and ensure workers' rights and it is not for us to fight for our rights. And so it was easy to cheat the working class that was not used to fighting to defend its rights.[45]

Another activist explains that over the years the absence of organisational bodies such as proper trade unions that could gather workers and fight for their emancipation undermined the workers' front. In connection with this point she says:

> You need to have proper [trade] unions, you need to have someone helping them to see that their problems are part of a much wider and much longer-term problem and not just their personal issue. People have immediate interests, you cannot tell them that a beautiful future is waiting for them. They need to see that something is changing for the better now, that they are not simply food for transition.[46]

the finances. However, the socialist self-management system was not devoid of contradictions. In Yugoslavia workers' unions stood under the control of the strongly centralised Communist party, operated as part of the management and resembled a personnel department. Hence, unions were de facto deprived of any real power in the decision-making process, and treated as 'mere transmission belts' for the party (see Bianchini 1984; Marković 2011).

45 Entente Internationale de Travailleurs et de Peuples 2014, 'Bosnia-Herzegovina: Interview with Emina Busuladžić', available at: http://international-liaison-committee-of-workers-and-peoples-eit-ilc.blogspirit.com/archive/2014/09/29/bosnia-herzegovina-interview-with-emina-busuladzic-tuzla-bosnie-herzegovine.html.

46 Interview with Svjetlana Nedimović, plenum Sarajevo, April 2014.

Independent Grassroots Alternatives: The Trade Union Solidarnost and the Plenums

As a result of the February 2014 wave of protests, two new political realities emerged, namely the workers' union Solidarnost and the plenums. The first, Solidarnost, was founded between March and April 2014 by a group of laid-off workers from the five aforementioned factories in Tuzla. The union quickly reached 4,000 members from 22 different companies across the canton area. One activist who participated in the plenum in Tuzla defined Solidarnost 'the best and most visible result of the February protests'.[47] Despite the many obstacles the trade union faced to obtain recognition, its members continue to this day to voice their rage by staging weekly protests in front of the canton court of Tuzla.

The founding workers of Solidarnost were galvanised by the February demonstrations, and felt unrepresented by conventional unions, who failed to negotiate on behalf of their rank and file, and did not support the DITA workers when picketing outside the factory, arguing that they were doing something illegal and acting only out of personal interest.[48] Enes Tanović, a worker and trade unionist of the Polihem factory and now member of Solidarnost, describes the choice of self-organisation as a necessity in the face of the passivity of the representatives of the Confederation of Independent Trade Unions of Bosnia-Herzegovina (SSBiH), the conventional trade union confederation that operates within the territory of the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina.[49] Workers like Tanović decided to step out of the conventional means of representation and to organise autonomously following a pattern that challenged both previous models of workers' unions and ethnic divides. The brand-new trade union Solidarnost attracted members by forming links across companies and administrative areas. It rejected the traditional corporate unionism in favour of a broader front. Workers and unemployed people from a variety of professions joined Solidarnost in recognition of the fact that craft divisions and individual strikes are not effective for advancing workers' interests and fighting privatisation. However, Solidarnost was founded amidst a wide range of challenges. The environment in BiH is one of economic stagnation, recession, and staggering

47 Interview with Adis Sadiković, plenum Tuzla, September 2014.

48 Interview with Emina Busuladžić. The video – called *Glas Dite* (The voice of Dita) – was shot by *Front Slobode* (Freedom front). The transcript of the interview is available at: http://bhprotestfiles.wordpress.com/2014/02/16/the-voice-of-dita/.

49 BHRT.ba 2014, 'Tuzla: Sindikat Solidarnosti', available at: http://www.bhrt.ba/nekategorizirano/tuzla-sindikat-solidarnosti/.

unemployment.[50] Challenges to the creation of a nationwide labour movement include the absence of national labour regulations, the lack of harmonisation and of a joint legal framework between the two semi-autonomous entities that compose the country, the difference in salaries from one local administrative unit to another, as well as the corruption of workers' representatives in the conventional unions.[51] Furthermore, political hindrance is a common practice in BiH. As the International Labour Organisation (ILO) stated, often state authorities 'actively refuse to register trade unions when they want to obstruct them for political reasons'.[52] All these factors still represent enormous obstacles hampering collective bargaining and the right to unionise in the country.

Besides embodying a new, autonomous example of self-organised unionism, Solidarnost epitomised the will of workers to overcome the administrative and institutional obstacles preventing the creation of a state-wide workers union. Solidarnost aimed to gather workers from all over Bosnia-Herzegovina, regardless of their regional situation. Although it faced many obstacles, including opposition from authorities and overly complicated labour law, the trade union officially registered itself in fall 2014. Damir Arsenijević, an active participant in the Tuzla plenum, maintains that Solidarnost faced obstacles because '[state authorities] fear the rage of workers'.[53] Together with local activists, the members of Solidarnost organised the 2014 May Day protests with the aim of reminding the country that the workers' struggle was not over. Contrary to the socialist tradition, the 2014 May Day gathering developed into a protest rather than into a celebration. Organised by the members of Solidarnost, together with local activists and students, the rally inspired the solidarity of citizens of Tuzla and of the neighbouring villages, gathering around 1,500 people on the streets.[54] From the streets of Tuzla both workers and people who had been laid

50 Stanković 2011.

51 Today conventional unions appear under the direct influence (and often control) of ruling political parties. Devoid of working members owing to the bankruptcy of factories, workers' unions are still characterised by a top-down structure and close ties with ruling political parties, to the extent that trade union officials are often politically appointed and easily corruptible. In many cases they have also been heavily involved in the privatisation process that led to the collapse of the industrial sector. As a result, trade unions are often blamed for not serving the interests of the workers they are supposed to defend.

52 Fischer 2006, p. 146.

53 Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso 2014.

54 Klix.ba 2014, 'Prvomajski Protesti U Tuzli: 1.500 Radnika Na Ulici Traži Svoja Prava', available at: http://www.klix.ba/clanak/140501031.

off sent a clear message: there is nothing to celebrate about unemployment.[55] A small-scale demonstration also occurred in the city of Mostar, where activists and participants in the local plenum organised an initiative in the central Spanish square. The choice of place was intentional: Spanish square is a significant spot, located at the very centre of the old military frontline.[56] Although the city was reunified in 2006, Mostar remains socially and culturally divided. In defiance of ethnic and psychological divisions, the demonstrators decided to stage a protest in the square with the purpose of turning it into a meaningful place. Surrounded by buildings in ruins and by a bunch of puzzled bystanders, protesters voiced their rage against the political class that keep them divided by playing on ethnic rivalries. Their message was that economic hardship affects all social sectors regardless of national divisions. Conventional unions did not attend the demonstrations either in Tuzla or Mostar, and the capital, Sarajevo, remained empty on May Day 2014.

Besides the trade union Solidarnost, the second important legacy of the February protests were the plenums, the spontaneous and participatory gatherings of citizens that blossomed in many cities and towns of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Drawing on the model first adopted in Tuzla, the city where the first plenum was set up, between February and March 2014 plenums were organised in 22 different towns throughout the country. Most were located in the Federation of BiH entity. Each plenum followed its own organisational path, but they were generally established in a decentralised way through thematic working groups addressing different issues. Working group examples include media, education and culture, social problems, interplenum cooperation, legal issues, etc. For example, plenum Tuzla had twelve working groups, one allocated to each ministry. Demands that arose during the plenums were collected and delivered to working groups, in charge of reformulating them in a coherent way. Once reformulated, the demands typically returned to the plenum for a final vote. All the

55 As a billboard in the city of Mostar reads: *Ne slavim nerad*, which literally means 'We do not celebrate inactivity'.

56 Located at the intersection between the former two sides – East (Bosniak) and West (Croatian) Mostar, Spanish square had been jointly administered by both parts until 2006 as part of the so-called 'central zone'. Although the shared administration was intended to provide a physical starting point for a reunited city, it instead moved the two communities further apart. Yet while over time the rest of the city has been 'nationalised', the square did not assume a particular national connotation, despite several attempts to give it a Croat or Bosniak outlook. Following the reunification of Mostar in 2006, the central zone was disbanded and absorbed within what had been Southwest and Old town municipalities (Gunzburger Makaš 2011, pp. 9–11).

plenums were coordinated through an organisational body called interplenum, in charge of connecting the various assemblies that had sprung up across the country. While the interplenum coordinated government-level demands from the different assemblies, each plenum was in charge of articulating its own requests addressing local issues. Themes of labour, economy, and workplaces were at the core of the demands. Several plenums asked for the resignation of the federal and canton governments, while others tackled the revision of the privatisation process. Furthermore, participants called for the suppression of benefits in institutions and public administration (included in these was the famous 'white bread' benefit),[57] salary caps for elected officials, social welfare improvement, and the suspension of criminal charges against the demonstrators.[58] Plenum Mostar advanced the request that all loans from the International Monetary Fund be frozen until the country became more stable.

The plenums' autonomous self-organisation practices were similar to those of other assemblies that blossomed in the squares of Europe from 2011. Nobody was entitled to represent anybody else, nor to speak on his/her behalf. Workers, trade unions, and other collective actors participated in the plenums solely as individuals, and had the same right to vote as the others. However, the agenda of Bosnian plenums was distinct from that of other squares all over Europe. Demonstrators identified the domestic political elite as their target, and held them responsible for the mismanagement of the privatisation process of public enterprises and state-owned assets. The demand to revise the privatisation process replaced the anti-austerity element present in other European assemblies. Furthermore, citizens asked for a change in the political establishment without calling explicitly into question the system of representational democracy. Considering the context in which the protests arose, it is not surprising that people rejected the political class but not the political system. In a country with a delicately balanced system of ethno-national quotas, no one dares to tackle the issue of democracy, in order to protect the already fragile equilibrium. An activist taking part in the protests and plenums explains the reasons why constitutional changes were not demanded:

> You cannot ask for constitutional changes because that would be seen immediately as an attempt to centralise or unite the country. The protests

57 According to the Law on Salaries and Allowances of FBiH, elected officials and holders of executive functions have the right to receive one year of salary after the termination of their mandate, and until obtaining new employment, of the same amount as they had while in office. Such an allowance is called 'white bread' (*bijeli hljeb*).

58 Mujanović 2014a.

> were socio-economic, people asked for jobs, end of corruption, nepotism, and they wanted that message to get through. If they would have asked for anything else, they knew that immediately the nationalists would just have destroyed the original message. Therefore, it was not possible to tackle constitutional changes. People know that everything here gets manipulated, so they stayed with a simple message: socio-economic issues.[59]

Furthermore, given the complicated equilibrium and the still persistent lack of social trust among people,[60] the call for direct democracy would have low resonance.

Conclusion

The widespread enthusiasm that emerged in February 2014 slowly faded away. On 9 April 2014 the 'plenum of the plenums' (*plenum plenuma*) meeting in Sarajevo attracted only sparse participation. Some other actions were organised in the wake of the mass protests: in May 2014 a two-day-long Freedom March (*Marš Slobode*) travelled to the capital calling for the resignation of the Federal government and acceptance of the plenums' requests.[61] The choice of the date was unfortunate, though: the day the march arrived in the capital Sarajevo, 9 May, was the scheduled reopening of the old national library, badly burned by Serb shelling in 1992. As the participants arrived, the police forced back the small number of demonstrators who continued protesting on the other side of the river in front of the library. Meanwhile, on the opposite side, the politicians enjoyed the opening ceremony side by side with members of the international community. The scene showed once again the widening chasm between the political class and the citizens, divided also symbolically by the river.

The protests came definitively to a halt as the flood that hit the country in May 2014 turned into a national emergency. Although weakened by a decrease

59 Interview with Emir Hodžic, activist, April 2014.

60 The lack of trust strongly affects Bosnian society, pauperised by the transition to a market economy and still traumatised by a war that tore the country apart. The domestic political elite plays on nationalist fear to further divide the population, and obscures the problems of the country by using an ethno-nationalistic rhetoric, as well as the threat of new conflicts on grounds of ethnicity.

61 Milan 2014c.

in participation, in many places the remaining plenum cells coordinated the volunteers who provided assistance to the victims of the flood, and promoted donations in their support.[62] The people active in the plenums also arranged transportation to drive students, volunteers, and aid material from the main towns to the villages hit by the flood, transforming the plenum solidarity networks that emerged during the uprising into 'a sort of humanitarian aid organisation'.[63] In some cases, relief coordinated through the plenums reached the affected areas faster than aid provided by the official authorities. The solidarity efforts around the flood brought about new forms of cooperation, and helped to further undermine ethno-national divisions. In these efforts concrete support was provided to those affected regardless of ethnicity. However, activists and plenum participants missed the opportunity to use the government's incompetent flood relief efforts to fuel further discontent. What could have been a moment to inspire mobilisation and gain momentum was drowned by the umpteenth emergency. Furthermore, organisational complications as well as interpersonal dynamics, the difficulty of finding a place to gather all the plenum's attendees,[64] and the mistrust among the participants made organising and maintaining momentum difficult.[65]

As for the workers, the Tuzla canton government decided to revise the privatisation process of several enterprises, and thus started the bankruptcy procedure.[66] The DITA factory, whose workers had headed the 2014 February protests, was single-handedly occupied in March 2015, upon receiving the notification that the bankruptcy proceedings had begun. A few days later the workers, who were still in arrears with over 40 monthly salaries, released a public appeal for international support.[67] Then they took initiative to restart the production of cleaning products. The action met with the widespread support of citizens, activists, and public figures. Shops and some retail chains decided to sell the products of DITA in order to financially support production. Groups of local and international activists visited the premises, and volunteered to help the

62 Ibid.

63 BiH protest files 2014, 'Bosnia Floods: This Is Going to Stay with Us for the next 20–30 Years', available at: http://bhprotestfiles.wordpress.com/2014/05/24/bosnia-floods-this-is-going-to-stay-with-us-for-the-next-20-30-years/.

64 In the case of Sarajevo, the plenum sessions were hosted free of charge at the city Youth House (*Dom Mladih*) hall for as long as the municipality decided to deny access to the premises.

65 Mujanović 2014.

66 Pepić 2015.

67 Milan and Eminagić 2015.

workers optimise production.[68] On social networks, a page called 'Selfie with DITA' (*#SelfieZaDitom*) invited people to advertise DITA's products by publishing on Facebook pictures that displayed the factory's products. All these civic initiatives contributed to attract attention and to trigger widespread support, both in the country and abroad.

Several lessons can be learned from the wave of protest that shook Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2014. First, its legacy lies mostly in its open rejection of nationalism. Workers demonstrated that class, not ethnicity, is the issue dividing the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina.[69] On the one side stands the nationalist oligarchy that keeps playing the ethnic card to further divide citizens along national lines. On the other side are the dispossessed, or as activists labelled them, the disempowered, all the ordinary citizens that, no matter what their nationality, are kept on the edge of existence.[70] Secondly, Bosnian citizens challenged the ethno-national system by calling into question the capitalist system that starves them, depriving them of their jobs, their means of production, and their livelihoods.[71] By challenging nationalism, the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina, led by the workers, called into question capitalism as well, which constitutes the very heart of nationalism.[72] In February 2014 'citizens came out as citizens, for the first time a rebellion had no national, ethnic or faith-based framework, and for the first time the participants spoke using human rhetoric',[73] explained the sociologist Esad Bajtal. The fact that the slogan 'We are hungry in three different languages' appeared often on billboards during

68 Haman, Alen 2015, 'Prva volonterska akcija Tuzlanski kanton #SaDitom', *Front Slobode*, available at: http://www.frontslobode.ba/vijesti/tuzla/56199/prva-volonterska-akcija-tuzlanski-kanton-saditom.

69 Mujanović 2014.

70 Interview with Emin Eminagić, plenum Tuzla, April 2014.

71 The workers of the DITA factory were told to put more salt inside the machinery to boost production and decrease costs. Although aware that this action would damage the machinery, they did it. They identify this moment as the beginning of the factory's decline. This proves that the owner did not have any interest in keeping the factory active (Eminagić and Vujović 2013). As one of the interviewees commented on the episode: 'I can't imagine how those workers felt seeing their factories being destroyed from within. They destroyed their lives, and then they destroyed their basic means of support' (interview with Emin Eminagić, plenum Tuzla, April 2014).

72 As Mujkić (2013) argues, 'It is only within the capitalist referent framework [that] the ethno-nationalist ideological production has its full meaning'.

73 Interview with the analyst and professor Esad Bajtal on Balkan Insight 2014, 'Why Bosnia's Protest Movement Ran out of Steam', available at: http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/why-bosnia-s-protest-movement-ran-out-of-steam.

rallies is particularly telling.[74] It ridicules the institutionalised national divisions, such as the official recognition of three national languages, which can actually be considered three different variations of the same one. The idea in the background is that, notwithstanding the constant divisive narrative of ethnic partitioning, economic hardship affects all citizens of Bosnia-Herzegovina equally.

To conclude, the legacy of the February 2014 protests can be summarised in two words: solidarity and networks. The workers strengthened relationships, establishing connections with their peers in the country and abroad, which resulted in joint meetings with other peers occupying factories in Serbia and Greece, for instance. Prior to the February 2014 protests no official link existed between Bosnian workers and their Serbian peers who occupied factories in 2009. However, after the February demonstrations, meetings were organised to connect the groups. As part of those meetings, Tuzla workers met with their counterparts from the Jugoremedija factory in Zrenjanin, Serbia, and the ITAS-Prvomajska factory in Ivanec, Croatia.[75] Similarly, workers from DITA attended the leftist summit in Serbia (*Levi samit Srbije*) in Zrenjanin. As for the plenums, some of them remained active, while others transformed into informal groups, and gathered in several civic networks active at the local and national level. The uprising thus contributed to the rebuilding of solidarity and the reactivation of the loose networks among grassroots groups that had emerged during the previous waves of protests. Furthermore, the uprising had an empowering effect on all those people who refuse to align with the dominant rhetoric of ethnic hatred, and deem it necessary to fight in the name of social and economic justice.

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74 *Gladni smo na tri jezika* in the original.

75 Jugoremedija is a factory occupied and self-managed since 2007 after a long struggle, and ITAS-Prvomajska is the only company in the region under full control of its workers. The meeting was organised thanks to a project headed by the local Centre for Free Thought Research (*Centar za slobodarska istraživanja*), with the support of the German Rosa Luxembourg Foundation.

CHAPTER 9

Sinaltrainal: Transforming the Workers' Movement in Colombia

Carlos Olaya

The Colombia National Union of Food Industry Workers – Sinaltrainal – was established at the end of 1982, aiming to bring together the more than three million people working in that industry; win the immediate claims they demand; resolve in the long term the national agri-food problem; contribute to the conquest of sovereignty, democracy, peace and well-being of the majority; help build a national humanist, comprehensive, balanced, proportionate, sustained, sustainable and democratic development; and contribute to Latin American integration, which presents a different alternative to imperialism in this part of the world. Sinaltrainal currently has 3,500 members and has a presence in Colombia's five geographical regions.[1]

Sinaltrainal began to take shape in 1977, when the need to establish an industry-wide union for food workers was raised. It took five years to turn the idea into reality. The union first emerged in the South-West region, specifically in the town of Bugalagrande, located at the centre of the department of Valle del Cauca. It then expanded and gained strength throughout the entire South West, such as in the city of Valledupar, located in the Caribbean region, and in Facatativa near Bogota. From these three centres, Sinaltrainal expanded to acquire a presence throughout the country by 1990.

1 It is divided into six sections organised in the Southwestern region, which is made up of the departments of Risaralda, Quindio, Caldas, Valle del Cauca, Cauca and Nariño. In addition, there are two sections in the Northwest, which include the departments of Antioquia and Choco, seven in the Caribbean region, made up of the departments of Cordoba, Sucre, Bolivar, Atlantico, Magdalena, Guajira and Cesar, three in the North Eastern region, where you will find the departments of Santander, Norte de Santander, Arauca and Casanare, and six in the South Central region, which encompasses the departments of Cundinamarca Boyaca, Meta, Tolima, Huila and Caqueta.

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1 An Unfavourable Strategic Context

Sinaltrainal has carried out its struggles in a very unfavourable strategic context. Colombia is the most transnationalised and dependent country in Latin America. The United States government regards its Colombian counterpart as its most faithful ally in this part of the world. The US Southern Command intervenes militarily in our territory through the so-called Colombia Plan and through military base locations that are vital for its global strategy, such as Palanquero, whose role is important for the logistical supply of troops located in Africa. They are also key to its regional interventions, which aim to destabilise and overthrow neighbouring progressive governments. Nationally, they are also crucial because they reinforce the sophisticated military and paramilitary services deployed in our country to destroy insurgency, political opposition and all kinds of social movements that do not serve its purposes.[2]

The armed forces of the United States have directly participated in the war on our soil through the presence of military advisers, as mercenaries hired by foreign private security agencies serving the Pentagon and with civilian agents – customs, trade, etc. – and intelligence personnel. They also supply the reactionary army.[3]

Our country has historically lived in war. During two hundred years of national history, shots have rarely ceased firing, as evidenced by 25 national civil wars and many regional conflicts suffered by our people. The current confrontation has been the continuation of this historic collision between landowners and the bourgeoisie, on the one hand, and against peasants, workers and other popular forces on the other. The unfolding of the last war has allowed the North Americans and Europeans to secure their interests in our territory. They control most of our raw materials – mines, land, oil and gas deposits, water, and so on – markets, infrastructure, and finance. They impose a pro-imperialist ideology and culture, resembling fascism in important elements, openly opposing progressive and integrationist positions in Latin America. They shape the national and international policy of the Colombian oligarchic state according to their own interests, and impose an openly undemocratic political system that uses state terrorism and widespread violence against the population, while promoting aggressive worker exploitation and insecurity and openly favouring the interests of the imperialist conglomerates and the small

2 For a wider perspective about military bases, see Lima 2009.

3 For more information on this subject, see Vernos and Hoyos 2008, and Azzellini 2003.

Colombian oligarchic leadership, strongly involved in the North American conservative bourgeois project.

11 Our Experience of Struggle

From its origin, Sinaltrainal has implemented direct struggle methods, rather than conciliation and demobilisation, to confront the brutal imperialist and oligarchic policies. Seizure of factories and public and religious establishments, labour and hunger strikes, stoppages, demonstrations, rallies, sit-ins, campaigns, national and international complaints and suits – these tactics have been used throughout Sinaltrainal's history to achieve its objectives.

1 *Union Growth and Brutal Repression in the 1980s*

During the 1980s the union carried out many of these actions. In 1982, 1985 and 1988 they had a strike, two factory seizures and a stoppage at Nestlé in Colombia. In retaliation for this last action, the union was legally suspended for a year. Between 1984 and 1986, they held two strikes in Cicolac, and another strike in La Rosa in 1987. At the same time, they took part in the powerful group labour movement in the Independent and Classist Unionism.[4] This group had gained widespread support among the population and was at the helm of the largest popular demonstrations in the country, such as one in the North-eastern region of Colombia that brought together more than 100,000 people, who undertook epic marches towards the major capitals of the region. These were bloodily repressed by state security forces and paramilitaries, resulting in thousands of deaths and displaced persons.[5] It also created cooperatives, developed extensive cultural and political organisational work, established schools, boosted the rural movement, brought together the

4 This term refers to unionism rooted in class struggle and not linked to parties. In Colombia this approach and term goes back at least to the 1960s.

5 Sinaltrainal has been supporting landworkers since the 1980s: First the consolidation of the National Association of Peasant Smallholders – Sincelejo Line (ANUC-SL); in the early 1990s the ANUC-Unity and Reconstruction (UR), later the National Agrarian Coordinator (CAN) and the Arauca Social Organisations. Currently Sinaltrainal cooperates with the National Union of Land Workers – Sinaltracampo. Sinaltrainal also helped promote significant civic and popular movements, such as the movement of the Western Savannah of Bogota, which has developed significant civic strikes since the 1980s, and the movement of the Central Cauca Valley, whose activities have been crucial for victories of the popular and workers' movements.

wives and children of workers, contributed to the strengthening of the strong political movements of masses whose presence was felt in the country at that time – Let's Fight, the Patriotic Union, the Popular Front and Unity and Democracy – participated in the 1980s social and political organisation meetings and national stoppages and mobilisations in the late 1990s, and developed international solidarity through the Latin American Coordinator of the workers at Nestlé, Cotlan.

The Colombian oligarchy and its state were not passive in light of the labour, social, and political progress achieved by the union. The owners and managers of multinational corporations, the owners of the large financial groups, the foreign imperialists, and landlords and narco-paramilitary units, with all their legal and illegal devices, set out to annihilate us.

In the second half of the 1980s, a brutal offensive against our organisation began, which reached its peak in 1986 with the murder of Hector Daniel Useche Beron, head of the union at that time. This crime also included the disappearance of Luis Alfonso Velez Vinasco in 1989 and attacks against other leaders, who went into exile. Over Rico, seriously wounded by paramilitaries in 1990, Adolfo Cardona, Gerardo Cajamarca Alfredo Porras, Alvaro Romer and Ulder Franco were some of those violently exiled in subsequent years.

In 1988, an unprecedented military and paramilitary repression was unleashed due to the stoppage and the seizure of the Nestlé factory in Colombia, located in Bugalagrande, Valle del Cauca – a stoppage caused by the dismissal of fifteen of the most renowned leaders and activists in this section of the union. The government immediately cordoned the factory off and then launched an assault using elite troops, who were supported by tanks and helicopters. However, the union took action. All its partners and the vast majority of the local population surrounded the troops and positioned themselves between them and the workers who had carried out the seizure, thereby preventing the massacre of those who were inside the company premises. Finally, the factory was evacuated without achieving the reinstatement of the dismissed workers or clarifying who were the perpetrators of the murders of and attacks upon the primary Sinaltrainal national leaders.

Violent events happened at both the Nestlé affiliates and the Coca-Cola bottling plants in Colombia. By 1984, many mass arrests had already taken place. Seven union leaders working for the US multinational water and soft drink company were arrested, tortured and subjected to humiliation after the directors of that consortium accused them of being members of insurgent groups. They were later released once their innocence was proven. During those years, attacks, assassinations, disappearances, threats and arbitrary detentions were daily occurrences.

Since then, the union has had to face four primary enemies: factory employers, the oligarchic state, which sought to outlaw trade unions, narco-paramilitary forces, which continue to carry out massacres left and right, and the strikebreakers and reformists, who have gradually been winning, in the midst of violence, a more significant presence within spin-off unions.

2 *Consolidation of Sinaltrainal in the First Half of the 1990s*

After experiencing this onslaught, the Sinaltrainal leadership decided to expand its jurisdiction. Initially, it only acted at Nestlé subsidiaries in Colombia: Cicolac, located in Valledupar, capital of the department of Cesar; Nestlé, in Bugalagrande; and La Rosa, headquartered in the municipality of Dosquebradas, department of Risaralda. Since then, an expansion policy has aimed at consolidating its presence in the primary multinational food industries in Colombia. We knew it was there that the primary class conflicts in the country would take place and from where the union could strengthen strategically. We then successfully got into Coca-Cola, Corn Products Corporation, Unilever, Kraft and almost thirty other companies where the union had a presence. Shortly thereafter, our organisation grew from a thousand members to almost six thousand.

The strengthening occurred in the midst of conflict. In 1991 came the seizure of the Nestlé factory in Colombia; in 1992, the strikes at Nutrinal, a manufacturer located in Cartagena, and Frutera Colombiana, located in Cali; in 1994 the strike at the Santander Bottling Company, a subsidiary of Coca-Cola, with factories in Bucaramanga, Barrancabermeja, Cucuta; and in 1995, the strike at the Roman Bottling Plant, another subsidiary of Coca-Cola with plants in Barranquilla, Cartagena, Santa Marta, and Valledupar.

The social and political situation was favourable. The 1990–5 period was characterised by the growth of insurgent forces, the rise of mass movements, the emergence of the first industrial unions, which were widely influenced by the left, and the rise of the rural and popular movements. The flow from the left was contained by the ultra narco-paramilitary fascist right, which aimed their weapons at social and political movements. Massacres became commonplace as paramilitarism spread throughout the country.

At the same time, killings and other forms of persecution were rife. Six of our leaders were killed by paramilitary groups. In 1990, it was Luis Angel Duque, a Levapan worker, and Avelino Achicanoy, a Coca-Cola worker. In 1993, 1994 and 1995, they were followed by Harry Laguna, a Cicolac worker, and Coca-Cola workers Jose Eleazar Manco, Luis Enrique Giraldo and Luis Enrique Gomez.

3 *Paramilitary Annihilation and Workers' Resistance in the Second Half of the 1990s*

The expansion during the first part of the 1990s was practically reversed in its second five-year period. Sinaltrainal was violently expelled from more than 25 companies. Our membership declined to around 1,500 members. Plant closures, mass layoffs, anti-union persecution and the internal crisis caused by these circumstances consistently downsized the union.

Now, in the first half of the 1990s, the main confrontation moved from Nestlé Colombia to Cicolac, which in 1997 became a subsidiary of Nestlé and Coca-Cola. After the annihilation of our organisation's leadership in Nestlé, union membership in the multinational company declined rapidly. Nevertheless, the Swiss transnational corporation did not stop its anti-union offensive, but rather went on to develop it, primarily in the fields of ideology, politics and labour – although the union would later find ways to counteract the action of the Nestlé owners in each of these areas, despite the loss of its main leaders. At the same time, in 1996, Sinaltrainal leaders and Cicolac workers Jose Manuel Becerra, Toribio de la Hoz Escorcia and Alejandro Matias Hernandez were killed. In 1999, Victor Eloy Mieles and his wife were killed.

In Colombia Coca Cola already had an extensive record of violations of workers' rights and the direct use of force, backed by the Colombian state, and was unscrupulous in taking advantage of the actions of paramilitaries. In 1996, on the premises of an American multinational located in the Carepa plant, department of Antioquia, Uraba region, Isidro Segundo Gil, one of the main leaders of Sinaltrainal in the municipality, was murdered by paramilitaries. This crime triggered an offensive by paramilitary and security forces belonging to the oligarchic state against activists working at the multinational corporation. Murder attempts, death threats, mass arrests, forced displacements, exiles, attacks and kidnappings against worker relatives, the burning of union premises and other types of humiliation were carried out at that time in order to eliminate the union in the above-mentioned conglomerate.

The weakening of the union was already a fact. In this five-year period there was only one strike, at the Santander Bottling Plant in 1996, along with the 1996 seizure of Frutera Colombiana (a subsidiary of the Corn Products Corporation), a plant located in Cali, subsequently closed when it was acquired by Unilever.

4 *Recovery in the 2000s*

The stoppages, labour and hunger strikes, mobilisations, complaints and other protests did not halt the criminal offensive against the union. The idea then arose of dealing with the total offensive by means of the major national and international campaign against Coca-Cola and Nestlé, denouncing the crim-

inal activities orchestrated by entrepreneurs, conglomerate managers and senior officials of the oligarchic state and its security forces, as well as the strikebreakers of the right, all of which were responsible for attacking our organisation's leadership.[6]

The first activities included the holding of three hearings,[7] a lawsuit in a US court,[8] and the boycott of Coca-Cola products. The tours of solidarity and protest came later, covering Latin America, North America, Europe, Asia and Oceania, coinciding with protests and demonstrations carried out in Colombia. The campaign was further strengthened with the establishment of the *Tribunal Permanente de los Pueblos* (People's Permanent Tribunal), organised in Bogota in 2008, which not only condemned the policies of the Coca-Cola and Nestlé owners, but also exposed the role of some forty other multinational corporations in the dozens of executions of trade unionists.

The global response was thunderous. Demonstrations in various parts of the world against Coca-Cola's policies, its expulsion from several colleges and universities in Europe, United States and Australia, and a boycott of the Olympic torch crossing through Italy in 2006, which forced them to suspend their tour, among other activities, accelerated the decision of the multinational's global leadership to sit down and negotiate with Sinaltrainal in Atlanta.

The multinational counter-offensive was focused on spreading mass propaganda across the globe and organising three events of self-acquittal in Bogota, Washington and London, with the heads of the union's right and reformist wing headed by Carlos Rodriguez, former President of the Central Unitaria de Trabajadores (CUT). Rodriguez worked together with the presidents of the unions Sico (National Union of Workers in the Beverage Industry), Sinaltrainbec (Colombian National Union of Drinks Industry Workers), Sintraindega

6 The hearing in Bern, Switzerland, against Nestlé took place in 2004. This was an important development, forcing global management to confront the problem in Colombia (although it never solved it).

7 The three hearings were held in Atlanta, United States, Brussels, Belgium, and Bogota, Colombia between July and December 2003. The outcome was a political declaration signed by multiple entities condemning the activities of this multinational corporation in Colombia, a plan of action and the boycott carried out as of 22 July 2003, the day dedicated to the fight against multinational corporations, according to the World Social Forum.

8 The criminal lawsuit against Coca-Cola companies was accepted by the Court for the Southern District of Florida on 30 March 2003. The demand required the sentencing of The Coca-Cola Company, its representatives in Colombia and its Panamco bottling plants, as well as Uraba Food and Drink, for their responsibility in the crimes committed against Sinaltrainal union members.

(National Union of Panamco Indega Company Workers) and Asontragaseosas (National Association of Workers of Companies Producing and Distributing Fresh Drinks). All four are small employer-friendly unions that were allowed to organise in production sites from which Sinaltrainal had been pushed out. These unions attacked and defamed Sinaltrainal, and implied that the Sinaltrainal activities were promoted by the guerrillas – an accusation that turns the accused into targets of paramilitarism and state repression. These unions also built a partnership with Nestlé, the aim of which was to discredit Sinaltrainal and the campaign that we had developed against the Swiss multinational. Meanwhile, at the same time as they endeavoured to present Nestlé as if its activities were innocuous, they attempted to take over Sinaltrainal's leadership by infiltrating the union – a plot that failed.

After fruitless negotiations, in which Coca-Cola executives sought to manipulate and ultimately silence the union, we partnered with those organisations in our country and other regions that fight against paramilitary violence and wars promoted by the owners of global financial groups and multinational corporations. To this end we launched the great national and international campaign: 'Say no to multinational war! To sovereignty, democracy, peace and well-being for Colombians'.

However, these important activities did not halt the murders and persecutions. In 2000, paramilitaries killed Jesus Orlando Crespo, an employee from the municipality of Bugalagrande, an honorary Sinaltrainal member, and Hernando Cuartas, a La Rosa worker. In 2002 they killed Adolfo Manera Lopez, a worker from the Roman Bottling Plant, one of the most important Sinaltrainal leaders; in 2005, Luciano Romero Molina, a Cicolac worker, who had been exiled, and Carlos Arturo Montes, who worked at the Club Infantas in the city of Barrancabermeja, and in 2007, Jose de Jesus Marin, a La Rosa worker.

22 dead, hundreds of displaced and exiled persons, thousands of death threats, tens of thousands of layoffs and labour rights violations, dozens of detained union leaders – these are the result of the sweeping policy practised by imperialists and the national oligarchy against us. Despite significant losses in this battle, Sinaltrainal has continued to gain strength. Several types of street fights, confrontations with the imperialist bourgeoisie (indeed a very unequal struggle), the connection with the population, reconstruction, reorganisation and restructuring, the development of proposed policies and international support – actions such as these have allowed Sinaltrainal to restructure its forces and to create new possibilities for growth. Today we are present in more than 50 municipalities and companies, and in economic sectors such as the agro-industry, trade, preparation services, nutrition and food resources, and we

continue to develop international campaigns like the ones we have launched against Coca-Cola, Nestlé, Kraft and Sodexo.[9]

III Our Definitions

In such difficult conditions, in the middle of the confrontations that characterise an aggravated class struggle, we attempt to establish the guidelines of our political and ideological behaviour. These we describe below.

1 *Our Ideological Line*

The first decision was to adopt Marxism-Leninism as our ideological approach. We understand Marxism as a dialectical guide to action, not as dogma. We do not share interpretations that erect personality cults, or that turn it into a messianic, all-encompassing or absolutist concept, and nor do we agree on a purely statist, party-centred, or voluntarist orientation, which is unaware of the central role played by the workers and the people in the development, realisation and leadership of socialism. They, the workers and the people, are really the ones to build and hold power; not a tiny group acting in the name of a party that supposedly represents the class.

On the contrary, Marxism is based on the concrete analysis of the specific situation, in order to crystallise the ideology and the interests of the proletariat, both nationally and internationally. It is creative, seeking answers that are tailored for different situations. That is why, from our perspective, there are no preconceived formulas to solve new problems; formulas should derive from specific circumstances and flow from a concept that allows you to analyse and give correct answers to those problems. We do not mean to imply that Marxist experimentation and learning-processes cannot lead to mistakes. Rather, Marxists have the ability to correct their mistakes and learn from them in order not to repeat them.

By adopting this view of the world, Sinaltrainal partners have committed to fighting in the long term to contribute to the elimination of the exploitation of man by man and the building of socialism and communism, understanding these as a result of the revolutionary effort of the organised and conscious masses, struggling for their own liberation, for power to be held by majorities and for democracy and well-being, with the long-term objective that all power

9 For more information about campaigns, visit the Sinaltrainal website, available at: www.sinaltrainal.org.

and the entire state should disappear. Their collective struggle not only aims to achieve the economic claims of labour and to carry out short-term and circumscribed activities, but it aims also to transcend short-term demands and systematically build ideological, political, economic and social solutions to each of the structural problems we face.

Part of the Sinaltrainal ideological line is the Marxist crystallisation of morality, ethics and culture. Our current behaviour is the result of the specific historical conditions we experience. We must strive to transform them. This is possible because morality is not a system that is closed and void of principles, norms and values. Instead, it is modified and develops constantly, incorporating the analysis of all material and spiritual manifestations emerging in the course of history.

On the other hand, our ethics summarise the best of human morals and culture, and help us to eliminate the defects and vices of bourgeois morality and develop concrete new values, ideals and standards of conduct in life that are congruent with the interests and historical aspirations of workers.

This is profoundly humanistic, because it gives to the conscious social subject a role as a maker of history rather than as a passive agent. It departs from blind obedience to pre-existing rules and values, making the worker a critic of the existing order, into an actor with permanent concerns, always longing for knowledge and capable of guiding his or her actions towards human improvement and progress as a social being. The role of the social subject changes, undergoing a transformation from being contemplative and submissive, to being a conscious builder of the most valuable ideals of humanity, a builder of a liberating, collective morality, with altruistic ideals.

The main theme of our ethics is to end alienation. If alienation refers to the exploitation of humans by other humans, to the loss of autonomy and freedom, especially that of workers, it is necessary to develop a new ethic that will develop modes of behaviour that lead to a new social-economic organisation, one that eliminates this exploitation, builds autonomy, dignity and freedom, enables humans to re-appropriate what they produce, and to make their own voluntary, conscious and self-expressive work, leading to creativity, individual and collective development, and well-being.

We combine three broad areas in this field that have to do with the individual, organisational and political levels. Individual ethics includes fighting for the moral ideal, that is, making the individual decision of fighting to reach the most noble human ideals when performing a collective action, and not this alone, but to work to maintain coherence in this struggle: to ensure continuity between what is said and what is done. Those who embody such working-class ethics are a living example for others, especially for the grassroots. Ethical-

political ideals are reflected in their behaviour. This profoundly affects the psychology of the masses, serves to configure collective beliefs and ideology, and transforms them into a material force, which makes it possible to achieve seemingly impossible goals.

Our ethics require us to be supportive, responsible, honest – not only due to the fact that we are not corrupt, but because we fight all signs of corruption; also honest in that we do not fool ourselves or deceive others; to be fraternal, effective, efficient, responsible, courageous, righteous, not only as individuals but also as fighters seeking to achieve the ideal of social justice; truthful, austere and respectful toward ourselves, our family, workers and the people; to love union and political work and to exhibit firmness in the fight and a spirit of sacrifice; permanently to demand the most from ourselves, and to be able to exert criticism and self-criticism.

We have, in addition, organisational ethics, which means loyalty to the organisation among our membership, a loyalty that derives from genuine democracy and a new political culture focused on values and truly democratic practices, and a collective defence of our ethics, focused on humanistic values.

In this ideological battle, we fight against bourgeois ethics and the hallmarks of anti-union ethics: corruption, greed, dishonesty, injustice, parasitism, ineffectiveness, inefficiency, social ambition, opportunism, favouritism, red tape and other ills, which are products of the ideological and political influence exerted by the bourgeoisie in our midst, and a force of habit that often abounds in social organisations.[10]

Its accumulated ideology takes shape through the school of education, Centro de Estudios Labourales, Económicos y Sociales (Centre for Labour, Economic and Social Studies – CELES). The school carries out research on the situation of the working class in Colombia, union life, the development of class struggle within the country, the socio-economic conditions that we face, and the policies applied to Colombia by imperialist governments and by the owners of transnational and global financial groups. On the other hand, it develops five cycles of training, at different levels and topics, starting with elementary training on labour and union problems, followed by training on Sinaltrainal policies, national and international problems, and Colombian and Latin American reality. Then, it analyses the history of capitalism, the development of both the class struggle internationally and the productive forces with its contradictions, connections, and trends, expressed in the misnamed but fashionable

10 Sinaltrainal's moral and ethical conception is summarised in Sintrabancol, Sinaltrainal, Celes 2007c.

term 'globalisation'. It will soon thereafter carry out a study of Marxist ideology and bourgeois history, and finally deliver some practical advice for the union and political work related to methods and styles, communication techniques, and agitation and propaganda, as well as how to give expression to an alternative culture. These skills are imparted twice a month at a local, regional and national level. The school's objective is not only to combat bourgeois ideas domestically and the estrangement and alienation fostered by capitalism, but also to rationalise our social practice; build worker freedom; accumulate knowledge, science, and historical, social and political awareness; to mobilise them to conquer the workers' most important demands; and to prepare workers for the fight against landowners and capitalists. At the same time, we enrich ourselves, in our specific conditions, through the scientific accumulation of dialectical materialism, we build national and Latin American identity and we crystallise a class-oriented culture to develop our uses, customs, symbols, traditions and art forms.

The school's training materials are developed with a view to articulating the rationalisation of collective experience, discussion and study, and also scientific research, on the one hand, with productive activity and the concrete development of the ideological, political and economic struggle on the other.

2 *Our Policy*

From the beginning of its participation in classist and independent unionism at the end of the 1970s until the mid-1980s, Sinaltrainal was identified as anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist and anti-employer. Those definitions were based on the existence of a series of dependent capitalism class contradictions (capital–work, imperialism–people, landlords–peasants and imperialist development–environment), which are insoluble within the current system.

Based on the development of these contradictions, Sinaltrainal leaders proposed to build a union organisation which would serve to enhance the role of the working class in the process of revolutionary transformation. To carry out the above changes, it was necessary that union leaders identify the working class's historical interests and possess awareness of the guiding role they played in this confrontation and in the building of the new society; and also that they obtain organisational tools, including social organisations, whose main strength is the unions, to learn how to develop fundamental forms of struggle and build their own ideological, political, social and economic power.

Exercising direct democracy and pluralism has been one of the cornerstones of our policy. This contributes to the development of a collective policy of placing democracy on an objective foundation by submitting proposals to the critique of the grassroots base, and by placing above any group consideration

the achievement of the workers' interests. We respect grassroots power; this means giving it the necessary tools to decide and exert direct democracy. We are pluralists within our principles. In other words, we respect all expressions that defend the workers' immediate and historical interests. However, we consider that there can be no pluralism domestically concerning those who consciously go against their own interests and compliantly serve employers.

Moreover, the union decided to be autonomous and so to avoid becoming a spokesperson for any leftist force. It thereby has its own orientations, leadership and independent ideological, political, economic, social and labour practices. Sinaltrainal has respected the political leftist organisations and political mass movements that are progressive, democratic and revolutionary, but has not become spokesperson for any of them. It urges them to unity on a single front, involving social organisations and respecting their autonomy and political development, and it calls for us to build a great national-cultural project together that is able to capture majorities throughout the hemisphere and the world, generating a socialism-building programme that involves a strategy matching the current global, Latin American and national class struggle phase, and tactics that address the present period of confrontation and the correlation of forces that exist today in the world and in our region.

The previous labour hegemony meant that unions were placed at the forefront of all the battles waged by actual workers and the population, that they identified their fundamental aspirations and were recognised by the masses as their guide. To do so, they had to win their support, building a solid worker-peasant and popular alliance.

However, these matters were insufficient. In the light of the experience they accumulated they had to move forward regarding programmatic, strategic, tactical and short-term definitions. This will therefore result in a coherent policy, which covers, unites and integrates all partner activities. It gives the organisation one sole point of view, guides our actions and long-term heritage, organises our strengths, centralises driving and grassroots knowledge, ideas and practices, and makes it possible to plan, streamline and be effective and efficient at work. In addition, it gives us the capability to correct errors, overcome internally divisive practices, reach proposed purposes and generate initiatives and forms of struggle that are consistent with the correlation of existing forces, and the mood of workers and the population.

We were able to develop this policy because we were able to unravel the strategy and tactics adopted by the ruling classes and because we continually evaluate and re-assess the national and international situation. From that perspective, and on the basis of our policy, we learned to articulate the union struggle in view of national developments and the interests of the working class

in connection with those in other sectors; and we were also able to achieve genuine allies and weaken the enemies of workers, while maintaining sufficient tactical flexibility to advance or retreat at the right time.

Our approach in the political struggle aimed at achieving a remarkable political influence on society, unifying workers, peasants, settlers, women, students, the indigenous, Afro-descendants and other sectors that belong socially and politically to the dominated group. It aimed to defend the fundamental rights of the exploited and oppressed, extending international solidarity, struggling to coordinate more advanced worker demonstrations in various countries and demonstrations of nations, peoples and working Latin Americans, and to build the necessary foreign support for the struggle towards liberating the Colombian people. The policy summarises our social practice and is the organised expression of class struggle, concentrating our transformative approach. For the same reason, we made use of public political denunciations and the national agitation campaign begun in 2007, which focused on showing the fascist nature of the current political regime and how Colombia is dominated by the alliance between imperialist and oligarchic sectors that are strongly united with narco-paramilitarism.

We then deal with building a comprehensive labour policy, whose programmatic foundation has been the formulation of a series of proposals, such as:

A Solution of the National Labour Problem

Worker and union rights are not respected at all in Colombia. To make them effective, the union has launched an 11-point struggle platform in order to reconquer them. It includes: (1) direct recruitment, (2) stability, (3) actual wage increases, (4) elimination of brutal workloads, (5) respect for the eight-hour work shift, (6) elimination of accidents at workplace and occupational disease prevention, (7) respect for internal career ladders and regulations, (8) respect for the Freedom of Association, (9) respect for Union Freedom, (10) respect for Collective Labour Conventions, for international conventions signed by the Colombian Government and for the national labour law and (11) respect for due process and workers' right to protection.[11]

B Building a Strong Leftist Union Movement

This proposal is based on overcoming the union crisis. The crisis has manifested itself in multiple ways, including the low rate of unionisation, the growing influence of employers inside labour organisations, the persistence of eco-

11 For further information see Sintrabancol, Sinaltrainal, Celes 2007a.

nomism, depoliticisation and employerism, estrangement from other social movements, the neglect of the country's problems, corruption, red tape, the abandonment of grassroots work, the lack of initiative and the imposition of a defeatist tendency for many of its leaders. The movement is so beaten, in some cases so demoralised and defeated, that most of its actors have lost the will to fight. Many of those directing it reduce their activity so as to prolong the slow agony they experience, and spend their time propagandising the delivery of those rights that have already been acquired, which they treat as a last step that precedes the final collapse. Due to the behaviour stated above, the legitimacy of unions in Colombia has been seriously injured and is now placed in question. The same is the case with respect to their representativeness. New forms of recruitment and 'de-labourisation' have significantly contributed to the union movement's continued decline in size. Workloads, new administrative techniques, work pressure, the prevailing terror in the sphere of production and the violent persecution of unions also contribute to the membership's ominous decline. The delinking of unions and their lack of work in training centres increases the disconnection between veteran workers and those who have joined up; this distance is becoming increasingly more abyssal. Meanwhile, there is no transmission to young workers of the history of unions, collective memory is lost, and if to this we add the prevailing alienation then it should be clear that the generational gap is growing wider. This deepens the crisis and prevents new blood from taking the place of old anytime soon. To overcome it Sinaltrainal designed a proposal with three key aspects in 2000: union reconstruction, reorganisation and restructuring.

Rebuilding unionism means centralising it in powerful industrial unions, regaining their political flags and bringing it to new areas. It also means developing a sustained quantitative and qualitative growth policy. Such a definition once again brought us into a debate with the reformists and employers, who have become mainstream in the Colombian union scene, concerning the issue of whether trade unions should or should not participate in politics. Their argument is that if the unions were founded exclusively for the purposes of carrying on a union struggle, then their presence in national politics is a manifestation of anarcho-syndicalism or denaturing; unionism instead had to move forward to face class contradictions and contribute to resolving them in a revolutionary manner. This is a Byzantine debate, already surpassed by current realities. Indeed, those who want to limit union organisations to the economic struggle condemn the working mass to non-participation in major national decisions, turning their backs on them and placing the movement at the service of the bourgeoisie.

Restructuring the movement means engaging in a merciless fight against the force of habit that hinders change. It is necessary to defeat that force, embodied primarily in red tape, in the struggle brought on by political groups to seize the few privileges unions still possess, and other vices that corrode union practice. In the midst of this contradiction, it was necessary to modify what prevailed and develop new labour, social, cultural, ideological and political practices. The challenge then was an intense fight against the influence of employers on unions, changing the attitude of most leaders and of the grassroots, both of which have focused on obtaining claims through the legal fight, and which, when this is not possible, have resigned themselves to losing acquired rights. The challenge was also to change our methods and styles of work, to deepen the exercise of union democracy, to abolish the absolute control of union organisations by political groups, and to win the hearts and minds both of the employee base and the majority of the population.

The aim of the reorganisation is to build an organisational structure that makes it possible to achieve the new goals we defined for the long term. The structures previously adopted were better suited to economist, bureaucratic and bureaucratic organisational forms and to the company unions that correspond to them. In order to build strategic lines, increase tactics, solve our internal problems, unite workers of different production industries and services, link us to the working class and the population as a whole, to social and political actions that the national reality requires from us, develop internationalism and successfully confront employers and their oligarchic state, we need the functioning organisational structure of a true industrial union.[12] Therefore, we need to centralise and specialise the organisation's structures, sorting them by departments that align to the lines of power: ideology, politics, social, economic, labour and international work, and in work areas consistent with the core activities that characterise each department. By this means, we should make effective use of human and material resources, arranging them into a whole, thus ending the prevailing dispersion.[13]

Using correct working methods, including a system of organisation, direction, agitation and propaganda and a harmonious and coherent planning system; helping leaders to become strategic leaders; building a national system of collective leadership – all of this has effects from the bottom to the top and returns from the top to the bottom. Linking the organised grassroots, activists and leaders of union organisations is part of the task.

12 To examine the concept of industrial unionism developed by Sinaltrainal, see Celes 2008.

13 Further information see Sintrabancol, Sinaltrainal, Celes 2007b.

C Building of the Leftist Social Block

Our organisation has contributed since its origin to the realisation of the labourer-peasant and popular alliance. It has been the articulator of a national grassroots movement, the cornerstone of which is strongly centralised and politicised social organisations.

D Transformation of the Current Prevailing Social Relations in the National Agri-food Industry

This proposal contains twelve points and its aim is to solve the national agri-food problem. The twelve points are: (1) Democratising economic relations in the National Agri-Food Industry, (2) Recovering the environmental base and rationally exploiting productive resources, (3) Satisfying the fair demands of workers, (4) Promoting and financing large-scale food research, science and technology, (5) Devising a macroeconomic policy consistent with national development, (6) Administratively and politically reorganising the national territory, (7) Drawing up a national nutrition policy and a plan to eradicate hunger, (8) Sovereignty and food safety, (9) Political solutions to the national crisis, (10) Building a popular culture and identity, (11) Sustainable, democratic, and economically and technically viable agri-food development, and (12) Working toward a new international economic order and independent international integration.[14]

E Solution to the National Crisis

The current proposal seeks to achieve six key points: (1) National sovereignty, (2) Grassroots democracy, (3) Peace with social justice, (4) Welfare, (5) Development, and (6) Latin American integration.

These claims are accompanied by the formulation of a new sovereign, democratic, popular, national unity and reconstruction government, which must address the solution of the national crisis and the construction, under our specific conditions, of socialism, giving priority in this effort to the growing involvement of the population, especially the working class.[15]

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14 For documents on the agri-food problems and Sinaltrainal proposals see Celes-Sinaltrainal 2011 and Celes 2011.

15 See Celes-Sinaltrainal 2009b.

F Provide Structural Responses to the Problems Generated by the Global Capitalist Crisis[16]

This proposal is summarised in 18 points to overcome the global economic, energy, food, health and environmental crisis. These points are: (1) International worker unity, (2) Recovery of workers' rights, (3) New international economic order, (4) International integration of the peoples of the world, (5) Imposition of the Tobin tax on international financial transactions, (6) Deprivatisation of monetary and exchange rate management, (7) Elimination of the dollar as the universal currency, (8) Nationalisation of financial industries, (9) Non-payment of foreign debt, (10) Abolishment of multilateral agencies, such as the IMF, the World Bank and WTO, and of trade agreements regulated by them, MAIS, TRIPS, GSAS, and FTAS, (11) Imposition of strong constraints on the actions of the owners of global and multinational financial groups, (12) Protection of national production, (13) Development of new sources of energy and cessation of the super-exploitation of traditional sources, (14) End of the occupation of foreign armies and end of the war for the control of energy resources imposed by imperialism, (15) Food sovereignty and safety, (16) Respect for national cultures and peoples, (17) Special international protection programme for the environment, water and the most vulnerable species, and (18) Global emergency programme for the prevention of pandemics caused by the commodification of health.

G Fight against Multinational Corporations

This proposal focuses on the campaign: 'Say no to multinational war!' contextualised in the social, political and military conflict affecting Colombia. We understood that the current war being waged in our country is motivated, promoted, financed and deepened by the owners of global financial groups, the world's largest multinational corporations and the local oligarchy. Such confrontation is part of the strategy used to achieve their goals here and in Latin America. Their interests are advanced by the conflict. Transnational corporations not only profit from selling arms and financing the Colombian oligarchic state, exercising indiscriminate repression and building a monstrous military apparatus; they also take advantage of the 'fruits of war'.

Financial groups such as Carlyle, the largest investor in the military industry, specialise in this type of business. Other multinational corporations like Halliburton, the company closely connected to Dick Cheney, former vice president of the United States; Sikorsky, which sells combat helicopters; or Monsanto,

16 See Celes-Sinaltrainal 2009a.

which retails the glyphosate used to fumigate coca crops, are major beneficiaries of armed conflict. Nevertheless, others profit from a 'cleansing' of the territory by the military and paramilitary. This is true of mining, energy, agrifood and public services multinational corporations. Others benefit from the 'investment climate' created by state violence and terrorism or from the violence exercised directly by owners of national or foreign consortia. This is where the finance, communications, and other services and industry multinational corporations are located. The campaign has a few programmatic themes, as follows: (1) Nationalisation and rational exploitation of natural resources, (2) Sustainability of farms and recovery of affected ecosystems, (3) Guarantee of workers' rights, (4) Protection of national production, import restriction and promotion of national exportation, (5) Valuation of agricultural and mining products, (6) Promotion of a new system of mutually beneficial and fair international trade, (7) Financial, production, energy and trade integration of Latin America and support of ALBA, (8) Technology transfer, elimination of intellectual property on trademarks and patents, and development of domestic capital goods and high-tech industry, (9) Nationalisation of the financial industry, non-payment of foreign debt, abolition of domestic debt, (10) Fiscal control over foreign investment and the imposition of a new system of taxes on transnational corporations, (11) Sovereignty and food safety, comprehensive agrarian reform, establishment of strategic food reserves, and a national nutrition plan covering the entire population, (12) Activation of the unemployed by means of work redistribution, (13) Investigation, trial, and punishment for those responsible for intellectual and material war crimes, compensation for victims of war, and expulsion from the country of multinational companies that have violated human rights, (14) Effective abolishment of paramilitarism, demilitarisation of society, exercise of a real, direct democracy and effective protection by the state of the rights of all people.

CHAPTER 10

A Fistful of Dollars? The Labour Dispute in the Babylon Cinema

Hansi Oostinga

In this chapter, I examine the Babylon cinema labour dispute in Berlin. The Babylon cinema was built in 1928–9 and is located at Rosa Luxemburg Square next to Piscator's Volksbühne and the Karl Liebknecht House, the former headquarters of the KPD (German Communist Party) and now the Left Party. It has a long tradition as a motion picture theatre. At the time of the conflict the partially government-funded theatre was run by the Neue Babylon Berlin GmbH, which offered wages at the low end of the pay scale for Berlin cinemas – and they were not known for their excellent working conditions. In 2008, employees gathered to discuss fair wages, working conditions and other work-related questions. As a result they decided to launch a boycott and pressure for new contract negotiations. This dispute impacted local and national politics. The employees of Berlin's Babylon cinema did not foresee the political ramifications of their first meeting when they gathered at a bar to talk about their displeasure with their working conditions. This meeting led to a local labour dispute that attracted more attention than is usual for a conflict involving a small cinema. Not only did the Berlin Senate (the government of the federal state of Berlin) and the Left Party[1] get involved, but so did the service sector union ver.di.[2] In addition to this, the very definition of a union was called into question and the employees brought the matter to the small anarcho-syndicalist Free Workers' Union (*Freie Arbeiterinnen- und Arbeiter-Union* – FAU). For the first time a group of part-time workers addressed the issue of a lack of adequate

1 The Left Party (officially called the Left) was formed in 2007. The Left Party's regional branch in Berlin, which formed a government coalition with the SPD until 2011, was criticised by its own party members for the sweeping cuts to social services it had agreed to.

2 Ver.di (United Service Sector Union) was formed in 2001 when five separate unions joined forces. It is a member of the DGB (Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund – Confederation of German Trade Unions). It currently has some 2 million members, mainly public sector workers. Ver.di, which negotiates 'social partnerships' with employers, has recently lost many union members and faces small professional union rivals. Ver.di only has limited influence in the service industry, which is known for short-term employment.

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labour representation, thus directing attention to a matter that transcended the labour dispute. As a FAU-activist, even if not working at the cinema, I was personally involved in the labour struggle. In the following chapter I describe what caused the labour dispute and how it evolved.

Kick-Starting the Conflict

The 30-person workforce of the Babylon cinema was mostly made up of part-timers – many of them students – who worked for between 5.50 and 8 Euros per hour gross depending on whether they worked at the door or as projectionists. There were no premiums and even mandatory benefits such as paid leave and sick pay were not granted or were only given to employees who were on the management's good side. The contracts were mostly temporary, if they were in writing at all. But it was not only low wages that led to resentment among the employees. The haphazard, incompetent and sometimes choleric management style of the boss Timothy Grossman led to growing unrest among the employees. A projectionist vented his frustration in a blog:

> Hours of training without pay, the wage payment is always late because of bankruptcy, and I – working as projectionist – have been transferred to a different affiliated cinema. That motivates. This is excellent planning and management of a company.[3]

The public first got wind of the situation in the cinema in June 2008. Jason Kirkpatrick, who worked at the door, filed a suit against what he perceived as a wrongful dismissal.

> I was fired without notice and without reason. The only thing which I could blame myself for was that I proposed a better feedback system for the employees and that I asked whether mandatory employee meetings should be paid.[4]

Other employees confirmed that this rapid employee turnaround was common and that things were not better when it came to the work climate and

3 Zattler 2010.

4 Oostinga 2008, p. 1.

working conditions.[5] The trial ended in a settlement. Kirkpatrick accepted the dismissal and receive compensation amounting to two months' pay. However, Kirkpatrick did set an example and the Berlin's Mayday Alliance[6] declared rather boldly in a press release that 'networks of precarious workers make sense and can lead to success.'[7]

Organising

Kirkpatrick's case served as the impetus for concrete action. It was decided to form a works council and in November 2008 the council members were elected.[8] While the management left the election unchallenged, the three newly elected members of the works council faced immediate retaliation. There was a flurry of disciplinary letters and a works council member was given unpleasant chores in the basement. The management even decided not to extend another member's contract. It was obvious that the management considered the formation of the works council to be a declaration of war.

However, the employees weren't necessarily looking for a confrontation; in fact, they were never quite as confrontational as the management throughout the entire conflict. It is perhaps not unusual for employees of such companies in the entertainment industry to remain loyal and to identify with a long-standing tradition in spite of the arbitrary management style and the lousy working conditions. The deputy head of the works council emphasised this at a time when the conflict was still being played out in public:

> We love this cinema. Next to the International and the *Krokodil*, it is the most beautiful in Berlin, the programme is unbelievably good, there's an interesting event almost every day (amusingly often from the leftist

5 See Schumacher 2008.

6 The Berlin Mayday Alliance was made up of various groups and organisations which united to resist the increasing precarity. Over many years the alliance organised a Mayday Parade on 1 May, a demonstration which took place in other European cities as well.

7 Mayday Berlin 2008.

8 In Germany the works council is an institutionalised representation of the interests of employees and can be formed in companies with five employees or more. It has certain information and co-determination rights, depending on the size of the company. According to law – and as opposed to unions – it has to work together with the employer and keep the interest of the employees and the company in mind.

> spectrum), there's often a relaxed atmosphere, there are also freedoms that don't exist elsewhere. We don't want any more despotism.[9]

The employees first hoped that they could reconcile their mixed feelings through the works council, which aims at conciliation, in order to normalise communication with the management. The management's reaction shattered all hope. The works council members were forced onto the defensive from the very beginning. Without any experience and training – which they are entitled to – they had to respond to attacks in the fields of labour and industrial relations law. They were lucky that their opponents weren't experts either; however, it quickly became clear that tension would not ease and the situation would not improve in this way.

The works council thus contacted ver.di. They hoped that they would get support and that the union would take the conflict to a new level. ver.di had even taken the initiative in the sector with a project called *Kinonetzwerk*.[10] But both a ver.di member employed at the Babylon and the works council were totally ignored by ver.di. Inquiries were left unanswered, appointments were missed. The union apparatus ver.di didn't show any interest whatsoever in the conflict in the small cinema – at least at this point.

The FAU Steps In

Ver.di's ignorance led a member of the works council to contact the FAU. A few employees knew about the FAU and Kirkpatrick had been advised by it in his suit against the Babylon. The FAU showed interest in the employees' demands. A works council member recalled in an interview that the first meeting provided clarity. After a few meetings, some of the employees joined the FAU and formed a workplace group in the cinema. At the end of January 2009, the FAU gave official notice to the cinema's management that it would become active in the cinema. There was no opposition to this or to the FAU's participation at the works meetings that followed.

The FAU's involvement in the cinema labour dispute led to the return of anarcho-syndicalism. By anarcho-syndicalism I mean a class-struggle-oriented union movement that relies mainly on the self-mobilisation of the working

9 FFA 2009.

10 The *Kinonetzwerk* (English: cinema network) was created by ver.di especially for employees in cinemas. Its main goal is to aid the formation of works councils in cinemas. See http://kinonetzwerk.verdi.de/.

class, which through direct action aims not only at immediate improvements, but also considers them as starting points for social transformation towards a libertarian and classless society.[11] The FAU's involvement prompted the return to different methods of organising that Germans were unfamiliar with. The FAU identifies the anarcho-syndicalist tradition of the Free Workers' Union Germany (*Freie Arbeiter-Union Deutschlands* – FAUD), which was active as a union, with up to 120,000 members, until it was crushed by National-Socialism in 1933,[12] as one of the historical experiences they draw upon. As in many other countries, anarcho-syndicalism in Germany was not marginalised only by fascist repression. Already in the 1920s this revolutionary union movement proved unable to figure out an adequate response to the growing juridification of labour, which aimed at a social partnership (between workers and employers) and drew on then-nascent social policies. In the modern post-war welfare state the FAU was unable to represent an alternative to the huge union confederations. It was not until the 1970s when some modest initiatives in favour of building an anarcho-syndicalist union restarted.[13]

Like the FAUD, the FAU is organised federally into local, autonomous unions by branches. At the beginning of the conflict at the Babylon cinema, the FAU in Berlin consisted of only one group with some 40 members encompassing all branches. Even so, most of the members had only occasional jobs, and these would change often. The FAU did not have any local workplace committees; it mostly supported individuals and engaged in campaigns, such as the huge student strikes at the end of the 1990s, the various anti-globalisation protests and the movement against the labour market reforms known as *Hartz IV*, aiming at the creation of a low wage sector in Germany (2004). The FAU had a considerable presence in these struggles, but this did not trigger collective offensive struggles on a shop-floor level. The first major shop-floor intervention was in 2004–5 in a call centre, a subcontractor of German Telekom. The FAU supported an independent shop-floor committee's struggle against closure. The defensive struggle was defeated and did not lead to the establishment of the FAU at the shop-floor level. The Babylon cinema labour dispute thus represented an unusual leap for the FAU Berlin. It was the first local workplace committee of the FAU. This also explains in part the union's decision to fully back the employees.

11 Oostinga 2009.

12 Rübner 1994.

13 van der Linden and Thorpe 1990.

Within the FAU, a working group was formed to support the nascent workplace committee of the Babylon cinema in the upcoming conflict. In addition to the Babylon's FAU workplace committee meetings, there were also regular open meetings for all of the Babylon employees where further actions were agreed upon. This structure – together with the works council – was the motor and backbone of the employees' campaign throughout the conflicts which followed. The structure developed through practical experience and was ultimately a compromise between the will to let the employees decide and the necessity to take action. It would have made sense to create a kind of strike committee at this point in time, with clear responsibilities and modes of decision-making, but the FAU – who were new to this kind of conflict – did not have a corresponding concept at hand nor did the rapid series of events allow time for suitable preparations to be made.

The employees wanted to do something but didn't have any experience in labour disputes or knowledge about the inherent consequences. The FAU suggested that the employees organise themselves more effectively, but the employees' enthusiasm was a compelling reason to take action. Ultimately the mixture of the wish for immediate action together with structural deficits and disagreement with regard to contentious issues created a divide among the employees. In the ensuing dynamic, a small core of activists emerged who were in the works council, the Babylon workplace committee and tuned into the ongoing communication process, while the rest increasingly took on the role of (sympathising) bystanders or only took part in actions from time to time. No one was able to incorporate all those interested in taking action in the evolving situation.

Action

The ball got rolling with a press release by the works council at the end of January 2009, written on behalf of all employees. This didn't only make public the actions taken by management against the newly formed works council but also the 'miserable wages, unfounded dismissal and an atmosphere where nobody who wanted to keep their job would dare to ask for a vacation'.[14] Although the FAU had warned against taking action prematurely, it helped the employees with public relations and suggested a few actions of its own. The resulting publicity meant that the management had no other choice but to

14 Meyer 2009.

grant all of the employees the statutory minimum standards for annual leave and sick pay. While the bosses pretended that they had always provided these benefits, the staff knew that this was its first small victory. However, other than that nothing changed.

The FAU's Babylon workplace group used the Berlinale film festival to add to the pressure. Because of the increased workload during the film festival, it demanded premiums and called a demonstration during the Berlinale. On 13 February 2009, the FAU together with leftist groups – especially the Mayday Alliance – held a demonstration in front of the Babylon, which mainstream media outlets covered.[15] However, management stuck to its confrontational course: with a cease and desist order, which was later rescinded, it tried to prevent the FAU from making any statements about the working conditions in the cinema, and a projectionist who had joined the FAU a short time earlier was laid off a few days before his probation period would have ended. The FAU reacted with a campaign to have the termination repealed. Leaflets informed the cinema's visitors about the situation and there was an international call for solidarity, which was signed by hundreds of people supporting the main demands of the workers on the employees' new blog.[16] The situation was resolved when the projectionist moved away from Berlin, but the situation in the cinema remained the same. The employees decided on a meeting to make their demands concrete and prepare for industrial action.

On the Offensive

On 6 May 2009 a first and last meeting between the managers and the FAU finally took place. The discussion was not very fruitful and ended with the union members announcing that they would soon present a draft of a company agreement. The managers at first left the door open to this proposal. Meanwhile, the employees had formulated their demands in a company agreement.[17] Aside from smaller improvements, the draft called for higher wages, shorter work hours, paid leave and various premiums, such as higher payment for extra hours, weekends and night shifts among others. Parts of the contract were taken from the industry-wide collective agreement between the

15 Freundeskreis Videoclips shot a first short film during this demonstration. Available at: http://archive.org/details/Babylon-teaser.

16 http://prekba.blogsport.de/.

17 FAU Berlin 2009a.

HDF[18] and ver.di. The contract also included a series of innovative points: a flat wage hierarchy; control over short-term contracts; time limits and payment for internships; a ban or at least co-determination on outsourcing; equality for married and unmarried employees; protection for union members of all unions; and finally the possibility to terminate the contract on short notice without conditions falling back below the level of the contract. At the beginning of June 2009, the FAU presented this draft – which 90 percent of the employees had worked on at one time or another – to the management and invited it to negotiations.

The management let the deadline for negotiations lapse and instead tried to stir up the employees against the FAU with an internal memo, which stated that the FAU was being observed by the German intelligence service and had taken part in the protest against the G8 in Heiligendamm 2007, amongst other things. These defamations did little to impress the employees – in fact more of them joined the FAU. The FAU and the Babylon local then announced that they would start industrial actions on 16 June 2009. The usual scenario – as practised by ver.di, for example – would be to call a 'warning strike' at a time when it does not hurt, i.e., so that film screenings would not have to be cancelled. The employees at the Babylon chose a different route. They wanted to put pressure on the Senate of Berlin and the governing Left Party, so they tried to amass as much solidarity from the public as possible. This pressure was to be increased successively. An informal network of leftist groups, filmmakers, cinema-goers and leftist union members formed to lend a hand in the struggle. A blog and mailing list informed people about current developments.

The FAU made sure that leaflets informing the public on the conflict were distributed in front of the cinema almost every day for a full month. Time and time again there were demonstrations and solidarity concerts in front of the cinema – by other groups as well, who combined their own cause with that of the employees.[19] In the meanwhile, the management tried to thin out and

18 The Hauptverband Deutscher Filmtheater e. V. (HDF) is an umbrella organisation and lobby group for cinemas in Germany. It represents some 650 companies according to its own figures.

19 The Mayday Alliance organised a video demonstration, for example, which put the industrial action in the context of precarity. A committee supporting a supermarket cashier who had been wrongfully dismissed – a case that caused a sensation throughout Germany – moved a scheduled demonstration to the Babylon to support the industrial action. When a demonstration was called to protest against a series of films promoting Colombia, activists not only addressed the human rights abuses and persecution of union members there but also the situation in the cinema.

restructure the workforce. Some of the rebellious part-timers were replaced with loyal full-time workers. The management created its own job description for this purpose: skilled employee for cinema operation. Two contracts were not renewed, two employees were pushed into signing termination agreements and one employee was quickly fired. Others were transferred into a newly created second company, so that the number of employees would be less than 21, which meant that the works council would lose some of its influence.[20]

The Boycott

After the management refused to enter negotiations at the beginning of July and the Senate and Left Party stated that they could not interfere with the cinema employees' collective bargaining, on 13 July 2009 the FAU called for a boycott of the cinema. A strike was also discussed as an option at the time, but the general assumption was that the management would argue that the strike was illegal and it would start firing employees and suing the FAU, driving the struggle into a defensive legal case. It was also questionable whether a strike could even succeed after the restructuring of the workforce and the massive employee turnaround. Moreover, the cinema could be run by two or three people for at least a while, and it was not entirely dependent on ticket sales because its operations are highly subsidised. As the number of visitors was already low because of the summer weather and the conflict, a strike would have actually helped the management save some excess labour costs. The management itself wanted to close one of the three screens over the summer.[21]

A boycott was chosen as it seemed like the best course of action in this situation. Even though a boycott would also have little economic effect, it did offer some advantages: the employees could not be fired and the public could play an active role in the labour dispute by not visiting the cinema. A boycott required more publicity than a strike. The struggle of the Babylon employees encountered more and more solidarity in Berlin. Stickers and posters in support were pasted throughout the city and in the leftist neighbourhood of Kreuzberg a huge billboard in support of the struggle in the cinema covered the windowless side wall of a 5-storey building. Letters calling attention to the situation in the cinema were sent to filmmakers, musicians and authors who

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20 The works council reacted here with a successful declaratory action, which proved that the companies were one and the same. However, this had no effect because the management was able to reduce the total number of employees to below 21 at the crucial moment.

21 See Gester 2010; FAU Betriebsgruppe Babylon 2009.

performed in the Babylon as well as cooperation partners and festival organisers who worked together with the Babylon. Some artists also approached the employees on their own and supported them by composing songs, performing in front of the cinema and penning appropriate comics. In the meantime, all of Berlin's important newspapers had reported about the conflict. Even Berlin's biggest tabloid, the *B.Z.*, which is actually quite conservative, reported favourably on the industrial action.

Slowly management began to lose its cool and its actions became harsher. Its behaviour became largely impulsive, without following any recognisable strategy. While the management had already made use from time to time of professional security guards to 'protect' some events from supposed 'attacks' by union members, now it even went a step further, calling the police to have activists kicked out of the cinema and to be charged with trespassing, after members of the Anarcho-Syndicalist Youth (ASJ) and the FAU interrupted an event to inform the audience about the situation in the cinema. After the FAU had started leafleting an open-air cinema run by the subsidiary Kino und Konzerte GmbH, Grossman attacked a cinema-goer who had dared to accept one of the leaflets. Within the cinema, the nervousness of the management and the theatre manager Jens Mikat became apparent when they tried to portray a works meeting as illegal and to prevent it. Grossman complained about attacks against his website and masses of black faxes. The likely source of this 'communication blockade' was an acceleration of the protest campaign through electronic means like emails and faxes. The FAU also developed a method to keep up the protest. This involved the federal FAU whereby different branches of FAU were called on to mobilise electronic protest over specific periods of time. In doing so they ensured that people constantly sent protest emails to the cinema management.

The turmoil in and around the Babylon seemed to force the Senate and Left Party to act. An open letter from the FAU to the Left Party, which again highlighted its responsibility in the matter, was answered by its vice chairman in Berlin, Wolfgang Albers, who again referred to the freedom of collective bargaining. 'Neither the Senate nor the party The Left [are] the Babylon cinema's operators and thus the employer'.[22] Although he stressed that he wanted to facilitate dialogue, it became obvious that the Left Party did not want to tackle this important issue in public and preferred to act behind the curtains. Similar remarks came from the mayor's office. During the conflict local branches of the Left Party got in touch with the employees in the Babylon and addressed the

22 Möllendorff 2009, p. 5.

case within the party. The intensification of the conflict made it harder for the party leadership to pretend not to be involved 'because the dark red part of the coalition [the Left Party] in particular', Lars Röhm – then secretary of the FAU Berlin – told the *Berliner Zeitung*, 'is brandishing demands for a €10 minimum wage for the upcoming federal elections. It is even using the cinema for events for this purpose'.[23] It must have become difficult to convince supporters of the necessity to subsidise and protect the cinema in light of what was happening. In August 2009, budget debates began in the Senate. The Babylon cinema and its funding were on the agenda.

The Intervention of ver.di

At the beginning of September 2009, ver.di appeared on the scene and offered to enter contract negotiations with the Babylon cinema.[24] Neither the employees nor the one person working in the cinema who admitted to being a ver.di member were informed about this. The FAU became suspicious that political manoeuvres aimed at pacifying the campaign were behind this intervention, because ver.di's vice-chairman in Berlin, Andreas Köhn, took charge of the situation instead of the official who was actually responsible. The FAU reacted immediately with an open letter:

> The fact that you have gotten in touch with the Babylon management in this situation without contacting the union which is involved in an industrial action first makes it look like this is an attempt to undermine this industrial action – a course of action normally reserved for company unions.[25]

Nevertheless, ver.di was offered talks about forming a bargaining union if it was 'seriously interested in the concerns of the Babylon employees'.[26] When the ver.di member in the cinema asked why he had not been informed, Köhn answered that another – to this day unidentified – member had asked for help and that he therefore had to act. There was speculation that the ominous ver.di member was an accountant loyal to the management, who was transferred from the subsidiary company just in time for the contract negotiations and

23 Schenk 2009.
24 See jW 2009.
25 FAU Berlin 2009b.
26 Ibid.

was the only employee to take part in these. Other than the aforementioned member, only two people attended a meeting to which Köhn invited the ver.di members. One had left ver.di long ago while the other had not worked in the Babylon for more than a year. Even these 'members' called for both unions to begin collective bargaining together.

A works meeting passed a similar resolution on 25 September 2009. This meeting took place during troubled times. The FAU had called for protest during the 'Left Film Night', a regular event organised by the Left Party in the Babylon cinema, which took place on this date. While Köhn was telling the works meeting inside the Babylon his version of events that a ver.di member had called him for help, members of the Left Party were distributing leaflets outside which attacked the FAU and proudly declared that they had arranged for the negotiations that were about to start. While Köhn had already lost considerable credibility by this point, he nevertheless promised the employees two things at the meeting: (i) he said that he was committed to bargaining between ver.di and the FAU, and (ii) that he would never sign a contract that undercut the terms of the industry-wide collective agreement. A meeting between the FAU's secretaries and Köhn actually took place at the beginning of October, but it did not result in anything other than vague promises on the part of ver.di.

Boycott Ban

Köhn had tried until this point to lay the blame on the Babylon's management and to argue that he was willing to negotiate with the FAU but that the managers wouldn't allow it. However, the labour courts came to his rescue on 7 October 2009 and helped him get rid of the FAU. Berlin's labour court accepted Babylon's motion for an interlocutory injunction[27] banning the FAU Berlin's boycott call. The court stated that the FAU Berlin was not capable of collective bargaining and thus could not call for industrial action.[28] It did not have sufficient social

27 A court decision with immediate effect until the case is definitely decided.

28 In Germany, whether a union can act legally in union – i.e. call for a strike or other industrial actions – depends on its capacity to conclude collective agreements. This isn't regulated by law, but is a concept derived from case law. Courts have developed the following criteria and terms which define the capacity to conclude collective agreements: A union must be freely formed, not subject to influence from the opposing side, independent and organised on a basis above individual company level. It must also recognise current law on

power for the area it claimed to organise and the representation which the FAU indisputably had within the cinema was not considered sufficient.[29]

The FAU considered the judgement absurd. Then Secretary Lars Röhm commented the decision as follows in a press release:

> The judgment of the capacity to conclude collective agreements is actually meant to ensure that employers face strong unions and that wage standards are not undermined by phantom unions. This principle is turned upside down here as an industrial action was undermined from the outside by ver.di.[30]

However, in light of the fact that one of the three judges was a full-time ver.di official, the verdict was not all too surprising to the FAU.[31] Even if the question of the FAU's capacity to conclude collective agreements was not definitively answered, ver.di seemed to think that its worries were over. Köhn used the momentum and announced after the court case that he wanted to commence collective bargaining with Babylon's employees.

The employees formulated a list of demands for ver.di, which reiterated the most important points in the FAU's draft company agreement (i.e., among other things, higher wages, no discrimination against different occupational groups, a ban of outsourcing and longer periods of notice).[32] This list of demands was signed by 15 of the 20 employees. The FAU announced that it would keep a critical eye on the contract negotiations. The FAU lost its patience after it became apparent that ver.di was not only going to negotiate the contract alone but also without considering the demands of the employees, and presumably to conditions lower than its own industry-wide collective agreement. The FAU

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collective agreements and must possess a measure of social power in terms of its organisational strength and its ability to exert pressure on its social counterpart.

29 See Arbeitsgericht 2009. Choosing an interlocutory injunction was an unusually clever move of the management. In such a case, the question of the capacity to conclude a collective agreement is only looked at briefly and is oriented to traditional case law. The court ignored the arguments of the FAU's lawyer regarding the changing union landscape and the erosion of classical industry-wide collective agreements, which formed the basis for the traditional definition of social power. In addition, such interlocutory injunctions could only be appealed once.

30 FAU Berlin 2009c.

31 In German labour courts, the judge is assisted by both a lay judge representing the employers' side and the employees' side. The ver.di official representing the employees sided with the Babylon management.

32 Employees of Babylon Cinema 2009.

publicly disassociated itself from the negotiations. In a press release, Benjamin Stange from the FAU union branch expressed his dissatisfaction with ver.di's unilateral action:

> Without the strongest union in the company, the negotiations are not in the least bit legitimate. It's a joke that a trade unionist who is a stranger to the company and industry is negotiating here, who does not know our problems or needs and who is propping himself atop phantom members. What takes the cake is that a bargaining committee hasn't even been formed and the employees haven't been seriously consulted. This reveals an autocratic concept of unionism that we find out of question. If ver.di is not even capable of involving the concerned parties in a small company, then this is an admission of failure in the sphere of union democracy.[33]

At the same time, a flame war began online in which the facts were hidden behind mounds of insinuations and which made the conflict look like a petty squabble between two unions. The basic premise of the accusations against the FAU was that it was controlled from the outside and that it was not working in the interest of the employees. There were even absurd rumours that the FAU was financed by an ominous West-Berlin culture mafia or even by the British secret service MI5. Köhn played a critical role here, using his union paper to defame the FAU. He wrote that the FAU's month-long leafleting campaign in front of the Babylon had been carried out by paid staff.[34] Köhn, who considered himself left-wing, had to face critical questions from his colleagues because of his actions. However, this didn't result in a change of course – at least not in this case.

Collective Agreement

In mid-December, ver.di announced that a collective agreement had been signed. As expected, it was below the level of the industry-wide collective agreement and most of the employees' demands were not included in the agreement. The door staff was to receive €7.74 per hour and projectionists €9.03 per hour, plus there would be a premium for work after midnight, for example. Although, this was a clear improvement from the times before the

33 FAU Berlin 2009d.

34 Ucb 2009, p. 11.

contract – the wages of those working at the door increased by 29 to 40 percent compared to the base salary and the projectionists saw their wages increase by 13 percent – the employees still earned a lot less than their colleagues in other cinemas where ver.di's industry-wide collective agreement applied.

The Babylon's company agreement only took the starting salary in the industry-wide collective agreement into account without including a pay scale for job tenure. Premiums were also lower and a Christmas bonus was to be negotiated at a later date exclusively for ver.di members. Questions regarding the new occupational groups (skilled employee for cinema operation) or the charges against activists during the industrial action, for example, were apparently not discussed during the negotiations.[35] The rumour that the increased wages would be paid for by increased funding from the Senate also turned out to be true. The contract will also only remain effective as long as these subsidies flow. The Left Party's speaker in Berlin's parliament for media policy, Gabriele Hiller, admitted frankly to a reporter what these additional 30,000 Euros were for: 'The additional funds are meant to pacify the location'.[36]

After months of conflict, it seemed like this compromise would work at least for some of the employees. The more or less passive part of the workforce, who worked at the door for the most part, profited disproportionately from the contract and seemed happy with the results. At least they weren't particularly willing to continue the struggle. The activists, who were mostly projectionists, had a difficult time summoning up enough energy to turn the tide after a long conflict where they not only had to defend themselves from attacks from the management but also from union members and supposedly left-wing politicians. However, the management persisted in adding fuel to the fire. As the collective agreement was only legally valid for ver.di members, the managers only wanted to apply it to non-ver.di members if they signed new employment contracts with worse conditions. This once again united the employees: They did not want to join ver.di after what had happened nor did they want to sign new contracts. They decided to take advantage of the pressure on the management – not to renege on their deal to pacify the cinema in exchange for more subsidies – and make this manoeuvre public. The management gave in and applied the collective agreements to all employees.

35 For a detailed comparison of the different collective agreements see Zattler 2010.

36 Asmuth 2009.

The Union Prohibition

The legal attacks against the FAU continued during all of this. On 11 December 2009, the FAU Berlin was even prohibited from calling itself a union by Berlin's regional court – once again at the behest of an interlocutory injunction filed by the Babylon's management. The decision was apparently the first of its kind in German history. The judge explained in his reason that the boycott case had proven that the FAU was not a union and that it was harming the Babylon cinema by suggesting it was one. This prohibition didn't only shock the FAU. The decision was reconfirmed at a later hearing and to make matters worse the appeal of the boycott ban was also lost by the FAU. During the boycott appeal case, the judge hastened to add that small unions were not accounted for in German law.[37]

The FAU started a campaign against the decision immediately. Within a week, it had organised a first demonstration 'Banned but not Bowed: Defend the Right to Unionise', which 300 people attended. The courts' decision led to outrage and unions from all over the world sent letters of solidarity. There were numerous demonstrations in front of German embassies and consulates over the next six months.[38] During the Berlinale in February, a second demonstration took place with 700 participants. Left-wing union members formed a 'Solidarity committee for union freedoms', which considered the attack against the FAU as an attack against the freedom of association. An 'Appeal to all union members and officials, to those who support the basic rights of workers to associate freely and independently in interest groups in defence of the freedom of association' called for solidarity with the FAU, 'even if one did not agree with the FAU's union or political orientation'.[39]

The management even wanted to see the FAU fined because it referred to itself as a union in its rules. The court agreed with this and fined the FAU. The tide only turned in June 2010. Berlin's regional court rescinded the interlocutory injunction and the FAU was allowed to call itself a union again. The court explained its decision by referring to the freedom of speech, not union freedom.

37 For copies of all of the court rulings see: http://www.fau.org/verbot/art_100106-234648.

38 For an overview of activities see: http://www.fau.org/verbot/en.

39 Solidarity Committee for Union Freedoms 2010.

Shift in the Conflict

While the FAU Berlin was forced to spend much of its energy on the campaign and the court cases during this phase, the FAU's Babylon workplace group was left with little room for manoeuvre after ver.di's intervention and the court decisions. The collective agreement changed little in the management behaviour; on the contrary, it felt that its autocratic actions had been validated.

The works council now became an important vehicle for the employees. Because of the protection it enjoyed and its right to co-determination, resistance could still be organised through it. Hence, the form of the conflict changed. A workplace guerrilla war began, which was carried out on legal terrain. Arbitrary boards at the labour courts were convened repeatedly – a very costly endeavour for the management – because the right to co-determination was not being respected. Various colleagues were also supported in their lawsuits against the management.

This situation continues to this day. After public criticism by the works council, ver.di was forced to renegotiate the collective agreement in March 2011, which resulted in small improvements for the staff. When they signed the collective agreement, ver.di and management had agreed to renegotiate by the end of 2010, which ver.di had apparently forgotten. In 2014 some employees built up pressure on ver.di to cancel the collective bargaining agreement at the company level in order to adjust to the better regional sectoral agreement. As of 31 December 2014, ver.di cancelled the agreement, but negotiations with Babylon cinemas have failed so far. A first token strike supported by FAU took place on 22 May 2015.

Epilogue

Compared to the goals set out at the beginning, the situation today is both positive and negative. The employees along with the FAU were able to improve the working conditions, but not as much as they would have liked and without their own contract. A positive aspect of the struggle was that the employees were able to force the management into applying the contract provisions to all the employees. The FAU still has members in the cinema and also still one works council member.[40] However, because of staff reductions and restructuring, the

40 In May 2010, there were new works council elections. Only FAU members were candidates for the position.

cinema no longer has an unruly base of employees capable of going on the offensive and pushing through demands. While some of the critical employees were replaced with loyal ones during the conflict, some employees – among them activists – left the cinema simply because they found better jobs. It is still too early to tell if the labour conflict taking place in autumn 2015 will trigger a new phase of struggle.

Regardless of this, the employees and the FAU have shown that it is possible to put pressure on managers in this sector – small companies with a large proportion of casual workers. This was mainly due to a dynamic that brought together organised and non-organised staff as well as other political, social and union groups – whereby everyone was treated as equals – and employed forms of action belonging to a syndicalist repertoire long forgotten in Germany. Especially the claim to self-organisation and permanent feedback on a grassroots level made this dynamic possible, even if this reached its limits in situations where there was an urgent need to act.

A union apparatus like ver.di, which hardly has any grassroots structures and whose approach involves installing works councils and ritualised collective bargaining, is incompetent in this respect – and apparently also lacks the will.[41] In view of the Babylon conflict, the author Gregor Zattler remarked:

> Small businesses, especially if they have a high number of casual part-timers, are not a worthwhile field of activity for big unions. The union dues are too low, the service fees are high and the influence to be gained too small. Employees that want to organise themselves are bothersome.[42]

Small businesses and casual work are common in Berlin's cinema industry. Few companies adhere to the industry-wide collective agreement and ver.di's influence is extremely small.[43] The Babylon case showed employees in this industry that they are unwelcome in conventional unions and that the cre-

41 A conflict in another cinema in Berlin, the Cubix, shows that a union apparatus like ver.di cannot simply adopt the actions and tactics that were used in the Babylon conflict in order to gain a foothold in this industry. Obviously inspired and spurred by the Babylon conflict, ver.di tried adding actions like video demonstrations to its traditional warning strike. A dynamic did not ensue. The struggle failed because the employees circumvented ver.di and agreed with the management on a raise.

42 Zattler 2010.

43 According to current case law, ver.di should also be disallowed the capacity to conclude collective agreements in the cinema industry. ver.di states that it has 2,000 members in the industry which employs 40,000 people (Zukunft Kino Marketing GmbH 2007).

ation of autonomous unions is hardly feasible at the moment. The freedom of association has thus been more or less abolished for this industry. Those in the industry who want to improve their working conditions are left with three options: creating a strategy based on the experience in the Babylon (i.e., force the traditional union apparatus into action by taking the initiative); illegal actions or low-level forms of protest, which do not count as industrial actions; or nevertheless creating new Babylons and changing the dominant, legal definition of a union bit by bit through the power of facts. In the future we will likely see all three options or mixtures of them. And the FAU will likely be involved.

A further positive aspect of the Babylon conflict is that a long overdue debate has begun among a wider public about a new labour movement and culture of unionism. This occurred because the FAU consciously presented itself as a union and laid claim to all of the corresponding rights. By doing so, the FAU naturally made itself vulnerable to legal attacks. This was part of a confrontation, which it considered inevitable:

> The legal attacks didn't come from nowhere and are taking place during a decisive phase of society's development. Strike and union laws in Germany have always been repressive, it was just never that obvious because class struggles were always pushed into controllable channels. During the crisis, the social conflicts and battles for a share of the wealth will intensify in Germany as well. Unions that are controlled in a democratic manner by their members and that allow room for dynamics are not easy to control by business and the state.[44]

A legal battle could only have been avoided if industrial action and the goal of signing a collective agreement had been achieved. This would not only have meant leaving matters in the hands of ver.di but also giving up standards for a union, including corresponding ideas – like the sovereignty of the employees.

Whether the FAU Berlin has the capacity to conclude collective agreements remains a question to be decided.[45] But this has not been detrimental to its development thus far. Since the Babylon conflict – and possibly because of it – its membership and the number of workplace groups have grown eight-

44 FAU Berlin 2010.

45 The FAU isn't the only union which has to or does live with this. The Union of Service Workers, a new small union in the health-care sector, has recently signed a company agreement with the UK S-H Service Gesellschaft mbH. Even though it only really has members in this one company in Kiel, it claims all of Schleswig-Holstein as its area of organisation.

fold, adding up to some 300 persons. The FAU took part in several workers' struggles in different sectors, especially regarding precarious labour conditions, and it was able to achieve some victories. In some cases the FAU could support individual workers regarding unjustified dismissals and unpaid wages. In other cases the FAU supports collective struggles, as recently at the Swedish School Berlin, where the whole teaching staff was fired, or the case of an internet mail-order where workers and the FAU achieved the negotiation of a company agreement. The best-known public labour conflicts in which the FAU was involved are the ones at the Green Party's Heinrich-Böll-Foundation and the huge 'Mall of Berlin'. In the first case FAU achieved permanent regular work contracts for some precarious contract workers and in the second case construction workers succeeded in claiming their unpaid wages. And this seems to be the guiding principle of the FAU at the moment: in addition to a further political confrontation, it continues to develop its own structures and struggles.[46] Without doubt, the Babylon cinema has served as an important case for autonomous organising and a renewed debate on unions.

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46 The FAU were able to score a small victory in December 2011. After the FAU filed a complaint, the ILO called on the German government to protect the rights of minority unions. In the case of the FAU, this meant it should have the right to publicly express its opinion, access the workplace of union members, and participate in meetings of the works council if it is representative at the level of the relevant enterprise (ILO 2011).

PART 3

Renewed Forms of Struggle and Workers' Self-Management

CHAPTER 11

New Workers' Struggles in Turkey since the 2000s: Possibilities and Limits

*Demet Şahende Dinler**

Introduction

Over the three decades that followed the military *coup d'état* of 1980, Turkish trade unions have been steadily losing membership or have been unable to recruit new members due to a number of factors: anti-democratic legal structures that make it difficult to unionise, aggressive strategies of employers to prevent unionisation, the commitment of union leaders to the status quo and decreasing confidence of workers in unions.[1] Official figures demonstrate a serious decline in membership.[2] While some existing unions have attempted to overcome these barriers by exploiting global networks of solidarity in organising the workers employed at the multinational companies,[3] a limited number of new unions have chosen to leave their comfort zone and organise subcontracted workers, with some level of success.[4]

Another path pursued since the 2000s was to set up associations and networks, which did not have the legal structures of unions and thus did not benefit from the instruments of collective bargaining agreements or legal strikes.

* The experience on which this paper is based owes a lot to workers, workers' leaders, activists and friends I have worked with and/or learnt from in various circumstances. Special thanks go to Alaattin Kesim, Ali Mendillioğlu, Aslı Odman, Aynur Aydemir, Ayşe Akalın, Bulut Aksoy, Cem Gök, Ezgi Bakçay, Feyyaz Yaman, Gülhan Benli, Halil Burak Öz, Jeremy Anderson, Kamil Dalga, Mac Urata, Molly Mc Grath, Mustafa Adnan Akyol, Özge Berber Agtaş, Sevgim Denizaltı, Theresa Conrow, Ulus Atayurt. I am also grateful to Michael G. Kraft and Dario Azzellini for their valuable comments and criticisms.

1 For an analysis of these factors see Lordoğlu 2003; Urhan 2005; Sazak 2006; Adaman, Buğra and İnsel 2009; Uçkan and Yıldırım 2010; Dinler 2012a.

2 According to the official statistics as published in the *Official Gazette* on 30 January 2016, only 1,514,053 workers out of 12,663,783 registered workers in Turkey are members of unions. This unionisation ratio corresponds to 11.96 percent of the entire formal labour force.

3 See Mc Grath and Dinler 2011.

4 The efforts of Dev Sağlık-İş and Enerji-Sen to organise subcontracted health and energy workers respectively are worth mentioning. See Dinler 2012b.

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They were easy to establish and flexible enough to reach out to a large number of individuals seeking support.[5] Despite being limited in scope, these organisations have had palpable success in solving the daily life problems of their members at the workplace, providing legal support and raising awareness among the public. They were led by political activists, independent activists or workers' leaders targeting a large segment of the unorganised labour force, which was not on the radar of traditional trade unions due to its informal status.[6]

This paper investigates a group of these workers' organisations within a period of 15 years (2000–15): The Waste Pickers' Association, Marine Employees' Solidarity Association, The Association of Construction Workers, the Union of Solidarity for Domestic Workers, Plaza Action Platform, Migrant Solidarity Network and Free Kazova Workers' Cooperative.[7] It examines their emergence, characteristic features, organising methods, strengths and weaknesses. The paper derives insights both from the author's own academic research and experience as a grassroots activist supporting workers' organisations (2007–14) and from secondary literature on the topic. Findings are based on ethnographic and archival data as well as on observations at meetings and demonstrations.[8]

Emergence and Development of New Workers' Organisations

The Waste Pickers' Association[9] was formally founded in 2004 by a small number of left-wing activists who had opened a warehouse in the capital city of Ankara. They spent their organising energies in squatter settlements to reach out

5 For an emerging literature on these initiatives, see Selçuk 2005; Taşkıran 2011; Baştürk, Tartanoğlu and Emirgil 2011; Çınar 2014; Koçak 2013.

6 In Turkey, one should be a formal worker registered to a formal company and to the social insurance system in order to be eligible to join a trade union.

7 The list is not exhaustive. It includes organisations that exhibit some common patterns in terms of innovative methods and capacity to mobilise various networks as well as an acknowledgement that traditional trade unions are unable to accommodate the needs and challenges presented by the contemporary composition of class, which is defined by hybridity and multiple modes of temporality and spatiality.

8 Ethnographic data rely on the author's doctoral fieldwork on waste pickers (2007–10), her experience as an organiser, trainer and supporter for the Association of Construction Workers (2012–13), the Union of Solidarity for Domestic Workers (2011–13) and Kazova Workers' Cooperative Initiative (2014–15).

9 The official name of the Association was Ankara Recycling Association. Yet it is popularly known as 'Waste Pickers' Association'.

to waste pickers of various profiles: Kurdish families who came to settle in Ankara as a result of forced migration after their village was evacuated[10] and who could only survive thanks to waste picking; Turkish scrap collectors who could not find any other work because of their previous criminal record; Romany (or gypsy) scrap collectors who had been doing this job for a long time, Turkish and Kurdish seasonal migrant workers who stayed in warehouses and alternated between different jobs. The modification of waste management regulations imposed by the European Union changed the dynamics of the informal recycling sector and a number of new investors entered the recycling market. These new companies, which received a license, colluded with municipal administrations in using the municipal police to force waste pickers to sell the waste paper and plastic at a price lower than the market price. The police were encouraged to employ violence when this was deemed necessary. When waste pickers, with the support of the Waste Pickers' Association, resisted the police to protect their customary right to collect waste, the conflict escalated. The Association published a magazine called *Katık* consisting of the workers' own articles and poems,[11] contributed to raising public awareness about waste pickers' problems and negotiated with the municipal administration to stop the violence against waste pickers. Although waste pickers still do not have any legal status and continue to work informally, the Association is their *de facto* representative organisation, which public authorities engage with when a problem occurs.

The origins of the Marine Employees' Solidarity Association (DADDER) go back to the opening of a contact office in 2006 in Pendik, İstanbul, by a small group of captains who decided to organise seafarers in Turkey. Conscious that the easiest way to reach out to seafarers was to offer training courses, a group of eleven activists used those courses to build trust and solidarity bonds with approximately 800 seafarers during a period of eight years. From 2007 onwards, DADDER was affiliated with the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) and started representing seafarers. Since strikes on Turkish commercial ships were legally forbidden, they astutely justified their actions with reference to the legally defined 'rightful termination of work contract'. By 2008, DADDER had signed ITF contracts[12] on 65 ships. This number reached 235 in

10 The displacement was the outcome of the state and military's strategy of fighting against Kurdish guerrilla forces. For research on the social consequences of displacement see Kurban, Yükseker, Çelik, Ünalan, Eker 2006; Yolaçan and İlhan 2010.

11 For an analysis of the pieces written by workers in *Katık*, see Dinler 2014.

12 ITF contracts are signed between a national maritime union affiliated with the ITF and a ship company. The contracts are signed on the ships which have flags of convenience. A flag of convenience means that a ship owner's ship operates under the flag of a country

2012.[13] Regarding the problem of the 'abandoned ships', which their bankrupt owners left at sea without making any payment to the workers, DADDER prosecuted lawsuits. When they won the court case, the workers' salaries would be paid with the money obtained from the sale of the ships by court order. That a founding member of DADDER was appointed as an ITF inspector added further momentum to the process of organising. ITF inspectors are like transnational brokers, who can detect the violation of labour rights on ships and then communicate with local trade unions, global union federations, public authorities and consulates in order to resolve the problems of seafarers. They can provide logistical and legal support for seafarers who face legal action in a foreign country.[14] DADDER used this as leverage to talk to seafarers in various ships as well as to ship owners.

Plaza Action Platform began its life in 2010, after the trade union that organised the employees of IBM lost its legal recognition as a representative of the workers, due to a number of legal and informal tactics used by the employer.[15] A group of activists who took part in this union campaign thought about alternative ways to organise white-collar employees[16] in the informatics, insurance and banking sectors. They built a flexible network called Plaza Action Platform. Members of the Platform organised special workshops to share their work experiences regarding stress, depression, anxiety, mobbing, competition, workload and performance. They offered legal consultation to those whose rights were violated at the workplace. They severely criticised the use of technology (Blackberry mobile phones for instance) as a means for supervisors to contact

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other than his or her native, in order to prevent the implementation of national labour laws. On those ships, ITF has the right to enforce its contracts.

13 ITF Bulletin, 27/2013, available at http://www.itfseafarers.org/files/publications/TUR/39846/SB2013_Turkish.pdf.

14 For an analysis of the role assumed by the ITF inspectors in the case of Australia in terms of building networks between the transnational union networks and the local union, see Fairborther (2013). For examples of fieldwork by inspectors, see http://www.itfglobal.org/en/transport-sectors/fisheries/in-focus/itf-inspectors-in-the-field/. For the job description of ITF inspectors, see https://www.rmt.org.uk/news/publications/itf-inspector-job-description/.

15 In Turkey, a union has to recruit 50-percent-plus-one employees at a workplace in order to get the right to sign a collective bargaining agreement. See Dinler 2012b.

16 Due to space constraints, I do not deal with the Association of Call Centre Workers. The founders of the Association reached out to their co-workers working in different shifts at their own workplace via stickers and informal chats in rest lounges. They kept their activities clandestine, yet represented the interests of their members vis-a-vis employers when necessary. For more details see Baştürk, Tartanoğlu and Emirgil 2011.

employees and force them to work outside of office hours.[17] They established an attractive public image, thanks to their witty slogans in mayday celebrations ('Turnstiles Divide, Public Squares Unite', 'Get Rid of Anti-Depressants, Join the Plaza Action Platform') and to their boldness in being the first independent organising body of white-collar workers.[18] Another important aspect of Plaza Action Platform was the willingness of its members to communicate and cooperate with the blue-collar workers. At least according to the leading activists, the conditions of labour and alienation united those who worked in fancy offices and those who worked on construction sites, mines and factories. The solidarity they expressed after the Soma mining accident is worth noting in this respect: When 301 miners died in a terrible mining accident in Soma, Kütahya on 13 May 2014, the Platform organised a major action to protest against the mining company Soma Holding, which was responsible for the accident. The demonstration took place in front of the headquarters of the company in İstanbul, Maslak, a very famous office area where many white-collar employees work.[19]

In December 2010, a group of workers employed in the construction of the highest skyscraper (called Sapphire) in the centre of İstanbul set up a picket line on the grounds that their salaries were not paid. The picket line attracted a large support base. Its success sparked interest among numerous construction workers, who organised similar protests with the help of the workers' leader in the Sapphire action. This process resulted in the official establishment of the Association of Construction Workers in İstanbul, in December 2012. The name of the Association was quickly made known in other cities, because workers who were introduced to and got support from the Association brought the news to their relatives and co-workers. Since construction workers were for the most part migrant workers, their mobility became an important means of expanding membership.[20] The organisers' routine included visiting construction sites in

17 Bora 2010.

18 Kepenek 2012.

19 Uzunoğlu 2014.

20 Construction workers have a mixed profile. They consist of Kurdish seasonal migrant workers coming from the Eastern and South-eastern regions and Turkish seasonal migrant workers from the Black Sea and Central Anatolian Regions. That the incumbent government has made the construction industry the leitmotif of economic growth since 2002 expanded the labour supply in the sector. Most construction workers work in small family teams who work under subcontractors. They live in villages when they do not work; when they work they live in poorly managed and unsafe residential units on the construction sites.

İstanbul to have face-to-face meetings with workers, the following up of work accidents and the preparation of special reports to raise awareness on health and safety issues. Local chapters of the association were formed in the cities of Adana, Samsun and Ankara. A specific method used by the association was the preparation of files on those construction companies that violated labour rights. The files included a detailed listing of the workers whose rights were violated and the steps to follow in case the company in question did not meet its obligations. The files were sent to contractors and their subcontractors who, according to labour law, were equally responsible for workers' entitlements. The method proved unexpectedly effective in persuading companies, which were afraid of tarnishing their reputation, to pay salaries and observe any other unfulfilled obligations. On 5 August 2014, a group of workers and activists established the Union of Construction Workers (İnşaat-İş), affiliated with DİSK (The Confederation of Progressive Trade Unions). Consequently, the association became inactive; at present, the organising of construction workers is carried out by the union.

The Union of Solidarity for Domestic Workers (EVİD-SEN) was founded on 15 June 2011 by a small group of domestic workers and their activist supporters. From 2009–11, this group provided material, legal and psychological support to several domestic workers who were subjected to abuse and violence by their employers; it assisted unemployed domestic workers in finding work; it raised awareness about the problems of domestic workers via public demonstrations; it ensured a good degree of media coverage via interviews and articles; it held house meetings to organise domestic workers in different neighbourhoods in İstanbul. On 22 September 2011, Bakırköy Third Labour Court issued a verdict in order to close down EVİD-SEN on the grounds that domestic workers were not legally defined as workers by the labour law. As a result of a very long and complex legal process, the Court of Appeals has decided, as of 7 July 2014, that domestic workers can establish their own union, on the basis of the new Law of Trade Unions and Collective Bargaining Agreement. Between June 2012 and February 2013, EVİD-SEN has organised weekly interactive training sessions to teach organising methods.[21] A personalised standard work contract (based on the principles of the ILO Convention on Domestic Workers) to be signed between the domestic workers and their employers was prepared as the outcome of this training programme. EVİD-SEN is not the only organisation

21 The innovative *Organising Manual* of the International Transport Workers' Federation was used during this training, with an adaptation of the teaching modules to the context of domestic workers.

operating in this field. IMECE Union of Domestic Workers was officially founded on 28 February 2014. Activists of the union are known for their persistence in the legal fights they pursue regarding labour accidents suffered by domestic workers and for their public campaign for the ratification of the ILO Convention by the Turkish government.

The Migrant Solidarity Network is not a workers' organisation per se, but it deserves special mention due to its capacity to mobilise resources and skills to support migrants, who are mostly blue collar workers employed in informal jobs (although some of them had white-collar jobs in their home countries). Many migrant workers from francophone African countries, Central Asia and most recently Syria work in small workshops, factories (textile, shoe, leather, bag, jeans) and in the construction industry; they work six days a week, 12 hours per day and are paid below the minimum wage. On 20 February 2010, Migrant Solidarity Network was set up in Istanbul and was supported by academics, activists, NGO employees, lawyers and health workers who worked formally or informally with or in relation to migrant workers. Although members of the network have had to help resolve the daily life problems of migrant workers in many crisis situations (e.g., in finding a doctor, assistance at the police station, translation, housing issues and violence), its essential objective was described as supporting the self-organisation of migrants in Turkey, a goal which is yet to be fulfilled in the Turkish context. Amongst the most significant activities of the network, one can cite a special campaign for justice in the case of an African migrant who was killed in police custody; a large meeting to improve migrants' access to health services, which brought together public institutions, NGOs and activists; as well as the opening of a solidarity kitchen in one of Istanbul's poorest neighbourhoods, populated by migrants.

Many of these new organisations had the opportunity to meet each other in different platforms. One such platform is worth mentioning, namely the Precariat Movement. This platform was established in January 2011, after the success of a series of workshops on the conditions of and organising strategies for precarious workers, which brought together activists and workers from various organisations.[22] Its members promoted a collective organisation of all precarious workers, going beyond the sectorial divisions imposed by trade union laws and the division of manual and intellectual labour.

22 See their website: https://guvencesizlerhareketi.wordpress.com.

Brokerage and Networks

Since organising depends on a relatively small number of individuals, understanding the specific role of those is necessary in grasping the nature of organising. In Turkey, one of the most important features of organisers is that they behave as brokers. By brokerage, I mean the 'linking of two or more currently unconnected social sites by a unit that mediates their relations with each other and/or with yet another site'.[23] In the context of organising, brokerage is closely related to problem-solving issues.[24] The first major problem is limited access to social insurance and health services among the workers. Waste pickers are entitled to limited health services under a package called 'General Health Insurance' provided by the state for those whose income is below one third of the minimum wage. Construction workers benefit from social insurance as long as their employers pay their premiums. Migrant workers only have access to emergency services but are deprived of basic health services. Domestic workers, most of whom work without any social insurance, are legally considered as co-dependents of their husbands. As long as their husbands have regular employment, they can benefit from health services. Workers may suffer from several occupational diseases, which remain unnoticed. Some may have family members who suffer from serious diseases (cancer or rare illnesses) whose medication may not always be covered by social insurance. Finding a doctor for a pregnant migrant worker, getting hold of an expensive medication to treat cancer, arranging medical checks in poor neighbourhoods, accompanying an illiterate worker whose child has a very rare disease requiring multiple consultations, may become necessary tasks for organisers.

Economic hardship constitutes another important matter. Networks of solidarity within the poor neighbourhoods (via kinship, neighbourly or ethnic ties) are not insignificant.[25] For instance, during marriages and funerals, a large amount of money is collected within the community of waste pickers to support families' wedding costs or compensate a loss in the family. Yet, empirical studies in poor neighbourhoods suggest that people find it increasingly difficult to get support from their relatives or neighbours when they go through financial difficulties. It is argued that poverty is becoming a destiny of isolation where everybody has to struggle and survive by his/her own means.[26] Recipro-

23 See Mc Adam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001, p. 142.

24 For an ethnographic analysis of the political brokers who act as problem-solvers for the urban poor in Argentina, see Auyero 2000.

25 See Erder 1996; Erdoğan et. al. 2011.

26 Şen 2011; Bora 2011.

city is thought to exist as long as individuals can provide mutual monetary or other benefits; in their absence, friendship bonds are suspended.[27] Poor families are eligible to apply for social aid, but the reception of aid depends on access to information networks and bureaucratic policies; even when resources are accessible, they may not be sufficient to guarantee survival.[28] In this situation, organisers are the ones who mobilise funds to buy school clothes for children or grant a scholarship to those who passed the university entrance exam, or who find homes and furniture for women who are subject to domestic violence. Many of the informal workers' organisations cannot collect regular membership fees, thus they have to find alternative ways to raise funds, such as organising solidarity events and requesting direct financial support from formal workers' organisations or other institutions.

Legal consultation is crucial for organisers to continue their activities. Work accidents, unfair dismissals and delays in salary payments are frequent. Although the Labour Law promulgated in 2003 provides employers with legally acceptable strategies to facilitate firing of workers and use informal and precarious types of labour,[29] it also provides tools for trade unions and organisers to fight against employers.[30] For instance, many organisations referred to Article 2 of the Labour Law, which holds the main employer liable for his/her subcontractors' workers, in order to prosecute lawsuits regarding the violation of the rights of subcontracted workers.[31] The activists, who organise domestic

27 Yaman 2013, pp. 183–9.

28 Types of social aid in Turkey include education (course materials, lunch, transport), health (payment of health insurance premiums for the poor who do not have social insurance), direct financial aid (monthly stipend for the disabled, dependent elderly, destitute, widowed women), basic needs (nutrition, coal for heating, bread, winter clothes). Its allocation has been coordinated by the Ministry of Family and Social Policy since 2011, with the Fund for Social Solidarity and Aid playing a key role in its provision. Social aid only accounted for 0.5 percent of GNP in 2002, but it increased to 1.5 percent in 2014 (Karanfil 2014). Apart from the general budget, local municipal governments distribute aid to their constituencies. According to 2014 figures, the health insurance premiums of 9.2 million poor families (those whose monthly income is below one-third of the minimum wage) are paid by the state, 285,000 widowed women get TL250 every month, 600,000 disabled individuals receive a monthly stipend. The budget of the Ministry is the sixth largest amongst all ministries (Semerci 2015). For a critical political economic analysis of the discourse of social aid and its role in governing the poor, see Yılmaz 2012.

29 For a critique of the Labour Law see Özdemir and Yücesan-Özdemir 2005.

30 For an analysis of how the Labour Law was used in the UPS campaign, see McGrath and Dinler 2011.

31 See Article 2 of the Labour Law, no. 4857: 'The principal employer shall be jointly liable

workers, supported the legal fight of families of domestic workers who got injured or died in work accidents.[32] Since many organisations do not have the financial means to hire lawyers, they rely on the support of volunteer legal aid offered by individual activists. In many cases, organisers represent workers vis-à-vis employers or public authorities: the Association of Construction Workers talks to employers to defend the rights of their members; the Waste Pickers' Association negotiates with municipal administrations to stop violence and other forms of discrimination against waste pickers. Therefore, the organiser is concomitantly an informal *mediator* and *negotiator* with employers and/or public institutions. Nonetheless, brokerage is based on a paradox. The more the role of the organiser as a broker gets consolidated, the more dependent the workers become on the organisers for their problems. When workload is not shared between the organisation's members, this dependency can be abused and the core organisers' energy may be exhausted.

Brokers cannot solve everything themselves; they are obliged to be connected to other individuals both in their inner and outer circles for energy, skills and resources. What do we understand by inner and outer circles? When we talk about an organisation, we observe first of all a core group of organisers. Those are workers' leaders, who are or used to be politically active (although this does not apply to the cases of the seafarers and the migrant solidarity network). As Roberts and Portes argue, 'social networks and previous experience of collective action provide an important basis for mobilisation'.[33] These individuals are prepared to undertake organising activity as part of their ideological/political commitment. This means that they sacrifice a great amount of time and energy in the organising work.

Around this core group, there is an 'inner' circle made up of workers who are respected members of their communities: experienced construction workers who work as small-scale subcontractors and know many young workers

with the subcontractor for the obligations ensuing from this Labour Act, from employment contracts of subcontractor's employees or from the collective agreement to which the subcontractor has been signatory'.

32 It is important to note the meticulous efforts of the Assembly of Workers' Health and Work Safety in giving public visibility to work accidents in Turkey. According to the figures published by the Assembly, at least 1,730 workers died in work crimes in various sectors, including construction, mining, agriculture and transport. See http://www.guvenlicalisma.org.

33 Roberts and Portes 2006, p. 75: 'People who had been or are still political activists, labour union leaders and long-time community organisers are at the core of neighbourhood movements. Past experience in a different type of organisation generates the leaders for new mobilisations'.

through their work experience or kinship ties or elderly waste pickers who are listened to by younger ones in their own community. They can convince workers to join the organisation. Sometimes such individuals have strong rhetorical skills, as in the case of Father Can. Father Can served prison time at a young age due to his involvement in a blood feud. When he was released, he opened a warehouse and worked with waste pickers for years, although by the time I got to know him he was barely walking due to a serious leg injury and was looked after by some waste picker families. The powerful rhetorical and poetic skills of Father Can made him exert influence both on young waste pickers and on the public when he was invited to conferences and solidarity events.[34]

Around this second inner circle there is a third one, consisting of radical and enthusiastic workers who are willing to take initiative, mobilise their friends and fulfil certain basic tasks. Some are attracted to the revolutionary ideas via the leaders, others enjoy the opportunity to go beyond the boundaries of their family and work life, encounter new people and get the attention of the public. Small achievements increase their confidence in the organising process, although some of them may drop out of the organising activity when they get married and assume family responsibilities.

In the 'outer' circles, there are, first of all, people who have direct and easy access to workers via neighbourhood community networks or the so-called village associations, whose members come from the same natal village. For instance, in Samsun, a city in the Black Sea region, the president of a village association helped organisers to reach out to many construction workers who spent their time in the coffee house run by the village association. In Istanbul, migrant construction workers frequented coffee houses near the construction sites where they worked and stayed. The people who ran these coffee houses facilitated the work of organisers by allowing them to organise their meetings and distribute their leaflets. Secondly, the outer circles consist of individuals (either independent or from other organisations, NGOs or political parties) who offer their professional skills at the service of the workers' organisation. They may be committed individuals who spend a great deal of time and energy in attending workers' meetings, organising training seminars and devising organising strategies and tactics, or they may be people who offer only their profes-

34 An extract from a poem written by Father Can (2007) runs as follows: 'They got hunters with prize to catch us, but then who would kiss the cats which are not cherished, who would nurture the dogs which are not loved. At that garbage a pigeon waits with hope, it never gets afraid of me, for all the wishes owned by pigeons are for me to come there. I am a waste picker, my voice is unheard. While I commit suicide for freedom at the shore of hopes, I would become nobody of everybody I know'.

sional expertise when required (lawyers for a court case, doctors for a medical issue, labour inspectors for advising on a health and safety issue, graphic designers for maintaining a website or designing a poster for a demonstration).

The role played by the outer circles resembles what Granovetter defines as the significance of 'weak ties' in society. According to Granovetter, it is weak ties, rather than strong ones, which link micro-scale social structures with large-scale ones. In the example of employment, close friends are likely to have access to the same information opportunities about employment, whereas acquaintances, to whom one is connected by weaker ties, are more likely to be in different circles, and will receive different types of valuable information regarding such opportunities.[35] In the case of organising, weak ties can be productive: an academic could arrange a seminar at his/her academic institution, where a waste pickers' magazine could be introduced and sold to participants; the activist of a political party could contact a member of the parliament who could then raise a parliamentary question about domestic workers; the participation of the leader of construction workers in official meetings on health and safety could introduce him to labour inspectors and workplace doctors who could offer their support. Organising requires numerous skills/resources and neither workers nor organisers are in a position to possess all of them, at least not in the absence of a professional organisation that can rely on sustainable revenue. Thus, weak ties operate as a means to bring such skills and resources into organising.[36]

Organising is not simply about mobilising networks to get support from outer circles. Organisers have to build strong emotional bonds with workers in order to ensure group coherence and the commitment of group members. It is to the building of those bonds that the present chapter now turns.

From Emotional Mentoring to Collective Repertoires

The personalised nature of class experience is partly derived from the fact that class does not refer simply to an economic status related to the ownership of revenue, assets or capital, but to an issue of denied respect and dignity. It is in comparing themselves with others that individuals internalise class

35 Granovetter 1983, p. 205.

36 The initial mobilisation of such networks starts with simple acquaintances. For instance, the leader of the waste pickers knew numerous trade unionists while he worked as a trade union organiser, the leader of construction workers knew many left-wing activists and journalists who gave their support to the Sapphire resistance.

hierarchies. Sayer,[37] Sennett and Cobb, and Newman[38] and Lamont[39] offer evidence to back such an argument and show how sentiments of shame, pride, envy, resentment, self-respect and dignity are key to understanding how class works and how social divisions are reinforced. As Sayer puts it: 'Sentiments such as pride, shame, envy, resentment, compassion and contempt are not just forms of "affect" but are evaluative judgments of how people are being treated as regards what they value, that is things they consider to affect their well-being. They are forms of emotional reason'.[40]

This aspect of class experience renders part of the organiser's work into a kind of emotional mentoring. The workers who feel weak and powerless vis-à-vis their employers are involved in a kind of 'cognitive therapy' in their intense interaction with the organisers.[41] Organisers visit workplaces, houses and neighbourhoods and engage in long conversations with workers. They work to replace fear with self-confidence, shame with pride, and envy with the positive energy to make changes. This is only possible if the organiser is an organic intellectual, in the Gramscian sense: 'the mode of being of the new intellectual can no longer consist in eloquence, which is an exterior and momentary mover of feelings and passions, but in active participation in practical life, as constructor, organiser, permanent persuader and not just simple orator'.[42] The dialogues between the organiser and the organised, the group talks and interactions help the dissemination of positive feelings, codes, words, behaviours. They include a strong element of morality, the purpose of which is to empower the worker: 'we are not merely a dust cloth' (domestic workers), 'we are the ones who build the whole world, which destroys us' (construction workers), 'our clothes may be dirty, but our hearts are cleaner than anyone else's' (waste pickers) – these are slogans produced by workers who claim their dignity from those who make them invisible. Once this collective discursive repertoire is constituted, workers use it as a resource while expressing their thoughts to others.

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37 Sayer 2005a.

38 For the relationship between emotions and class in the context of the urban working poor in the United States, see Newman 2000.

39 Lamont 2000 shows that, traditionally, the male members of the American working class have a very strong attachment to their jobs, because they consider work an affirmation of their masculinity and ability to serve as the breadwinner for the family.

40 Sayer 2005b.

41 For a deeper ethnographic analysis of the relationship between emotions and organising, see Dinler 2014.

42 Gramsci 1971, p. 10.

In terms of collective action types, interesting and promising results come from those organisations which combine unorthodox and familiar methods, turn constraints into opportunities and encourage hybridity in form and content. Simple replication of familiar methods, which are not adapted to a new context, may reproduce previous mistakes. As Tilly argues, the existing repertoire limits collective action, because people tend to act within familiar boundaries and miss opportunities, especially when they have vested interests in continuing the existing customs and habits.[43] What kind of methods does one observe in the Turkish context? McAdam and Rucht talk about individuals whose transatlantic travels and friendships linked student movements from Germany and the United States and brought in new tactics to Europe in the 1960s.[44] Similarly, the cases examined in this paper show that contact with and experience in global union federations by certain individuals was a factor behind the diffusion of new ideas and tactics. The connection between the ITF and DADDER, the use of a Turkish ITF inspector and ITF contracts were significant resources in organising a workforce of mixed nationalities. Seafarers' organisers regularly attended the ITF meetings and trainings and held meetings with the ITF officers in Turkey in order to discuss with them problems and potential solutions. In the Association of Construction Workers, I was the one who, as a former ITF employee, introduced employer research techniques and customer pressure as leverage to negotiate with construction companies. In the case of domestic workers, representatives from the International Research Network for Domestic Workers, International Network of Domestic Worker Unions and WIEGO (Women in Informal Employment, Globalising and Organising) followed the work of the unions, set up meetings with them and made suggestions with a view to supporting their organising work. Domestic workers' unions also joined the conference organised by the ILO Turkey Office on domestic workers.

Intellectual, professional and artistic skills have been important in increasing public visibility. Plaza Action Platform had competent researchers who organised and wrote outstanding reports regarding workplace conflicts and abuses. The detailed, analytical language of these reports illustrated the subtleties of employers' strategies and employees' responses and became a tool of empowerment for those white-collar workers who felt that they were not alone in their experiences of alienation, isolation and mobbing. The magazine *Katık*, published by waste pickers, was a unique publication, combining the pictures taken by professional photographers with poems and articles written

43 Auyero 2004.

44 See McAdam and Rucht 1993.

by the workers themselves. Different from the traditional workers' magazines, which aim at raising class consciousness from a top-down approach, *Katık* was a magazine that laid bare the intellectual energies and dreams of the workers themselves in a way similar to *L'Atelier*, published by Saint-Simonian intellectuals and workers in nineteenth-century France.[45]

Demand formulation is another complex task carried out by organisers. Well-structured mechanisms to enable the collective formulation of demands are absent. More significantly, workers are not trained in the political and organising skills necessary to translate their problems into a coherent programme. Still, it is possible to observe coherent demands made by the leading organisers and activists who have a clear understanding of the problems of workers: Domestic workers demand the ratification of ILO Convention No. 189 by the Turkish government, the enactment of a Domestic Workers' Law, the equal treatment of Turkish and migrant workers, and the inclusion of domestic workers in the social insurance system. Plaza Action Platform demands the reduction of working hours, the enjoyment of the right to associate, which is violated by employers, the prohibition of the use of controlling measures outside of working hours and an end to performance measurement and other forms of control that aim to create divisive competition in the workplace. Construction workers want better auditing of construction sites by labour inspectors, practical enforcement of health and safety measures at the workplace in order to prevent work accidents and deaths, and the regular payment of salaries. Waste pickers want to be recognised as recycling workers, reclaim their right to work freely in the streets and benefit from social insurance schemes. The Migrant Solidarity Network demands the removal of all frontiers in the world as a general principle, but on more issue-based campaigns they promote equal access to health and education services for migrant workers and the equal treatment of all migrants, regardless of their status.

These demands impel the government to initiate policy changes to improve the economic and social rights of workers. And yet they lack the wider aim of building an alternative form of economic and social life. A recent workers' initiative named Kazova has responded to this omission by preparing to build a cooperative. The following section of the chapter offers a close examination of this experiment.

45 See Rancière 1989.

Building an Alternative Form of Social and Economic Organisation: The Case of the Kazova Workers[46]

Kazova was a famous brand name in the Turkish textile sector; its 100 percent woollen products were sold both in the local and export markets. The salaries of the 94 workers employed at the Kazova factory located in Şişli neighbourhood of İstanbul had been unpaid for several months before the owner laid off the workers and abandoned the workplace. In January 2013, as an act of resistance to help reclaim their salaries, a group of workers occupied the abandoned factory. While they waited for the lawsuits concerning their salaries and severance payments to come to trial, they decided to make something out of the old machinery, the hundreds of rolls of yarn of various colours and the pieces of jumpers abandoned at the factory. One of them repaired the machinery and the workers started producing their own jumpers and selling them at a shop they rented in Şişli. From October 2014 onwards, production continued in a new location in Rami, in the Eyüp district. Four workers stayed in the production line and a new worker was hired to operate the linking machine. These five workers were supported by a group of solidarity volunteers: artists, academics and journalists who mobilised their 'weak ties' for Kazova and used their skills to help make the everyday functioning of the factory possible. The initiative took the name 'Free Kazova', and adopted the principles of the International Cooperative Union, although the formal structure of the cooperative has not yet been fully established.[47] In January 2015, the legal process regarding the Kazova machinery was concluded. The textile machine that was foreclosed by

46 Other occupations in which trade unions were involved are Greif and Tekel. The Greif occupation started on 10 February 2014, after the collective bargaining negotiations between the textile union Tekstil-Sen and the company administration Greif (the Turkish branch of a world industrial packaging company) were interrupted due to disagreements over the use of subcontractors in the factory. The occupation lasted two months and attracted a lot of public support, until the police evicted the factory. For details, see Erturan and Diyar 2014. The Tekel resistance started when the government forced tobacco workers to become contract workers with reduced salaries and entitlements in other public institutions, after the sale of Tekel factories to the British corporation American Tobacco. Workers from Tekel enterprises in various cities came to Ankara, occupied the largest public square, Kızılay, and stayed in tents for 78 days, with the support of trade unions, activists, left-wing groups, students and NGOs. Negotiations with the government did not prevent the transition to contract work, but delayed the process and improved, to a certain extent, the terms and conditions of the contracts. For details, see Bulut 2010, and Yılmaz 2011.

47 These principles are: 'voluntary and open membership, democratic member control,

court order and kept by the workers in the factory was officially awarded to the workers in exchange for their unpaid salaries. The workers had to put together a considerable amount of money in the space of one week in order to pay the tax for the transfer of ownership of the machines. An online campaign for solidarity with the Kazova workers was launched and hundreds of jumpers were sold to supporters in order to collect the amount necessary to pay the tax.

An objective assessment of the first year of collective work at Free Kazova shows promising results: Free Kazova members have managed to run the factory and regularly pay the rent, bills and the workers' salaries. They have set up sale points in various shops in İstanbul, Ankara, İzmir, Balıkesir and Diyarbakır. A Facebook account was created to facilitate direct communication with interested customers and supporters. Volunteers have monitored email communications, responding to customers who contact Free Kazova to request a catalogue with product pictures or to place orders for the selected jumpers and sweaters. During the spring and summer seasons, in the weekends, workers have attended open air markets and festivals wherever they were invited. Decisions are being taken collectively during weekly or bi-monthly meetings held by workers and their supporters. A transparent calculation of the production costs of jumpers and of their sale price and a report on how the online campaign money was spent were made public on the Facebook page as a sign of accountability to the customers. The long-term dream of Free Kazova is to recruit new members, create an egalitarian cooperative structure and produce 'common value' (instead of surplus value) to support the establishment of potential new workers' cooperatives, which can be part of a network.

These achievements can be ascribed to a very peculiar combination of factors: First, a large group of customers (mostly in white-collar employment) who were critical of the everyday organisation of capitalist social relations, yet were unable to locate any immediate alternative, have seen in Kazova a possibility for emancipation. The trade mark 'jumper without a master' has become a source of hope for them. In e-mail communications, customers have written humorously and have expressed their desire to engage with this this project and be a part of it. Second, thanks to the activists who had connections with cooperatives in different countries (Italy, France, Spain), Kazova has managed to attract an international audience. These dedicated individuals have been successful in mobilising such international connections not only so as to extend sales to European exhibitions and cooperatives, but also in order to

members' economic participation, autonomy and independence, education, training and information, cooperation among cooperatives, concern for community.'

introduce the foreign experience into a new, Turkish context. Third, the connection between the aesthetic and the political has been especially strong in Free Kazova.[48] A group of artists were invited to do an art workshop for the design of the summer collection of t-shirts, some of which quickly became popular. An Italian academic/activist has designed a number of jumpers, the design names of which were derived from workers' names. Musicians have played in solidarity evenings and a group has composed a special song for Kazova. Workers have enjoyed spending time with people with different skills and backgrounds. Fourth, the persistence and commitment of the workers during the resistance is worth mentioning: the workers have relocated the machinery to a new place, have resisted police attacks, have taken the risk of not getting paid for months and have had to cope with a variety of routine problems and crisis situations that arise in the management of a factory.

Despite these strengths, there is a number of challenges: Calculating for long-term planning, balancing between meeting immediate costs and anticipating future investment, dealing with the uncertainties in the market (such as fluctuating prices in raw materials), finding reliable suppliers, increasing sales points, keeping regular accounts, amending previous mistakes, discussing alternative means of credit, coordinating production, packaging, distribution and sales are all problems a cooperative has to deal with in a capitalist economy. Workers are not accustomed to these tasks; human errors and unexpected problems may have a discouraging effect. Furthermore, although decision-making is open and democratic, there are no well-established rules to resolve conflicts when issues regarding division of labour, fulfilment of responsibilities and gender inequalities emerge. Many questions are also open-ended: What will be the criteria for recruiting new members? What will be the relationship of Free Kazova with other market actors in the economy? Will financial credit be used to buy new machinery?

By a fortunate coincidence, the occupation of Kazova was taking place when the Gezi protests erupted. Although it would be too ambitious to make a very strong correlation between Gezi's influence and the general labour movement, one can still talk about some modest and visible effect of Gezi on Kazova and other worker groups. The last section of the chapter will deal with this effect.

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48 For a subtle analysis of the relationship between aesthetics and the political in the everyday life of the Kazova factory, by an academic/artist who is a volunteer at Free Kazova, see Bakçay 2015.

The Influence of the Gezi Protests

Starting as a modest action by a small group of activists to stop the demolition of a park in the centre of İstanbul at the end of May 2013, Gezi turned into a massive popular protest against the authoritarianism of the government that extended to dozens of cities all over Turkey. Participants included Kemalist nationalists, socialists, feminists, LGBT activists, environmentalists, anti-capitalist Muslims, students, white-collar professional groups and trade union members.[49] Gezi Park became a space of communal life for 15 days, until its violent eviction by the police. The resistance then spread to public parks, where neighbourhood assemblies were formed. The speed of information flow (through the use of social media, protesters warned each other about dangers and registered violations of rights), the speed of solidarity in the street (people who had never previously met offered each other support, first-aid facilities were organised in clandestine spaces), the speed of learning (people learnt how to build barricades, developed spatial tactics and used them) and the speed of skills mobilisation (medical/logistical/intellectual/artistic skills were widely shared) were unprecedented. Gezi replaced the usual unattractive collective action repertoire with a festive, joyful and exalting one. It spread the belief that people could reverse political inertia and create solidarity networks as an alternative to the individualistic relations of everyday life. More significantly, it was a moment in which historically divided actors encountered, got to know and supported each other: Kemalists vs. Islamists, nationalists vs. Kurdish groups, white-collar professionals living in middle class neighbourhoods vs. blue-collar working classes living in shanty towns, Alevis vs. Sunnis. The role of feminists and LGBT activists was also critical in questioning gender inequalities and the culture of masculinity. Such encounters continued, to a certain extent, in the post-Gezi period. That many groups joined the open air Ramadan dinners after Gezi was remarkable. The participation of Sunni anti-capitalist Muslims in demonstrations organised by Alevis to demand recognition was also a significant post-Gezi event.

A closer examination of the relationship between Gezi and working-class struggles produces mixed findings: First, although many trade union activists (especially in the public sector such as health and education) joined the Gezi movement, the call for strike action during Gezi was not very effective, because the trade union movement's capacity to mobilise its members

49 For an analysis of the relationship between social classes and the Gezi protests, see Tuğal 2013.

is low, as is its membership ratio. Second, protests spread to working-class neighbourhoods in Istanbul. Thousands of people in these areas organised demonstrations in their own neighbourhoods in the evenings.[50] Third, many white-collar employees who had not been politicised before Gezi joined the demonstrations. These individuals responded to the calls of Plaza Action Platform and other calls disseminated via social media to participate in one of the major actions accompanying Gezi: the NTV action. The aim of the action was to protest against the NTV channel, which did not show the extreme violence used by the police. The action was incredibly successful.[51] Fourth, some neighbourhood assemblies in the middle-class residential areas stood in solidarity with the resistance organised by workers. For instance, the Şişli neighbourhood assembly and the Caferağa solidarity group in the district of Kadıköy were significant supporters of Kazova: they visited the picket line in front of Kazova factory, mobilised their networks to buy Kazova jumpers after production started and contributed to the organisation of solidarity events.

Conclusion: Possibilities and Limits

In order to recapitulate and evaluate the narrative about workers' struggles, Saul Alinsky's *Rules for Radicals* may be a good reference point.[52] A major weakness in most of the organisations I have discussed in this paper can be illustrated with reference to the following golden rule proposed by Alinsky: Organisers should not do for the organised what people can do for themselves. Many organisers acknowledge that they are doing many things on behalf of the workers, to the extent that the organised come to depend on organisers for every small task and become unaccustomed to taking initiative or responsibility. A second weakness is the lack of training. Most organising work is unsystematic; lack of self-confidence and skills among the workers turn the core group of organisers into indispensable decision makers, contrary to the latter's own will. Most workers initially join the organisation to find a solution to their problems, but it is not easy to bridge the individual needs of workers with a broader programme of defence and reinforcement of collective rights. Alinsky sees no problem in workers prioritising their own issues. He would consider it a prob-

50 For an analysis of Gezi and working-class neighbourhoods, see Dinler 2013a; 2013b; 2015.

51 See İnce 2013.

52 Alinsky 1989.

lem if workers did not take responsibility for each other's issues as part of a common programme for struggle.

On the positive side, the Association of Construction Workers and the Association of Seafarers seem to have cleverly applied Alinsky's golden rule that 'the threat is usually more terrifying than the thing itself'.[53] They have shown to the employers that if they do not fulfil their obligations to their employees, workers are well prepared to tarnish their reputation, carry out a legal fight in court and mobilise solidarity networks. They have also shown the validity of another rule: 'wherever possible, go outside the experience of the enemy'.[54] They have caused confusion and fear on the side of the employers, who were not prepared to deal with novel tactics and tools.

The successful organisations are the ones that use a multiplicity of tactics and strategies and constantly seek for new pressure points to use as leverage against employers: the ones that do not underestimate the importance of small gains. Furthermore, the case of the Free Kazova workers has shown that building an alternative is a lengthy and cumbersome task. The utopia of a cooperative where members will work fewer hours, child care will be free and common value will be shared with new potential cooperatives cannot be reached without persistence, patience, long-term planning, problem-solving capacity, extensive knowledge about the economy and the self-reflexivity required to change everyday life (regarding gender equality and the fair division of labour).

As can be seen, although there is great potential to exploit in the emerging labour struggles in Turkey, none of them is strong enough to contribute to the building of a robust and organic labour movement. Some critics argue that the main problem lies in the fragmentary nature of the struggles and that a broader political project bringing together those initiatives is the answer to overcoming the weakness of the labour movement. I rather argue that the problem lies more in the nascent and fragile character of those partial struggles than in their immediate cooperation. If the parts are not solid and do not grow organically, the whole is condemned to remain weak too. Increasing the number of activist/supporters, mobilising a multiplicity of skills (legal, practical, strategic, logistical) via weak ties, making well-thought-out and flexible plans by setting specific benchmarks, enhancing the organising skills of workers by training, creating solid communication and solidarity networks, using strategically national and international legal frameworks – such methods can help to foster organising.

53 Alinsky 1989, p. 142.
54 Alinsky 1989, p. 131.

CHAPTER 12

Recovered Imaginaries: Workers' Self-Organisation and Radical Unionism in Indonesia

Felix Hauf

> Buruhberkuasa, rakyatsejahtera! (With the workers in power, the people will be prosperous!)[1]
>
> Group discussion with FSBKU members, February 2012

Strategies and practices of workers and their organisations depend on how they conceive of themselves and the world around them. Their ideas, discourses and imaginaries are inseparably linked to the actual material practices from which they emerge and which they inform. Transformative struggles against neoliberal capitalism therefore hinge on the conviction that indeed 'Another World Is Possible'. Limiting the scope of imaginable alternatives – most radically in Thatcher's 'There Is No Alternative' mantra – is a major technique to maintain the social domination of capital. Widening that scope and recovering silenced imaginaries and radical alternatives are thus critically important for keeping possible post-capitalist futures open.

In Indonesia, these possible futures remained closed for over 30 years under Suharto's military dictatorship. Once the country with the largest communist mass movement outside the Soviet Union and China, hundreds of thousands and perhaps even more than a million alleged communists were massacred in an orchestrated mass murder by the military and Islamic militias after Suharto took power in the 1965 *coup d'état*, which took place with the support of Western powers.[2] The official state ideology of *Pancasila* presented Indonesian society as an organic state without class conflict, a harmonious family with

1 Group discussion with FSBKU (*Federasi Serikat Buruh Karya Utama*, Federation of Main Plant Labour Unions) members, February 2012.

2 Roosa 2006, p. 194; Ford 2009, p. 30; La Botz 2001, p. 114.

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a benevolent dictator at its head.[3] Anti-communism was the foundation of *Pancasila* and the legitimation for the 1965–6 democide. Applied to the field of labour as a doctrine known as Pancasila Industrial Relations, this ideology outlawed strikes and industrial disputes, deeming them unnecessary within the harmonious family of Indonesian society. Dan La Botz labels the Pancasila Industrial Relations discourse 'a fascist theory of industrial relations'.[4]

While a popular mass movement removed Suharto from power in 1998, the old state and military elites retain strong influence in Indonesia's political landscape. Anti-communism continues to be a cornerstone of *Pancasila*, which continues to be a hegemonic discourse in Indonesia. In Cultural Political Economy (CPE) terms, such discourses can be conceptualised as 'economic imaginaries' – i.e., 'the semiotic moment[s] of a network of social practices in a given social field, institutional order, or wider social formation'.[5] *Pancasila* was Indonesia's hegemonic economic imaginary, glossing over the antagonism between capital and labour and processing the contradictions based in the social forms of capitalism. It partly continues to play that role.

It is, however, not without contestation and competition with other economic imaginaries in circulation. *Reformasi*'s democratic opening has created new discursive spaces enabling the articulation of various ideas, discourses and imaginaries informing very different, sometimes conflicting labour strategies and practices – from authoritarian, 'hegemonic' imaginaries related to *Pancasila*, to more progressive, 'sub-hegemonic' imaginaries modelled around social-democratic ideas, to radical 'counter-hegemonic' imaginaries of workers' self-organisation and workers' control.[6] CPE conceptualises the evolution of and struggle between economic imaginaries in terms of 'variation' (proliferation of competing imaginaries), 'selection' (based on structural, discursive, agential and technological selectivities) and 'retention' (materialisation, institutionalisation) of particular discourses at the expense of filtering out or marginalising others.[7]

CPE is a novel paradigm that puts the interplay between discursive or semiotic and material or structural dimensions of the social in the centre of analysis, in terms of 'economic imaginaries' and their 'correspondence to real mater-

3 Ford 2009, p. 31. *Pancasila* stands for the five constitutional principles of monotheism, humanism, nationalism, democracy and social welfare, introduced by Sukarno and co-opted by Suharto.

4 La Botz 2001, p. 123.

5 Jessop and Oosterlynck 2008, pp. 1157–8.

6 Sum 2006, p. 21.

7 Sum and Jessop 2013, p. 403.

ial interdependencies in the actually existing economy'.[8] An economic imaginary is 'a semiotic ensemble (or meaning system) without tightly defined boundaries that frames individual subjects' lived experience of an inordinately complex world and/or guides collective calculation about that world'.[9] Economic imaginaries are conceptualised as either hegemonic – forming the semiotic moments of hegemonic projects (e.g., the discourse of *Pancasila* within the hegemonic state project of Suharto's regime), sub-hegemonic – complementing hegemonic codes by extending their meaning through limited inclusion of alternative or critical discourses (e.g., the limited transformation of the state ideology through incorporation of democratic values) or counter-hegemonic – motivating and mobilising resistance (e.g., class-based discourses radically challenging the status quo). Whereas sub-hegemonic imaginaries 'may strengthen the overall consensus around the hegemonic project',[10] counter-hegemonic imaginaries can be defined as those which contribute to the articulation of a counter-hegemonic project that cannot easily be subsumed and absorbed into the hegemonic project.

Workers' self-organisation and workers' control are such counter-hegemonic imaginaries, which is why they remain suppressed not only by political and economic elites but also by bureaucratic trade unions and social-democratic parties throughout the world. CPE conceives of them as 'recovered imaginaries'[11] that may have had greater currency in other historical times, but re-emerge in the context of the ongoing global crisis of neoliberal capitalism as counter-hegemonic movements seek alternative paths of social development beyond what is discursively constructed as being without any alternative.

In this chapter, I analyse the re-emergence of such radical labour imaginaries in Indonesia from a CPE perspective. Elsewhere, Claes Belfrage and I have argued that in order to study economic imaginaries in both their semiotic and structural dimensions, it is necessary to conduct ethnographic fieldwork: to venture out into the specific contexts of people's everyday lives and analyse how economic imaginaries become actually relevant in everyday practice. We have suggested Critical Grounded Theory (CGT) as a method for CPE research as well as other approaches based on critical realism.[12]

Indonesia's labour movement has been reignited since a popular mass movement ousted Suharto in 1998 in the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis.

8 Jessop and Sum 2012, p. 87.
9 Sum and Jessop 2013, p. 165.
10 Sum 2006, p. 21.
11 Sum and Jessop 2013, p. 424.
12 Belfrage and Hauf 2015.

Newly emerging, genuinely independent and democratic trade unions are now competing with old authoritarian state unions over members and influence. The resulting trade union landscape is extremely diverse and fragmented. It ranges from employer-dominated or state-led 'yellow unions', to reformed or progressive unions modelling themselves around social-democratic imaginaries, to radical unions championing explicitly anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist goals and radical, militant strategies.

Drawing on qualitative fieldwork conducted between March 2011 and February 2012, with follow-up interviews conducted in March 2013,[13] this chapter analyses the emergence of the newly established National Union Confederation (KSN) from a CPE perspective. KSN has emerged as tensions and conflicts within the Congress of the Indonesian Labour Union Alliance (KASBI), until then the most radical confederation of Indonesia's fragmented trade union landscape, escalated over the future of the organisation, and caused a number of federations to split off from KASBI and form KSN. While KASBI is now set on a path of institutionalisation and integration into Indonesia's industrial relations system, KSN holds on to a specifically Indonesian version of 'social movement unionism'[14] prioritising workers' self-organisation and grassroots activism.

This chapter takes the factory occupation at PT Istana (2007–8) as an entry point into the analysis of economic imaginaries of workers' self-organisation and workers' control in Indonesia. It looks at how the radical imaginary of workers' control emerged after Indonesian independence, survived violent suppression under Suharto through clandestinity, was recovered after 1998 and became rearticulated with the more recent and more transnational imaginary of alternative 'solidarity economies' beyond capitalism. It also looks at how KSN seeks to link urban struggles to rural struggles such as occupied plantations through the larger Indonesian People's Movements Confederation (KPRI), bringing together labour unions, peasants' and fishermen's organisations as well as women's and indigenous people's movements.

The Factory Occupation at PT Istana

In 2007, the owner of the garment factory PT Istana in Northern Jakarta declared bankruptcy and announced the closure of the factory. This is very com-

13 The fieldwork was conducted as part of my PhD research. This chapter draws heavily on my thesis.

14 Waterman 2004.

mon in Indonesia's garment industry and usually it is a strategy to undermine the power of organised workers and cut labour costs. For example, the factory may be closed for several weeks or months, only to re-open under a new name with new workers who can be paid less as they are less senior, are hired as contract instead of permanent workers, and/or are not unionised. Indonesian labour law requires employers to provide severance pay in cases of factory closures. At PT Istana, however, management refused to provide severance pay, which is also very common in such cases. Whereas the usual way to seek redress would be to file a lengthy and costly law suit at the labour court, workers at PT Istana developed a double strategy of following the legal procedures while at the same time occupying the factory and continuing garment production under workers' control.

There were about 1,000 workers employed at that garment factory, the vast majority of them women. The workplace union SBKU-Istana, member union of FSBKU (*Federasi Serikat Buruh Karya Utama* – Federation of Main Plant Labour Unions) had organised hundreds of them as their members. FSBKU was affiliated with KASBI at that time; today it is a member of KSN. In order to pressure the employer to provide severance pay according to the law, initially they organised picketing actions. When these failed to take effect, the workers radicalised and decided spontaneously to occupy the factory. FSBKU members assisted and advised the workers, since they already had experience with factory occupations in other industries. The workers agreed not to loot the factory, not to take anything or to sell the machines to compensate for withheld severance pay. Instead, they decided to guard the machines and continue production under workers' control in order to raise money and make a living during the law suit. They sought solidarity and support from Indonesian labour NGOs such as PRP (*Perhimpunan Rakyat Pekerja* – Working People's Alliance) and LBH Jakarta (*Lembaga Bantuan Hukum* – Legal Aid Institute). Jemi, a PRP activist, explained that they 'came with discussions and played some documentaries from Latin America that show that there is an experience where the factories that were left behind by the owners can be recuperated and run again as a factory occupation'.[15]

A workers' cooperative was set up that would take control of production at PT Istana. At the height of the occupation, there were hundreds of workers living, discussing, working and organising in the factory. They decided to set up office in the factory and turn it into their homes. They organised job rotation so as to reduce the alienation of dull tasks and maximise opportunities to learn

15 Interview with Jemi (PRP), December 2011.

new skills and develop new capacities. They built a public kitchen so they could share food. They organised their own child day care, because most of the workers were female and many had children. They produced t-shirts with the slogan '100 percent cooperatively produced' and they connected themselves to 'No Chains', a transnational network of cooperatively operated factories producing sweat-free clothing in Thailand, Argentina and other countries. 'No Chains' is marketing these products as 'the first global clothing brand free of slave labour'.[16]

Industrial production, democratic self-organisation, political self-education and social reproduction were all united under the factory roof of PT Istana, at least for a limited period of time.

Different problems and challenges made it hard and eventually impossible to sustain the experiment at PT Istana. Although the workers won several legal victories in front of the labour court – e.g., the owner was sentenced to one year of prison for not providing severance pay and for bankruptcy fraud – the bankruptcy proceedings also disadvantaged the workers legally. They require that the value of all the assets of the factory be assessed by a third party and that the assets then be auctioned. The money raised will then be used first to service bank debts and second to pay other creditors, including workers' severance pay. During the legal dispute, family members of the former owner tried to intimidate the occupying workers, sometimes using brute force:

> Several times, they tried to evict the occupiers, those hundreds of FSBKU members. They called in the police and they hired thugs and criminals to force the workers out of the factory, but somehow uniquely, those female workers were able to fight back, so they were able to get rid of the thugs.[17]

Nevertheless, a combination of intimidation, economic hardship and other difficulties pushed many workers to accept subsequent deals with the trustee and look for new jobs. About 300 of them continued the occupation running the factory as a cooperative. They continued producing garments and clothing for the domestic market, while international buyers like Adidas and St. Oliver cancelled their contracts. Financial and technical difficulties made it hard for the cooperative to maintain production on a scale that could sustain all workers. For example, electricity was a problem. The area of North Jakarta where PT Istana is located is often flooded and electricity cannot always be

16 www.nochains.org.

17 Interview with Jemi (PRP), December 2011.

provided. For a while, production was run using diesel engines, but that was not sustainable. One of the lessons of this experience was thus that an isolated factory occupation could not last long if it was not linked up to other struggles in other sectors. PRP activists tried to connect the workers at PT Istana with those in the state-owned electricity company who were resisting privatisation at that time, in order to supply the factory with power. This attempt failed, but later on the idea of linking up private sector workers with those from the strategically important state-owned enterprises would gain currency (see below).

Support from KASBI was also not as intense as the workers at PT Istana had hoped for. Then, a flood in 2008 destroyed most of the machinery and forced the cooperative to leave the factory premises and continue production on a smaller scale from their private homes. Out of the 40 workers who moved production to their homes, at the time of research only 15 still continued producing garments as a small home-based garment cooperative. Jemi argued that, although cooperative production under workers' control was financially unstable and wages could only be paid irregularly, the empowering experience of collective self-organisation and autonomous production was 'like an immaterial substitute'[18] for material gains.

Although the factory occupation at PT Istana can hardly be called a success story of industrial production under workers' control, it clearly shows that there are radical, counter-hegemonic alternatives envisioned and enacted by Indonesian garment workers and their unions. These alternative imaginaries, strategies and practices tend to be silenced in academic discourses about labour politics in Indonesia today. Although marginalised and however weak, these radical approaches are far from irrelevant since they provide a repertoire of ideas and experiences that counter-hegemonic projects can draw on. Who are the actors producing and circulating the imaginaries underpinning these approaches? Where do they come from? What is their historical trajectory and present re-articulation? How are they linked to other counter-hegemonic imaginaries on other scales or in other sites?

Tracing the Emergence of KSN

Under Suharto, SPSI (*Serikat Pekerja Seluruh Indonesia*, All-Indonesia Trade Union) was the only legal labour organisation, representing a form of 'authorit-

18 Interview with Jemi (PRP), December 2011.

arian state unionism'[19] and arguably 'a fascist labour front constructed to control workers, not represent them'.[20] In 1995, when Suharto was still in power but under domestic and international pressure, a small group of workers at an electronics factory in Tangerang decided to take advantage of a limited labour reform allowing for the formation of enterprise unions where there is no SPSI unit. Despite the employer's anti-union repression, the small group continued to meet as a discussion group that would become the embryo of the independent trade union federation FSBKU. This embryo union expanded quickly to other factories in Tangerang. By 1997, they had some 200 members and decided to hold the first congress in the same year. In 1999, after the fall of Suharto, they formally transformed their discussion group into an enterprise union at the electronics factory. By 2000, there were already 18,000 industrial workers from Tangerang connected by an independent enterprise union forum. In 2001, they held their second congress where they officially founded FSBKU as a city-level trade union federation. FSBKU was heavily involved in the Action Committee of Independent Labour Unions (*Komite Aksi Serikat Buruh Independen*, KASBI), founded in 2003, and one of the founding members of KASBI when it was transformed into a national trade union confederation in 2004.[21]

FSBKU activists who were also part of KASBI's national leadership reported that there were three main lessons learned from the KASBI experience: ownership, elitism and bureaucratism. First, while KASBI initially was dependent on external support by labour NGOs and intellectuals, they increasingly sought to replace 'outsiders' from NGOs with workers. Sastro explained that 'there is mistrust towards the NGOs from the labour unions',[22] because their reliance on foreign funding also makes them less independent with regard to their political agenda. As genuine labour unions grow stronger, there is less need for NGOs as substitute labour unions. Ownership of the unions should be enacted by the workers rather than by 'outsiders' from labour NGOs.[23] This partly explains the scepticism of radical labour activists towards transnational labour rights campaigns that are perceived as driven by NGOs. Second, even in progressive unions putting strong emphasis on intra-union democracy, elitism has been a problem. At the second KASBI congress in 2008, parts of the leadership were re-elected for a second term although the members had decided that they

19 Lambert 1997.

20 La Botz 2001, p. 123.

21 KASBI, while retaining the well-known abbreviation, changed its name to *Kongres Aliansi Serikat Buruh Indonesia* (Congress of the Indonesian Labour Union Alliance).

22 Interview with Sastro (FSBKU, KPRI), January 2012.

23 Ford 2009.

should be replaced in order to prevent the forms of elitism that were common in the bureaucratic SPSI unions. A dispute about the leadership evolved that displayed both growing distance between rank-and-file members and leaders and growing animosities among leaders where personal conflicts and political differences are not always easily discerned. Third, KASBI's move towards more official recognition and integration into Indonesia's industrial relations system as well as participation in private multi-stakeholder initiatives and NGO campaigns was perceived by some member federations very critically. For them, this development drives KASBI away from the militant strategies of mass demonstrations and industrial actions that had served them well in the past. The growing amount of red tape and bureaucratism associated with these formal and informal structures, they argue, absorbs important resources and thus diminishes, rather than strengthens, their capacities for workers' self-organisation and the construction of an autonomous labour organisation from below.[24] It was this development of institutionalisation and integration that was seen by some member federations of KASBI as moving the confederation away from their power base, as a form of de-radicalisation and co-optation.

Tensions within KASBI grew until the third congress in 2010. Then there was a split in the confederation. In addition to the ongoing quarrel over the leadership, there was a dispute over the direction KASBI would take over the next years. One of the issues was the question of whether or not to integrate workers from state-owned enterprises. In 2008, a coalition of independent trade unions such as KASBI, labour NGOs such as PRP and public sector unions was formed under the name National Solidarity Committee against Privatisation and Union Busting (*Komite Solidaritas Nasional melawan Privatisasi dan Union Busting*, KSN). In this coalition, cross-sectoral collaboration between private and public sector unions was good. Within KASBI, suggestions were made to integrate state-owned enterprise unions into the confederation or form a new one together with them. However, 'this idea was kind of rejected or wasn't very much welcomed in KASBI, so in the last congress there was some sort of dispute about what will be the direction of KASBI'.[25]

Ultimately, the combination of disputes over the leadership, over the participation in NGO campaigns and over the state-owned enterprises led to the division of KASBI at the third congress in 2010. Out of the 20 regional federations affiliated with KASBI, six moved out of the organisation to form the new confederation KSN (*Konfederasi Serikat Nasional* – National Union Confeder-

24 Group discussion with FSBKU members, February 2012.

25 Interview with Jemi (PRP), December 2011.

ation), FSBKU among them. This number grew to 11 out of 20 when KSN was officially launched on 11 November 2011 in Bandung, although some federations are claimed by both KASBI and KSN, since not all of their member unions joined the new confederation. As with KASBI in the beginning, the founding members of KSN chose to change the name but keep the abbreviation that was already well known. Most of these 11 federations have their main membership base in the garment industry, some in other light manufacturing industries such as electronics, and some in the plantation sector. The federations, however, are not organised sectorally but regionally. Two union federations from state-owned enterprises also joined KSN. The involvement of unions and workers from state-owned and privatised enterprises and plantations also means that the geographical reach of KSN is much greater in comparison with private sector industrial unions. While KASBI is mostly concentrated in the industrial and urban regions of Java, KSN also covers the plantations of North Sumatra and South Sulawesi: 'That is a signal of a new frontier or a new base for the trade unions in relation to the capital flow that goes more intensively to Eastern parts of Indonesia'[26] as resource extraction and agribusiness, especially the palm oil industry, expand.

KPRI – The Indonesian People's Movement Confederation

Workers' capabilities for self-organisation and autonomous action figure prominently within KSN's strategies, given more weight than incremental improvements of working conditions implemented from above. It is thus not surprising that factory occupations such as the one at PT Istana present to them unique opportunities to develop such capabilities. The case of PT Istana was not the first occupation of a garment factory on Java, but it was the one that was the best politically organised, assisted by the union federation FSBKU and the NGOs PRP and LBH. Interviewees reported several other factory occupations in the greater Jakarta area, all of which had failed after a certain period of time for similar reasons as PT Istana. KSN leaders, therefore, began to think systematically about the factors responsible for the success or failure of recuperated factories. The main lesson drawn from the PT Istana experience was that factory occupations have no chance of survival if they remain isolated from other struggles in other factories and sectors. The idea to link up public and private sector workers, to overcome old divisions among Indonesian wage labourers, became one

26 Interview with Jemi (PRP), December 2011.

of the two major strategic innovations of KSN vis-à-vis KASBI. The second, perhaps more important innovation relates to the idea of linking urban and rural struggles and therefore connecting workers', peasants' and fishermen's organisations as well as women's and indigenous people's movements.

The newly established radical union confederation KSN is part of a larger multi-sector alliance of Indonesian social movements, which was designed for this purpose. The Indonesian People's Movement Confederation (*Konfederasi Pergerakan Rakyat Indonesia*, KPRI) was founded in 2003 by peasants' and plantation workers' unions as well as KSN labour unions and some progressive NGOs such as women's and indigenous people's organisations and environmental groups. The main economic imaginary informing the strategies and activities of KPRI relates to re-organising the production, distribution and consumption of goods beyond the capitalist market by building alternative 'closed markets' between recuperated factories and occupied plantations or reclaimed landholdings. Since 1998, peasants' organisations had already begun to reclaim land that had been given to private companies, government officials or military commanders despite being communal land according to customary law.

In Indonesia, new rounds of enclosures have dispossessed large numbers of the rural population of access to land, which was subsequently leased out or sold to agribusiness companies growing cash crops such as palm oil for the global market. The urban labour markets, however, do not have the capacity to absorb these 'surplus populations'[27] and provide them with livelihoods through industrial employment. Reclaiming dispossessed land and cultivating it cooperatively, therefore, has become a central strategy of the rural poor, taken up and systematically promoted by KPRI.

The Economic Imaginary of the Alternative Economy

According to KPRI activists, neither factory occupations nor agricultural cooperatives are a novelty in Indonesia, but 'the experiment to build a closed market between workers and peasants is a new one. It is an alternative economy, because it is not involved in the liberal markets'.[28] The overall discourse of KPRI – its main economic imaginary – connects to the idea of an 'alternative economy'. The long-term strategic orientation is improving the livelihoods of working people by reclaiming the means for them to sustain their own lives,

27 Li 2009.

28 Interview with Tommy (PRP), January 2012.

i.e., reclaiming the means of production and social reproduction. What in this case does 'alternative economy' mean at the discursive level?

The idea is that agricultural cooperatives cultivating reclaimed land produce goods such as rice, coffee or rubber while industrial cooperatives working in recuperated factories produce goods such as garments and shoes. Ideally, this would include industrial products necessary for farming like chemical fertilisers or agricultural machinery. Peasants are encouraged to process their raw materials into semi-manufactured products, adding more value to their products and absorbing more labour power, for example pre-processing rubber or roasting coffee. Workers and peasants then exchange these goods on their own 'closed markets', thereby bypassing the capitalist markets, cutting the price for consumers while raising the income of producers. The above-mentioned selling of PT Istana's '100 percent cooperatively produced' t-shirts via the transnational No Chains network indicates that such closed markets can also be established across borders.

KPRI has an economic programme consisting of four pillars: 'The first pillar is the production base, the second is the consumption base – how to control both of them is very important for the confederation. The third pillar is collective ownership and the last one is institutionalisation'.[29] Re-organising the production base relates to the just mentioned question of adding more value to the products by integrating more steps of the supply chain under workers' control. Re-organising the consumption base, apart from building autonomous distribution networks, entails a more or less explicit critique of the globalised culture of consumerism. Repeatedly, KPRI activists explaining their economic programme have stressed that a 'closed market' could only provide for what a person or family 'actually needs'.[30] This does not only include the classic 'basic needs' for food, clothing and shelter, but also material and immaterial needs such as education, health and communication. It does, however, not necessarily include luxury goods such as 'expensive furniture or big plasma TVs',[31] affordable to Indonesian workers only through consumer credits, making them dependent on speculative financial markets.

This critique of debt-financed consumerism is an interesting parallel to other imaginaries of 'alternative' or 'solidarity economies' that criticise the present articulation of production and consumption norms as unsustainable and as destructive for both the planet and the people.[32] The consumption pillar

29 Interview with Sastro (FSBKU, KPRI), February 2012.
30 Interview with Tommy (PRP), January 2012.
31 Interview with Tommy (PRP), January 2012.
32 The 'de-growth' imaginary is a case in point. See Brand 2014; Habermann 2012; Jessop 2012.

of KPRI's programme, however, also relates to the re-organisation of the distribution of goods via 'closed markets'. Collective ownership refers to the forms of self-organisation and workers' control that KPRI is experimenting with, such as occupied factories and cooperative farming. Institutionalisation aims to consolidate these experiments over time by building political structures supporting the cooperatives, potentially also including the future formation of a new political party.

Practical Experiences with the Alternative Economy

In order to get a sense of the chances of this economic imaginary to be *selected* by more social actors or wider social groups and *retained* within actually existing alternatives to neoliberal capitalism, the limited experiences with practical experiments deserve closer attention. Most of these are located in the agricultural sector rather than in garment production or other industrial sectors.

A relatively large peasants' union (*Serikat Pertani*) organising landless people is one of the biggest member federations of KPRI. This peasants' union has already reclaimed a total of 500,000 hectares of land on Java, Sumatra, Sulawesi and Nusa Tenggara.[33] For example, in Yogyakarta they took over a tea and coffee plantation on Suroloyo Mountain and are now producing tea and coffee cooperatively. The coffee from Suroloyo is already being marketed directly to KSN member unions in industrial areas. The local peasants' union at Suroloyo (*Serikat Pertani Kecamatan Samigaluh/ Kabupaten Kulon Progo*, Peasants' Union of the Samigaluh District/ Kulon Progo Regency) also has an Independent Women's Union (*Serikat Perampuan Independen*) aiming at training and empowering women to fully participate in the decision-making processes of both the union and the cooperative. One of the KPRI coordinators, however, explained:

> The plantation used to be run by Gadjah Mada University, but the university sold it to a CEO of some company. After that, it was taken over by the peasants there. They had to lobby the sultan, because the land is owned by the Yogyakarta sultan ... In there, we also have a traditional market, where we can barter, so the people from the mountains don't have to go to the city market anymore.[34]

33 Interview with Sastro (FSBKU, KPRI), March 2013.

34 Interview with Sastro (FSBKU, KPRI), March 2013.

It is very interesting to note that the 'alternative economy' envisioned by KPRI also entails traditional elements of a non-monetary barter economy. Again, we see some parallels to other models of alternative economies such as 'local exchange trading systems'.[35]

Whereas the sultan was quite supportive of the peasants in Yogyakarta, allowing them to take over the land peacefully, in other places they were less fortunate and had to fight and struggle hard to take over the land. In South Sumatra, for example, in OganIlir there is a sugar plantation named PT Kayumanis. Before Suharto, the land was owned by local peasants, but under Suharto the military took over the land. After Suharto's fall, the peasants reclaimed the land: 'They said, this used to be our land; we want to have it back'.[36] After that, the military and the police and the company's security guards went to the village and launched heavy repression against the peasants. Some activists were shot dead. KPRI started to advocate on behalf of the peasants; there are still three people in jail, among them the local leader of the peasants' union, who is also one of the presidents of KPRI. 'This shows the tactics of criminalisation of activists', as KPRI activist Sastro asserted.[37]

In West Java, the local peasants' union *Serikat Pertani Pasundan* (SPP) has some 90,000 members cultivating a large area of reclaimed land and producing agricultural goods such as rubber, rice, cocoa, vegetables, dairy products and so on. They have built a new village, including an elementary school for children and an educational training centre for adults. The government does not officially recognise these informal structures, but after many years of fighting, at least there is no longer violent repression.

Such land disputes are very common and on the rise in Indonesia. KPRI aims to give them a more coherent organisational framework and to systematically link them up over the huge distances of the Indonesian archipelago. They start by mapping the land and researching the histories of the communal land. Then they investigate the specific legal situation of the case at hand, organise the peasants and campaign for the land's reclamation. Where there is no local peasants' union, they try to help the peasants in setting one up. They engage in

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35 There is a large variety of such 'local exchange trading systems'. They range from traditional barter economies such as the one at Suroloyo Mountain to modern exchange systems supported by alternative regional currencies. When the Argentinian monetary economy collapsed in 2001, the number of 'local exchange trading systems' skyrocketed as a survival strategy in the context of economic crisis and political turmoil (Uriona 2007, pp. 63–5).

36 Interview with Sastro (FSBKU, KPRI), March 2013.

37 Interview with Sastro (FSBKU, KPRI), March 2013.

education, training, exchange, etc., to learn from successful examples. Education and training not only refers to skills and knowledge necessary for running plantations under peasants' control, but also to training for social activism such as learning how to build barricades and how to deal with security forces.

After successfully resisting repression, the peasants organised in SPP encountered another problem that illustrates why linking the agricultural and the industrial sectors is so important for KPRI's strategy. The problem is that the prices of their agricultural products are very low, since they only sell the raw materials with no added value. For example, there is a reclaimed rubber plantation in West Java but, as a KPRI activist explained, they 'need to think about how to set up a communal factory. Now, all factories are still owned by the capitalists'.[38] According to Sastro, it is very important to gain control over more parts of the production process in order to strengthen the unions and cooperatives of KPRI.

Most practical experiments with building an alternative economy are in stage one of the four pillars of KPRI's economic programme, i.e., re-organising the production base. Coffee production has in some cases moved to stage two, i.e., re-organising distribution and consumption. KPRI still has a long way to go in terms of developing collective forms of ownership, especially with regard to the industrial sector and even more so with regard to building sustainable institutions for the alternative economy: 'There is so much potential, but we still can do little practically'.[39] Peasant cooperatives such as the one at Suroloyo have the potential of becoming Indonesia's node in the transnational network of alternative economies. Autonomous, horizontal networks of worker cooperatives such as No Chains represent counter-hegemonic alternatives to conventional labelling and certification schemes such as Fair Trade, which, in CPE terms, is a sub-hegemonic complement to the hegemonic project of neoliberalism.

Radical Imaginaries: Recovered or Travelled?

While in critical research on Latin America these more radical imaginaries of 'alternative' or 'solidarity economies' are regularly taken up by scientific discourses,[40] this task has yet to be carried out comprehensively in relation to

38 Interview with Sastro (FSBKU, KPRI), March 2013.

39 Interview with Sastro (FSBKU, KPRI), March 2013.

40 On Argentina see Lavaca Collective 2007; Kabat 2011; on Brazil see Sarda de Faria and Novaes 2011; Mance 2014; on Venezuela see Azzellini 2011.

Southeast-Asia.[41] While to do so would be beyond the scope of this chapter, the remainder of this section contributes to illuminating this often invisible, silenced and marginalised phenomenon in the Indonesian context. Where do these radical imaginaries of cooperative production under workers' control come from? Are there historical links to the imaginaries and practices of Indonesian communists and socialists from the Sukarno era? Did Marxism somehow survive the repression under Suharto underground? Or did the Latin American imaginary 'travel' to Indonesia? In other words, is there a specifically Indonesian imaginary at work or does this imaginary have transnational origins?

The limited evidence from fieldwork conducted for this research pertaining to this question suggests that both are true. It was already mentioned that, at PT Istana, union activists showed documentaries from Latin America to the workers, and that these were presented as an inspiration and opportunity to learn from the Argentinian experience especially, but this was connected to the historical experiences of the Indonesian labour movement:

> We took some of the ideas from the Argentina experience, but we also kind of connect it with the history of Indonesian labour struggles, because right after independence … the main struggles of the Indonesian labour movement was to take over companies from the Dutch colonialists and from the British etc. So, we kind of mixed it with the idea that it is not only about solidarity but also workers' control.[42]

Suryomenggolo analyses the emergence of workers' control after independence in 1945.[43] After Japanese and Dutch troops were defeated, he explains, workers began spontaneously to take control over factories, railway stations and plantations. The declaration of independence was signed on 17 August 1945, but the new postcolonial state was still in the making and Japanese troops were still present in key places of public life such as the national railway system and the stations. It was here that workers, motivated by the spirit of national liberation, first started to take away control from the Japanese. In early Septem-

41 A book edited by Denison Jayasooria (2013) is an exception. It collects conceptual reflections and empirical case studies of the 'solidarity economy' in Asia. However, the practical examples provided for the most part cover 'social enterprises' and 'social entrepreneurship', representing something very different from the radical imaginaries that are of interest here.

42 Interview with Jemi (PRP), December 2011.

43 Suryomenggolo 2011.

ber 1945, the railway stations of Jakarta were taken over and, by October, all Javanese stations were under workers' control.[44] They quickly implemented an operational system of self-organisation to administer the railway system autonomously. Democratic workers' councils and steering committees were set up to this effect. Suryomenggolo describes a similar process for the worker-controlled plantations formerly owned by Dutch companies or the colonial state:

> Workers came to perceive that they had the right to the products of their own labour on the plantation. Under their own management, they ran and administered the workplace so as to continue production … This system of self-management allowed them to retain their jobs and survive the hardships of this time.[45]

There were similar experiments with self-administration of industrial factories such as sugar mills. These experiments with workers' control and self-organisation, however, were short-lived. As the new post-colonial state consolidated its power, it increasingly saw workers' control of plantations, factories and stations as a threat to economic and political stability due to their strategic importance. Whereas the nationalist and the labour movements were close allies in the struggle for independence, this alliance broke up when the state started to recapture control of the plantations, factories and stations from early 1946 onward. The government, dominated by nationalists, aimed to integrate and contain the labour movement in the service of national development: 'It was Vice President Hatta who named and criticized publicly the workers' self-management practices as "syndicalism" at the Yogyakarta economic conference in February 1946'.[46] While he would later become a staunch supporter of a certain state-controlled model of cooperatives, autonomous self-organisation of workers was lambasted as a 'childhood disease'.[47] Subsequently, the government moved to regain control over the self-administered plantations, factories and stations by replacing the democratically elected steering committees of the workers' councils with government-appointed officials. Deprived of their self-administrative power in the workplace, the workers' councils began to transform themselves into more conventional, independent trade unions.

44 Suryomenggolo 2011, p. 215.

45 Suryomenggolo2011, p. 219.

46 Suryomenggolo 2011, p. 222.

47 Suryomenggolo 2011, p. 224. This term goes back to Lenin's critique of 'left-wing' communism as an 'infantile disorder' (Lenin 1964).

Although workers' control and self-organisation lasted for only a couple of months, this episode from Indonesian history shows that the radical imaginaries envisioned by KSN and KPRI have historical forerunners on which they can draw. This, however, is hampered by the hegemonic historiography, silencing and marginalising everything that can even remotely be labelled as 'communist'. Current debates of Indonesian history are only slowly starting to address the mass murders of 1965–6, if at all, as the quarrel over a suggested apology by the state to the victims' families demonstrates.[48] Anti-communism continues to be the cornerstone of Indonesia's state ideology. How did the economic imaginary of workers' control and self-organisation survive the anti-communist purge and 30 years of victors writing history under Suharto? PRP activist Tommy's response is illuminating:

> It was the students' movement. You cannot just abolish ideas. You cannot repress theories like Marxism. In Indonesia, even though Suharto completely prohibited Marxism and cracked down on communist party members, even after that Marxism still exists in Indonesia. They have survived until today, by means like books well hidden by family members of the PKI [Communist Party of Indonesia] members and carefully passed on to others. It survived until today.[49]

The activist making this statement explained that he used to be anti-communist due to Suharto's propaganda but when he entered college he got in touch with Marxist theories of class conflict. He came to realise that these theories were forbidden precisely because they could explain the harsh realities of workers' lives in Indonesia and potentially become a powerful weapon in their struggle against capitalist domination and exploitation. According to him, these radical ideas or imaginaries survived the New Order underground within families and re-emerged in the struggle against Suharto, recovered by the students' and the workers' movements. In this process, however, the historical imaginary of workers' control in Indonesia came to be re-articulated with the more recent, more transnational imaginary of 'alternative' or 'solidarity economies', travelling from places like Argentina and Venezuela to Indonesia. At the time of research, KSN and KPRI delegates were planning a prolonged visit to Argentina and Venezuela to exchange experiences and knowledge with worker cooper-

48 'Former TNI general warns against government apology over 65 killings', Panjimas.com, 6 July 2015.

49 Interview with Tommy (PRP), January 2012.

atives in recuperated factories in these countries. So, there is transnational or trans-local organising around the economic imaginary of an alternative 'solidarity economy' under workers' control that is usually overlooked in mainstream discourses of global labour politics.

The Contradictions of the Alternative Economy

This chapter has identified the existence of radical alternatives to bureaucratic unionism in Indonesia, taking KSN and KPRI as examples for workers' self-organisation, aiming to build alternative solidarity economies beyond neoliberal capitalism. I have analysed the recovering of these silenced and marginalised imaginaries in the context of *Reformasi* after Suharto's fall. Taking the factory occupation at PT Istana as an entry point and following the traces of an alternative counter-hegemonic imaginary, my study has brought to light the solidarity economy alternative in Indonesia, which is usually silenced and invisible in mainstream discourses of Indonesian labour politics. The absence of 'solidarity economy' experiments from these discourses is a good example of CPE's notion of 'discursive selectivity'.[50] The mainstream labour discourse on Indonesia selectively prioritises moderate trade union strategies of social dialogue and systematically filters out more radical strategies of worker's self-organisation and workers' control.

I have analysed the emergence of the new, radical union confederation KSN and the split from KASBI. The latter's participation in multi-stakeholder initiatives and NGO campaigns and its path towards more institutionalisation and integration have been identified as factors contributing to its division. KSN activists feared that this path would de-radicalise and de-politicise the union, thereby undermining its own power base. KSN, instead, has joined the social movement confederation KPRI, aiming to build 'closed markets' among urban and rural communities and to break away from the neoliberal market regime. I have argued that this approach towards improving the lives of Indonesian workers and peasants by reclaiming the means to sustain their own lives represents a counter-hegemonic 'alternative economies' or 'solidarity economy' imaginary. It centres on ideas of autonomous self-organisation and workers' control and foregrounds social emancipation. It has historical forerunners in experiences of workers' control immediately after independence. These experiences were violently suppressed by the Suharto regime and excluded from

50 Sum and Jessop 2013, p. 215.

public discourse, but they survived underground. Revived practices informed by this kind of recovered imaginary such as factory occupations, land reclaiming and other direct actions are already being made use of by the autonomous labour movement, the peasant's movement, and the indigenous peoples' and women's movements. Previously excluded meanings, identities and desires are re-entering and re-politicising the arena of Indonesian labour discourses and practices.

These radical imaginaries and practices point towards not only post-neoliberal but also post-capitalist futures, but they carry with them their own contradictions. Throughout the history of capitalism, co-operatives and other forms of the solidarity economy were often born out of sheer necessity, as mere survival strategies. Many experiments disappeared as capitalism recovered from crisis.[51] If self-help and survival are the primary motives behind these experiments, they are more likely to become re-absorbed when the crisis appears to be over than experiments simultaneously envisioning economic imaginaries with transformative, emancipatory potential. Lisa Mittendrein concludes:

> Solidarity economy, first, provides the potential of coping with crisis by helping to satisfy material and immaterial needs. Coping with crisis becomes more important for many projects as the crisis intensifies. It often means concrete, collective self-help. Through the collective form and the associated collective identity, coping with crisis however also carries transformative potential.[52]

In Indonesia, the factory occupation at PT Istana was similarly born out of necessity. Initially, it was developed as a form of self-help to generate income and pressure the former owner to provide severance pay. Over time, however, the transformative potential surfaced, as workers radicalised and started aiming to keep the factory running under workers' control. Even though this transformative potential did not spread to other factories and many workers returned to the formal and informal labour markets after the cooperative had to leave the factory premises, some of the workers held on to the solidarity economy imaginary and continued to produce clothing collectively as a home-based cooperative. As the analysis has shown, the workers, who are still members of the cooperative, value collective self-organisation very highly, even though the cooperative may pay wages only irregularly. Their experience

51 Mittendrein 2013, pp. 42–4.

52 Mittendrein 2013, pp. 185–6, my translation.

of being able to determine their destiny themselves, to organise a workplace democratically and collectively, and to develop a counter-hegemonic imaginary that extends beyond the workplace to envision a radically democratic transformation of society produced collective identities and post-capitalist desires that will continue to spark emancipatory practices.

At PT Istana, another aspect of the transformative potential of the solidarity economy became visible. I have argued that industrial production, democratic self-organisation, political self-education and social reproduction were all united under its factory roof for a limited period of time. The workers not only continued to operate the machines to produce clothing, they also organised their own child day-care and public kitchen. While also born out of necessity, this shows the potential of counter-hegemonic practices associated with the solidarity economy imaginary to overcome the division between the production of goods and the social reproduction of people and communities imposed by capitalism. These practices thus underscore the possibility of reconnecting what capitalism has divided in an emancipatory way: everyday culture, politics and economics as well as productive labour, reproductive care and subsistence work. They can therefore be a reference point for the revitalisation of the global labour movement that also addresses feminist concerns. CPE, if complemented with feminist theory and operationalised with CGT, is well placed to further investigate these practices in their cultural, political and economic dimensions.

Whether the practices associated with the solidarity economy imaginary will resist co-optation and tap their transformative potential is an open question. Its answer will partly depend on the ability of the social forces championing these counter-hegemonic imaginaries and practices to further consolidate them into a viable counter-hegemonic project, transforming sporadic and spontaneous elements of counter-hegemonic reactions to capitalist crises (such as the occupation of a factory or a hospital set for closure) into moments of a collective, self-conscious effort to leave behind the impositions of capitalism. In Indonesia and elsewhere, this process is already underway.

CHAPTER 13

Italy: The Revolution in Logistics

Anna Curcio

'A Week of Passion'

Monday, 20 January 2014, it's early in the morning. A white van is parked outside the main gate of the warehouses of Granarolo – the dairy farming plant in Bologna – which for the last months has been the epicentre of a hard struggle for labour rights. It is the same van which had been parked outside the IKEA storage in Piacenza to support IKEA workers on strike. After six intense months of picket-lines and blockades the IKEA workers won. Since then, the white van has become a sort of talisman for the Granarolo and Cogefrin warehouse workers.

It all began with workers opposing a 35 percent pay cut and speaking out publicly in protest. 51 workers were then fired because in early May they had gone on strike for better wages and labour conditions. All of them had been employed by Sgb, Service Group Bologna, a consortium of cooperatives. Sgb manages sub-contracted labourers in Granarolo and Cogefrin warehouses. The latter deals with plastics imports and exports between the Middle East and Europe.

From 20–5 January 2014 Granarolo and Cogefrin warehouse workers organised several on-off blockades together with students, precarious workers and social movement activists who joined the picket-lines. They demanded the reinstatement of the fired workers. The police used violence to interrupt the blockades three times. The first time was on the first evening on Monday, 20 January. The blockade had lasted an entire day, but at the end of the day the police managed to clear off the picket-line despite nearly two hours of resistance. On Thursday 23 January police violently broke up a blockade which had been going on for at least five hours to ensure the transit of goods.

Their methods were less 'conventional' than usual. Pepper spray might not be officially allowed in Italy, yet the police made use of it; they broke the hands of some workers trying to resist the clearance, and resorted to the entire repertoire of riot police brutality including violent charges and batons.[1] Two

1 See the video testimony of a worker https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RgZvDeG12q4.

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workers were hospitalised, five others ended up in police custody, with two of them getting arrested without any evidence. The day after, on Friday, 24 January, police intervened the third and last time. In heavy rain, hundreds of workers, students, precarious workers and activists decided to block the plant entrance to the bitter end as a sort of revenge for the violence and the arrests of the previous day. This time, the police dragged people away – one by one – from the picket line.[2] Then on 25 January a demonstration held outside the court demanded the immediate release of the two workers who had been arrested the previous day. This demonstration, and the important intervention of the lawyer, forced the release of the workers.

According to one worker this was a 'week of passion'; this subsequently became the apt title of a video of the conflict posted on YouTube.[3] These very intense days of struggles split the city of Bologna into opposing sides: force against force. On the one hand, Sgb with its Granarolo and Cogefrin warehouses received the support of local and national political institutions, and the main trade union organisations. These then launched a coordinated attack against the workers on strike via political, media and judicial channels. On the other hand, workers could count on support from social centres, political collectives, students, precarious workers and workers from other industries, including public employees of the local administrations, and even from some novelists who made their support for the strike public. Everybody on both sides knew that the dispute was crucial. The stakes were high because the co-op system which manages subcontracted work in the industry represents the dominant paradigm for the overall organisation of precarious work in Italy at present. Thus, the city of Bologna split along a class line.

When we look at this 'week of passion', we can easily see that it was the peak of an extraordinary five-year long cycle of struggle within the logistics industry. On this basis, the present chapter analyses the forces and the actors involved in this cycle of struggle, the labour organisation, the social composition of the struggles, and the emergence of an autonomous political subjectivity able to relate with 'its' trade union in a pragmatic manner that we could define as 'the workers' use of the union'. To conclude, this chapter will try to highlight the political lessons emerging from the struggles.

2 See the video https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zr_J7iS_reo&feature=share.

3 See the video https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=soKaGUdDY08.

Retail Logistics, Cooperatives and Just-In-Time Capitalism

Struggles in the Italian logistics and warehousing sector – concentrated in the Po Valley – began a few years ago. Between 2008 and 2010 several strikes and blockades took place in Lombardy, in the hinterland of Milan. Later they spread to the Veneto region, especially to the industrial area around Verona and Padua. Finally struggles erupted in Emilia-Romagna, both in the industrial area of Piacenza and Bologna. Between 2011 and 2012 there were strikes and blockades at the international mail delivery company TNT Global Express warehouse and at the IKEA storage facilities in Piacenza. These were immediately successful in reinstating labour rights the cooperatives had abolished. After that, struggles moved to Bologna, where workers have been fighting since April 2013.

The Po Valley functions as a huge logistics space suited for the just-in-time capitalist valorisation process. It represents the heart of the circulation of goods in Italy and Europe. Milan, Piacenza, Bologna, as well as Verona and Padua are its epicentres, the nodal points connected by the harbours of Genoa – in the West of the county – and Venice – in the East. The whole import-export between the Middle East and North Africa passes through here. This is why global distribution giants such as Amazon.com and IKEA have chosen to locate their Italian warehouses in Piacenza and why the German DB SCHENKERhangartner has purchased a warehousing centre in Verona, an important logistics passageway for fruit and vegetables travelling to and from the Middle East, Spain, Latin America and Northern Europe.

It is in this specific geographical location that the cooperatives managing a subcontracted labour force have worked side by side with the global brands of large-scale distribution to build a powerful valorisation *dispositif* based on the acceleration and the linearity of the goods-circulation processes of in-time contemporary capitalism.[4] In fact, this industry is not affected by the economic crisis in Europe and Italy. Quite the opposite: intermodal transport – especially exports – represents a large portion of the weak Italian growth during this crisis. However, unlike other European countries where logistics operators invest in computer systems, warehousing machinery and network technologies, corporations located in Italy turn to cheap migrant labour under the management of the co-op system instead, thus eluding labour regulations. Hence, it can be argued that in Italy intermodal transport 'prefers recurring to cooperatives employing immigrants rather than investing in technologies'.[5]

4 Chignola 2012. I use the word *dispositif* in Foucauldian terms.

5 Bologna 2013, p. 2.

In light of this, we can claim that accumulated surplus value depends on the exploitation of a low-skilled and low-paid labour force whose working activity is managed by an unregulated co-op system operating outside of the legally established frameworks set up to regulate the employment relation. What is more, and not at all surprising, is that about 98 percent of workers employed in the subcontracted cooperatives that are active in the industry are migrants. These people are literally caught between the deregulation of the co-op system and labour mobility legislation, both at the European and national level.[6] These policies have allowed employers to blackmail and heavily exploit migrant labour-power.

Usually, workers employed in these co-operatives enjoy neither any sort of social security protection nor any labour rights, as co-operatives are not subject to the mandatory application of the CCNL (the National Collective Labour Contract). According to Italian Public Law, the CCNL is supposed to regulate employer/employee relations, but the workers of these co-operatives are employed as associate-workers.[7] This means that they are wage labourers and members of the co-operative at one and the same time. As wage labourers they have no access to profits. As members they do not enjoy labour rights to which they should be entitled. Instead they bear the full risk on the job. Furthermore, up to five thousand euros are deducted from their payroll each year as a percentage of their capital share in the cooperative. In other words, they have to manage their own exploitation. More generally speaking, it should be noted that this sort of exploitation does not happen only within the logistics industry: *the co-op model is the new paradigm of precarious labour organisation in Italy*.

Thanks to deregulation of labour laws over the last decades, corporations have been able to dramatically reduce the cost of labour and their social security contributions. Furthermore, co-operatives – especially the great trusts of co-operatives that follow the capitalist imperative to concentrate employed labour – often function according to the well-known and unscrupulous company model in order to escape financial taxation and costs. They flourish and die within a short span of time, receiving great tax benefits.[8] And, as one worker

6 The Italian Bossi-Fini law institutes a tight connection between employment and the residence permit, since it established that migrant workers could reside on the national territory only if they own a formal contract of employment.

7 The CCNL is a contract of employment stipulated at the national level jointly by trade unions and employers, predetermining the regulation of individual employment relationships and some aspects of their mutual relations.

8 See Bologna 2013.

explains: 'either they change their names every two years or so in order not to pay social security taxes and scrub workers, or they rely on 80-year-old owners who cannot be prosecuted because of their age'.[9]

Labour Organisation in the Warehouses

Just-in-time capitalism, the acceleration and linearity in goods circulation, services, information, and data flows constitute today an extraordinary assemblage for the valorisation of capital. This goes hand in hand with processes of racialisation in which segmentations and hierarchies are produced along *colour lines* and/or across divisions of nationality, representing a prominent *dispositif* of contemporary capitalist accumulation.[10] Within the co-operatives in logistics warehouses these two processes are inextricably welded. Their merging represents a specific and explosive mixture through which capital is able to intensify the brutal extraction of surplus value, and thus increase the speed of goods circulation. According to the workers themselves, co-operatives are a *dispositif* of slavery. In fact, they often accuse their bosses of being Mafioso. In this sense, the banner: 'IKEA CGS + CO-OP = MAFIA' hung next to the storage space in Piacenza, was not simply a metaphor but referred to the co-operative's money laundering practices and its standard employment of mafia gangs in order to threaten (and sometimes attack) leading figures involved in the struggles.[11] Trade unionists in particular have had their car wheels cut open or, far worse, have even been assaulted. Meanwhile, the few women employed in the sector report sexual abuses and molestation.

'Co-op Porterage = slavery' was written on another banner shown during the first general strike in the industry on 22 March 2013. It referred to the mechanisms of subordination and racialisation characterising 'co-operative' labour within the logistics warehouses. For example, racial hierarchies are the *dispositif of labour organisation* at the Cogefrin plant in Bologna. According to workers, while Italians work indoors, foreigners work outdoors. 'It does not matter if it rains, if it snows, or if it is sunny, we must be there, working longer than our colleagues indoors', some workers disclosed.[12] Similarly, workers report that before the summer of 2011, when struggles began at the TNT warehouse in Piacenza, closer managerial control and a speed-up occurred. The person in

9 Curcio and Roggero 2013.

10 Curcio and Mellino 2010; 2012.

11 Pallavicini 2013.

12 Bortolato and Curcio 2013.

charge shouted at his/her subordinates: 'do this, do that!' This was perceived as being akin to how the slave in the plantation perceived the command of the whip.[13]

Workers see labour itself as being similar to slavery. At the TNT warehouse the work-pace acceleration in 2011 meant that 200 workers now performed the same activity that had previously been carried out by 500 workers. Self-evidently this meant a great reduction in labour costs. Under these conditions, the company managed to increase its productivity – the highest increase in productivity in Italy in the last five years.[14] Its workers, however, have been forced to adopt faster rhythms and lower wages. They have been made victims of threats and intimidation as well as increasingly widespread physical ailments such as hernias, joints problems and postural disorders that often are not recognised as work-related injuries. In June 2012, at the IKEA storage facility in Piacenza, the 'rows' of pallets the workers were expected to unload were increased from 12 to 35 per hour. In this case too, the productivity increase was not matched by any wage growth. Moreover, when workers went on strike to protest against the work speed-up, they were forced to take a day off; otherwise their hours were reduced by the management in retaliation. This would be suffered in addition to their loss of wages.

At the Granarolo warehouse, where fresh produce such as milk, mozzarella, and yogurt are handled, workers report that the work is exhausting. A 28-year-old worker from Bangladesh recounts:

> Work consists in moving weights, the temperature is around four degrees Celsius, and the quality of the garments the cooperative provides is really bad. Under these labour conditions you can work no longer than two years. Your body rapidly wears down.[15]

80 people are employed in the Granarolo warehouse where struggles erupted. Each shift involves 20 dolly operators and 40 picking operators. The latter group collect and organise packages to be shipped. The labour contract sets the amount of packages per hour to be handled at 189, but the workers report that 'If you do not manage more than 200 packages per hour the person in charge in the warehouses will suspend you "on holiday", which means a pay cut'. At Cogefrin, around 30 operators are employed outdoors during each shift.

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13 Curcio and Roggero 2013.

14 Ibid.

15 Bortolato and Curcio 2013.

Some of them, especially migrants, have longer working days, spanning from 7.30 a.m. to 10 p.m. A 31-year-old Moroccan crane operator says: 'We have to load and unload containers or bags.' Workers employed at the floor level have to lift 25 kilogrammes bags and load them onto a container using a belt. Each tank can hold 20 pallets of 55 bags each. Workers usually load up to seven containers a day, amounting to about 200 tons moved by four people on a daily basis.

In virtually all warehouses the labour organisation is centred around the so-called 'corporal' or person in charge. He is the one who sets the shifts and monitors labour performance. Shifts are usually organised on a hierarchical basis. Blackmailing practices create a climate of fear of being fired and of losing one's residence permit. However, it is above all the racial divide that produces hierarchies and a segmented regime, differentiating between 'Italians' and 'foreigners' but also among foreigners themselves. The 'corporal' establishes the amount of labour for each worker on a weekly basis, in turn determining their wage package, since co-op workers' wages are based on the amount of time they work. Paradoxically, at the end of the month the majority of workers do not even reach 168 hours, as agreed in the contract at the Granarolo plant, while others work extraordinarily long hours. It surely is not a fortuitous case that those workers more active in the struggles were the ones to be reprimanded for their union activity – independent of their nationality or skin colour.

Labour, Racialisation and Composition of Struggles

In logistics warehouses located in Emilia Romagna – the geographical focus of this analysis – the majority of workers are from North African countries such as Egypt, Morocco, or Tunisia. The others are from Eastern Europe, South Asia, and Sub-Saharan and East Africa. North Africans and Eastern Europeans tend to be recruited in their home countries by recruitment agencies acting within a legislative vacuum, which guarantees them large profit margins. South Asian workers were able to migrate to Italy under the Flows Decrees and its programme for seasonal workers. On the contrary, Sub-Saharan and East African workers entered Italy 'illegally' by crossing the Mediterranean Sea with private boats often owned by mafia groups. The majority of these workers are male. Only very few women are employed in the industry. The average age tends to be between 25 and 35 years of age. Some of the workers are graduates or even enrolled in Italian universities. 'Second generation' migrants who were born and/or raised in Italy can be found as well.

As the Bossi-Fini law established the tie between the labour contract and the right to stay in Italy[16] back in 2002, there is a strong link between one's employment contract and the residence permit. The law tends to favour the establishment of a systemic process of racialisation on the basis of the hierarchical construction of the labour market. In so doing, it establishes the subordination of certain social groups by others – a process eloquently described by Frantz Fanon.[17] As a consequence, in Europe as much as in Italy – more generally under capitalism – migrants are not excluded from the labour market but instead fully included in the lowest strata where labour protection mechanisms and rights are either scarce or do not exist at all, where wages are extremely low, and where blackmailing practices are prevalent. Thus, the migrant labour composition intertwines with the European system of control and management of labour mobility. Migrants' life and labour experiences are hence marked by constant blackmail, marginalisation and heavy forms of work exploitation.

As a matter of fact, when migration became a mass phenomenon in Italy in the 1990s, some industries saw labour protection, workers' rights and wages rapidly decrease as a result.[18] Today the average salary in the logistics industry is equal to approximately a third of what was paid in the 1990s. Back then it was ITL 3.5 to 4.0 million – i.e., around €2,000 – while now it is around €700 to €800 a month.

Racism and racialisation processes function as 'internal supplements' in the organisation of labour. Racism produces internal hierarchies, especially between Italians and foreigners, but also among foreigners themselves. The goal is to pit workers against one another and undermine the possibility of solidarity and the development of unity.[19] In this sense, racism is not an ideological vice, a nasty behaviour or social pathology. As a matter of fact, it is a completely internal *dispositif* to the capitalist mode of production. According to a worker on a picket line at the main gate of the IKEA storage facility in

16 The law, introduced in 2002, amending and restricting the national legislation on immigration and asylum, states that the residence permit will only be granted to a foreign worker who already has an employment contract. If the migrant worker loses his job, he will have to return to his home country, or otherwise he will be subject to processes of expulsion, following a period of internment in CIE (Centres for Identification and Expulsion).

17 Fanon 1967, pp. 37–8: '[T]he shameless exploitation of one group of men by another'.

18 The history of migration into Italy is quite different from some European countries such as France or the UK, where migration has historically been connected to the decolonisation processes in the aftermath of World War II. In Italy, in fact, migration is especially connected to globalisation.

19 Roediger 1999; 2008.

Piacenza, racism is the *dispositif* that is necessary to establish a 'racial division of labour'.[20] He said:

> In warehouses the 'corporal' used to say to Moroccans that they are better than Tunisians, to Tunisians that they are better than Egyptians or Romanians. The objective is to split up workers, putting a group against the other: 'if you behave well, I'll pay you more; do not join the struggles', etc.[21]

Foreign workers' poor command of the Italian language facilitates further blackmailing and exploitation. In producing differences and marginalising labour-power along the *colour line*, warehouse management is able to exploit as much labour as possible (or even more!) and take advantage of the workers' need for extra work, which is itself a consequence of the low level at which wages are set. As a result, large amount of surplus value is extracted. In light of this, overthrowing the 'racial division of labour' was a fundamental precondition for the interruption of the capitalist valorisation process, especially at the beginning of the mobilisations. Arafat, an Egyptian and one of the leading figures of the struggle taking place in Piacenza, says:

> We have met Indian and Chinese workers, we have recognised some differences to us Arabs, but what I said to my fellow workers was: 'just forget where we come from, here we are all workers and all of us are exploited. This is the only thing we have to think about'.[22]

Similarly, a Pakistani worker employed at the Granarolo plant in Bologna declared: 'Finally, all of us understood that bosses could exploit us more because we were letting them put us up against one another'.[23] These statements describe the processes of workers' unification taking place within the struggles. They stand in explicit contrast to the capitalist approach to discipline, which tends to fragment the workforce. In a certain sense, this reveals how racial differentiation can also work for the production of the common.[24]

20 Quijano 2000; Curcio and Mellino 2010; 2012.

21 Radio UniNomade 2012.

22 Curcio and Roggero 2013.

23 Bortolato and Curcio 2013.

24 Curcio 2010.

A Powerful Space of Political Subjectivation

'Initially our major problem was to unite the warehouse workers and to overcome the fear of wage retaliation or that of losing the job', Mohamed Arafat, a TNT warehouse worker from Piacenza explains.[25] Thus, it was within the struggles that workers managed to open up an incredible space for political subjectivation, or better, a space for autonomous subjectivation. This transformation of a subjected subjectivity into an autonomous and resistant subjectivity is capable of overthrowing capitalist command and interrupting the process of capital accumulation.[26] In fact, it was especially when workers managed to materially damage the companies that they dared more and found the courage to ask for better wages and labour conditions. The capacity of affection, and the diffusion of alternative political subjectivations, could bloom in these struggles.

In one warehouse after another the workers managed to win their demands – the right to unionise, the application of the CCNL, the reinstatement of the suspended and fired colleagues, and the settlement of previously unrecognised claims for overdue pay. Workers always reminded themselves that it was through struggle that 'we got dignity for our jobs, which is even more important than money'.[27] As a worker highlighted during a meeting, in Arabic 'dignity' is an expression standing both for resistance and liberation from exploitation. It has, in fact, the same root as the word meaning 'resistance', 'insurrection', 'revolt'. Here, the role of the Arab uprisings must be acknowledged as a factor in the political and autonomous subjectivation of these workers. In this sense the processes of resistant subjectivation within these struggles have to be understood as a wider and more complex terrain of conflict.

Many of the workers in the logistics industry are from North Africa. Obviously, they were not indifferent to the instance of radical change unleashed by the uprisings in their home and neighbouring countries. They were aware that radical change at their workplaces was a possibility as well. For this reason, the TNT workers in Piacenza referred to their local struggle as 'the TNT revolution'. Arafat recounts:

> After thirty years of government Mubarak was finally overthrown. While nobody before seemed to have ever thought it would be possible, in the

25 Curcio and Roggero 2013.
26 Read 2003.
27 Curcio and Roggero 2013.

> same way nobody ever expected that a struggle at TNT in Piacenza could take place and be victorious.[28]

Within these struggles, the production of an autonomous and resistant subjectivity included a mix of different experiences that workers brought from their home countries and from the contemporary just-in-time mode of production itself. Tired of the symbolic tactics imposed by the confederation of trade unions – 'for them the only way to fight is standing up in front of the warehouse gates, waving flags' – the workers chose instead to effectively damage the corporations. Since the beginning, this posed a 'new' modality of struggle. They identified the enemy as 'the bosses' and pointed out the weakest moment in the circulation of goods. After this, they were finally ready 'to harm the bosses' – a claim continuously repeated by the workers themselves. Thus, the interruption of the capitalist valorisation process became the main feature (and the actual weapon) of the conflicts in the logistics sector. In this way, the workers managed to not only cause huge economic damage, but also damage the image of the corporations. Here it is important to highlight that the workers gained the 'skill' of identifying the most effective form of struggle on the job and the positions from which they could accumulate technical knowledge about the cycle of production and distribution. Having acquired such knowledge, workers blockaded the warehouses exactly at the time when the largest amount of goods had to be delivered. And the mobility of goods soon became the mobility of conflict. The weeks-long, so-called 'cappuccino strike' at the Granarolo plant, for example, blocked about forty trucks which supply cafés and small businesses around Bologna with milk in the early hours of the morning.

However, the most significant development in terms of subjectivity-production is the emergence of explicit political and militant subjectivities. Strike after strike, picket line after picket line, has brought forth a significant 'expertise' in managing the different moments of the struggle. This is particularly important since these struggles have been the first political experience for the large majority of workers involved in them. Moreover, in the course of these struggles, workers, alongside students and precarious workers who joined the picket lines at Piacenza and Bologna, have produced new forms of life as a consequence of their social interactions, provoking a radical change in the lives of the young migrants involved. In this sense, the words of a migrant worker involved in the struggle against Granarolo assume paradigmatic value:

28 Ibid.

> I've been working in Italy for five years waiting for the residence permit with the idea of going to another country. As foreign workers we are extremely exploited here. But after these months of struggles, despite now having gained the residence card, I have decided that I want to stay in Bologna. I have found brothers.[29]

Hence, these struggles have not only managed to successfully interrupt the capitalist valorisation process, but they have also proved to be a fertile ground for the 'conflictual cooperation' among logistics workers, precarious workers, and students, who, although starting from different daily experiences, all fight against their exploitation and the precarity imposed by the co-op system.

The Workers' Use of the Union

The struggles in the logistics warehouses were usually ignited by a small group of workers who organised for better working conditions. The struggle at TNT warehouses began as a community-based process, according to these workers. Mohamed Arafat reports:

> I went from door to door explaining our shameful contract to workers, the way in which, for years and years, the co-operatives and the bosses exploited and blackmailed us, saying that we shouldn't accept this treatment ever again, that it is against our dignity.[30]

A couple of weeks later, this community-based process led workers to self-organise at their workplace. However, they quickly realised that self-organisation unfortunately was not enough. In order to effectively bargain with the company they needed trade union advocacy. Therefore, they looked for a union able to support a 'real struggle harming bosses'.

In July 2011, with exactly this intent of 'harming the bosses', some TNT workers met the SI Cobas, a grassroots trade union, which was ready to block the circulation of goods. At the Granarolo and Cogefrin plants in Bologna things evolved in a similar fashion. During the summer of 2012 when mobilisations for the application to the CCNL (*Contratti Collettivi Nazionali di Lavoro* – National industry collective labour agreements) began, workers first went to the main

29 Bortolato and Curcio 2013.

30 Ibid.

leftist union, the CGIL (*Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro* – Italian General Confederation of Labour), but they did not agree to the blockade. Therefore, some of the workers turned to the UGL (*Unione Generale del Lavoro* – The General Labour Union) – a right-wing union – which a few months later would sign an agreement implying a 35 percent pay cut. The frustration with the mainstream trade unions pushed the workers closer to SI Cobas.[31] At the Granarolo and Cogefrin warehouses, the fight for the CCNL began at the end of April 2013.

This case highlights the specific way in which this grassroots union serves the workers' purposes. Migrant workers are sceptical about mainstream trade unions, they see them as unable or unwilling to act on the workers' demands, and are aware that they have sometimes explicitly colluded both with the bosses and the co-op system. For these reasons, workers chose SI Cobas, the union which would best meet their needs: 'a union that supports us in our struggles, struggles made up by strikes and picket lines concretely affecting the interests of the company owners'.[32] In other words, SI Cobas is a union working on behalf of workers, that is to say, a union where decisions are taken directly by workers and not *vice versa*. In contradistinction, mainstream trade unions are perceived as service offices, useful only for filling out forms and procedures (such as the renewal of the residence permit and family reunification) but surely not as political actors struggling for labour rights. Thus, workers' mindful and active rejection of passive mainstream trade unions can be said to have been a major feature of logistics struggles. As a consequence, we can speak of a general unrepresentability of the workers. This expresses itself above all in workers' use of the union as a flexible infrastructure in support of workers' autonomy.

Both SI Cobas in Emilia-Romagna and the ADL Cobas (its sister union) in Veneto have demonstrated their willingness and ability in following the initiative of workers themselves. From 2011 onwards they have rapidly expanded into many warehouses, opening up spaces for new workers' organisations. During the blockades and on picket lines, workers, union delegates and political activists openly discuss decisions in assemblies, with everyone actively participating in the fight. Actions, slogans and the timing of the blockades are collectively decided. The decisions are based on workers' knowledge of the production and

31 SI Cobas, founded in 2010, is a grassroots cross-organised union (especially involved in the engineering industry, public employment, services, logistics), which has also supported and organised workers' struggles within the logistics industry, especially in regions such as Emilia Romagna and Lombardy.

32 Curcio and Roggero 2013.

distribution cycle and on the availability of forces. SI Cobas has demonstrated a fairly high degree of willingness to come into contact with other political practices, specifically those typical of social movements. The result is a multifarious co-operation. We have witnessed this during the so-called 'week of passion' at the Granarolo plant, where each different actor contributed to the functioning of a well-organised and efficient blockade. This assemblage was able to constantly move from one level to another, in a very fluid manner. As a matter of fact, the struggle was able to move from the level of bargaining to the production of material for legal defence; from the level of blockades and picket lines to that of a boycott; from the level of cyber guerrilla activities – Anonymous attacked and brought down the Granarolo website several times – to that of autonomous communication through national newspapers, social networks and self-managed websites. In so doing, the workers broke through the initial veil of silence presented by the mainstream media: from now on, they would no longer be able simply to ignore the struggle.

Balance of Power: The Workers' Struggles against the Leftist Emilia and the Capitalist Reorganisation

For the network of relationships among workers, trade unions and companies, the Granarolo dispute was paradigmatic, as it was able to reach the core of the co-op system which in large part manages and organises the logistics workforce in and around Bologna. Historically, this power system has been firmly in the hands of the left in the Emilia Romagna region. However, since World War II the co-operative system has largely changed its aims. Contemporary co-operatives have nothing to do with their founding principles based on co-operation and mutual aid. On the contrary, such principles have entirely been replaced by a business-based value system, creating a complex intersection of economic, political and social powers. The result is almost uncontested labour deregulation and increased exploitation in terms of labour organisation.

Therefore, the dispute at the Granarolo plant – one of the leading corporations in the dairy industry – aptly encapsulates the balance of forces in the logistics sector. The struggles have reached the heart and stronghold of the co-op system. The leftist Emilia region counts more than 500,000 employees and an increasing turnover, with agri-food co-ops including Granarolo and Co-op Adriatica (which has also been at the centre of another hard fight that took place between December 2012 and January 2013). The struggles have directly affected the co-op system and its highly profitable extraction mechanisms. They have explicitly revealed how power is mediated within the co-operatives,

and to what extent it is enabled by the employers' gross disrespect for labour rights and tax regulations. The 'week of passion' and the surrounding struggles have provoked widespread police brutality, supported by the employers. And because this brutality is focused on a largely migrant workforce, it shows clearly how institutional racism plays a prominent role in the equilibrium of industrial relations in Italy. A tweet from someone on the picket line read: 'When a picket line involves migrant workers there is no mediation, the police brutally charges. Workers resist!'

Although worker layoffs and police brutality also occurred during the struggles at the IKEA storage facility in Piacenza, the Granarolo dispute was characterised by a qualitative political leap. The co-op system in the Bologna region implies a set of powerful interests coalescing around Legacoop, the association representing the co-operatives, and the financial group Unipol, both of which are closely linked to the Democratic Party (PD) that has been governing the region (and now the whole country, too) for a long time. It is within this framework that we have to understand why the government's warranty committee on strikes accepted Granarolo's request to limit the right to strike by deeming milk and dairy products goods that cannot be blocked as a form of protest under national law. Undoubtedly, this first-time decision had serious repercussions for the struggles in logistics. On the one hand, it affected the main dynamic of the struggles, as wildcat strikes and the blockading of goods were now illegal. On the other hand, however, it increased the social and political attention around the mobilisation. The decision of the warranty committee on strikes has led some labour counsellors to decry the unconstitutionality of the decision. In short, even though milk and dairy products are undoubtedly essential and perishable goods, Granarolo does not operate in monopolistic conditions. Therefore the decision violates the constitutional provisions and the right to strike. A few weeks after the warranty committee's decision, a big demonstration took place in Bologna on 2 June 2013. Large numbers of ordinary citizens, students and other social sectors who could be defined as the 'social precariat' participated in protests organised around the democratic right to political dissent. The employers' attempt to reduce the possibility of strikes in the logistics industry is indicative of the tough reorganisation that has taken place in the wake of the struggles. As a part of this reorganisation, and with the intent of circumventing the blockades, corporations also changed the timing at which they load and unload goods. Furthermore, they have forced corporations to relocate some of their production activities to other sites. Production was located to the city of Modena, a city around 50 kilometres from Bologna. Nonetheless, the collective intelligence which emerged from the struggle has proved able to oppose these measures. Picketers 'followed' the relocations of

production and blocked both the Bologna and Modena sites during the last general strike of the industry on 28 February 2014. We can see how the employers' reorganisation of labour constitutes an attempt to prevent or reduce any damage to their profits and reputation that the blockades and picket lines may have caused. At Granarolo warehouse, for example, a four-hour blockade means a loss of around €250,000.

A one-day blockade at the IKEA storage facility in Piacenza or at the Cogefrin plant in Bologna causes unquantifiable damages. But as the national leader of SI Cobas explains:

> Goods are not loaded onto trucks. Therefore, they cannot arrive on time at the harbours, producing heavy delay in the shipping towards Eastern Europe, the Middle East or North Africa. In other words, a single blockade can blow up the entire logistics circuit: corporations have to wait at least ten days for reorganising the shipment. We are talking about a huge economic damage as well as an incalculable damage to their image.

Lessons from the Struggles

There are several lessons we can draw from these struggles, with the bosses' political use of the economic crisis probably being the most significant. The expansion towards new international markets and the increase in company profits reveal that austerity policies and sacrifices imposed on workers are not a necessity but a conscious choice. As workers' struggles push the development of the logistics industry forward, the political and strategic issue is about who is in control of this development.

The logistics struggles also contain important lessons with regard to the continuity and discontinuity with the past. At a picket line it is easy to realise how repressive practices from the late nineteenth or early twentieth century, such as the company's use of strike-breakers hidden in trucks, or other employees attacking strikers, as described for example in John Steinbeck's novels, are used even within the context of the most advanced forms of capitalist development. Furthermore, the heavy physical suffering endured by workers takes place within a highly productive context which is characterised by high knowledge concentration. This confirms that the knowledge circulating in the logistics networks is central and embedded in the machines. Thus, knowledge should be understood as a *dispositif* of hierarchisation and exploitation, and therefore poses a battleground for and against the accumulation of capital. 'Logistics is the logic of capital', a worker explained during a meeting. He was not refer-

ring to conceptual abstractions, but to the fundamental determinations that characterise the struggles in the sector. The workers' knowledge of the production and distribution cycle, of its spatial and temporal coordinates, provides the opportunity to forge a formidable weapon using the master's own arsenals – one which can be turned against him.

In these struggles even 'passions' are a constitutive part of the class struggle. Anger and exasperation alternate with joy. The desire for revenge against the bosses is at one and the same time the desire for the common. Take a worker's recent Facebook post into consideration:

> I swear to you that the Director of *Arco Spedizioni* [a retailing company] is now – at a temperature of minus two degrees Celsius – unloading goods, while workers are enjoying a barbecue and listening to music. This is communism, isn't it?

For some of them, workers' struggle is no longer just a temporary phase. It has become a way of life and socialisation. They claim their goal is to return to their jobs even if their implicit goal is to start earning again. However, not all of them seem inclined to return to being exploited.

In this sense, the struggles have torn apart the rhetoric of integration into a system of formal equality, which concretely has always meant subordination and substantive inequality. In its place, there has opened a common space of autonomy. In the blockades and on the picket lines, the common spaces determined by struggles and differences (relating to language and to religious or national belonging) have become elements of a new, collective creativity.

Are these mobilisations able to develop into a more general framework of political struggle beyond the workplace? This is still an open question. And this is important, because fighting for better working conditions in the warehouses also means fighting against both the legislation that regulates labour mobility in Italy and Europe and the rampant racism in the country. The formation of new productive spaces of political mobilisation and subjectivation of the workers in struggle, which occurs in the course of numerous initiatives (assemblies, demonstrations, etc.), and together with other actors (such as students, precarious workers and activists), opens the possibility for a wider and more complex mobilisation. Last but not least, these struggles have brought a long forgotten issue back onto the political agenda: victory. In times of crisis, this is probably the most useful lesson that we can take away.

CHAPTER 14

Sweat and Detergent not Bread and Roses: Behind the Shiny Surface of London's Financial Industry, Latin Cleaners Struggle for Dignity

*Elmar Wigand**

I first met Vincent, a Wobbly based in London, in 2010, when he came to visit Cologne, my hometown.[1] We became friends. Vincent was an experienced trade unionist in his forties, had been a shop steward at his workplace, a cinema, for many years, and as a political activist had dedicated himself to establishing a branch of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). At the time, he was brimming with enthusiasm. His union's London branch was apparently on the brink of an enormous breakthrough: the syndicalist organisational structure was about to become a proper union. Around 200 Latin-American cleaners in London had just broken with the established service union Unite and switched over to the IWW.

Three years on, most of the enthusiasm had evaporated and, in the wake of personal and political conflicts (or an obscure combination of the two), Vincent had left the IWW; at the same time, a large number of the Latin American cleaners had also turned their backs on the Wobblies to form their own International Workers of Great Britain (IWGB).

I decided to take a closer look at this chapter of labour history from an outsider's perspective. It interested me for the following reasons. For one thing, it features at least three different union organisational concepts and the specific problems they face in central London: a Latin American community organisational strategy with a strong Colombian element; a professional organising campaign based on Saul Alinsky's and John L. Lewis's[2] concepts, and carried

* The author would like to thank Gabriela Quevedo (University of Nottingham) for her important advice and support and the IWW General Membership Branch of London for their hospitality.

1 Wobbly is a nickname commonly given to members of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). Name changed.

2 Saul David Alinsky (1909–72) from Chicago is considered to be the founder of modern community organising. John L. Lewis (1880–1969) served from 1920–60 as president of the United Mine Workers of America (UMW). In the 1930s he was the driving force behind a

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out with the aid of organisers from the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) in the US; as well as the syndicalist approach of establishing an independent grassroots union based on self-organisation and political activism.

Ever since the 1980s, there has been a steadily growing Latino international population in central London.[3] Colombians, Ecuadoreans and Brazilians come together in the cleaning crews that clean the glass facades, the hallways and the toilets inside the office blocks. They unionised in 2002. As a result of the economic crisis of 2008 and the ensuing downward slide of South European countries, there has also been an additional inflow from Spain and Portugal. In April 2013 I conducted a number of semi-structured interviews with eight cleaners – four women and four men.[4] They were members of the syndicalist unions IWW and IWGB; some were also dual-card members of the professional union Unite.

Above all, an analysis of the London cleaners' working conditions and struggles reveals how difficult it is to develop workers' power deep in the heart of modern financial capitalism, in a company structure characterised by outsourcing and cascading tiers of subcontractors.

As chance would have it, while I was on location in the spring of 2013 to conduct the interviews, longstanding former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher died. From 1979 on, Thatcher's conservative government sealed the fate of British heavy industry[5] and did its utmost to promote the rise of the financial oasis of the City of London to the leading centre of capital in the northern hemisphere – next, that is, to Manhattan. In the 1980s, Thatcher's foes had already sworn an oath to celebrate the death of the Iron Lady on Trafalgar Square at 6 p.m. on the Saturday following her demise.[6] But her opponents were not even granted this belated and therefore somewhat stale and perhaps macabre triumph over a geriatric pensioner who suffered from dementia. On

massive industrial organising campaign that led to the founding of the Congress of Industrial Organisations (CIO) in 1938.

3 Però estimated the Latino community in Great Britain at 500,000 in 2008, half of them Brazilians, 200,000 Colombians and 50,000 Ecuadoreans (Peró 2008, p. 10). This number will have soared since 2008.

4 Five of the people I interviewed were from Colombia, two were from Ecuador and one was from Portugal.

5 Prime Minister Thatcher's term of office (1979–90) saw the implementation of mass dismissals, closures, and the privatisation of the former state coal, steel, railway, and car (British Leyland) industries. The defeat of the National Union of Miners (NUM) in the great miners' strike of 1984–5 had traumatic consequences for the entire British labour movement.

6 This arrangement was later reconfirmed by the group Class War.

that Saturday, 13 April 2013, it was freezing cold and tipping it down and nobody was really in the mood either for partying or rioting. It was a modest crowd of about 300 people. In the following week, Baroness Thatcher was awarded a state funeral with all the requisite pomp and circumstance, attended by 2,300 invited guests.[7] At least the song 'Ding Dong, the Witch is Dead', sung by Judy Garland in the musical 'The Wizard of Oz', took the British charts by storm, lending expression to the very mixed state of mind that prevailed in the British Isles at the time.[8]

One can safely say that Margaret Thatcher and her strategies laid the foundations for the City of London as it is today. In 2009, the City district had around 300,000 workers, most of them in financial services, and it is the site of JP Morgan Chase & Co.'s and Merrill Lynch & Co.'s European headquarters as well as of large buildings of the Royal Bank of Scotland (RBS) and the Deutsche Bank AG.[9]

A closer look at the London cleaners is rewarding also because it allows us to take a look behind the shiny, flawlessly polished facade of a society based on the provision of services that preaches the benefits of neoliberalism and its pioneers as an alternative model to the grubby traditional industrial culture dogged by class warfare and socialist worker culture and folklore. Inside the office blocks, early in the morning or late at night, the opposing poles of this 'modern' service world encounter one another, apparently by chance: highly paid financial managers, analysts, management consultants, and solicitors and underprivileged cleaning staff, who generally earn less than what official calculations say would be necessary for a life of dignity in London.

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7 Thatcher's death was commemorated on 17 April 2013 with a memorial service with full military honours at St. Paul's Cathedral, attended by 2,300 invited guests, and following a procession through central London. The ceremony cost around £3.6 million. Source: 'Margaret Thatcher's Ashes buried in London', *Associated Press*, 28 September 2013.

8 Following an online campaign, the song climbed to number one on the British iTunes charts, among others. The BBC came under fire over the question of whether or not they should play the song as part of their compilation of the current top five hits. Source: 'BBC Faces Controversy Over Airing Of Anti-Thatcher Hit "Ding Dong, The Witch Is Dead"', *huffingtonpost.com*, 12 April 2013. Lyman Frank Baum's book *The Wizard of Oz*, published in the USA in 1900, is, according to anthropologist and Occupy activist David Graeber, often seen as a parable on a world run by bankers (the Wicked Witch of the East and the Wicked Witch of the West), where poor farmers are driven from their homes and holdings by financial privatisation and debt servitude. Oz is the standard American abbreviation for ounce, the unit for measuring gold and silver. See Graeber 2011, p. 59.

9 Penny and Lysaght 2009.

The Making of a Service Caste[10]

In London, the cleaning sector is a Latino domain. You might even say that Latinos in London constitute a sort of cleaning caste. This sector offers easy access to new arrivals, but at the same time it is a dead end.[11] Facility firms, in their role as subcontractors, profit from the insecure residency status of many of their workers.

> The cleaning companies prefer workers without documents because it is easier for them. Those people don't claim anything, you can put more and more work to them.[12]

Most Latinos switch from one subcontractor to the next within the same sector, unable to leave the industry. There is one simple reason for this: language skills.

> If we Latin American people arrive here, the first thing we work is in the cleaning sector. There is no choice. The most important thing is the language barrier. It is a job where you don't have to speak English. Another opportunity is washing dishes in restaurants. But there the exploitation is even worse. People have to work plenty of hours. They are paid only up to £4 per hour. The minimum wage is £6.19 right now.[13]

Another factor contributing to the emergence of a sort of Latino caste is the fact that many foremen and forewomen are from the same countries.

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10 The lack of English-language skills plays an essential part in tying the Latin American community to this sector, as well as being a central criterion for the emergence of formal or informal leaders amongst labourers. Besides this, linguistic factors had a strong influence on the interviews I conducted. For instance, I could only speak to two of my interviewees, Rodrigo and Roberta, in English on a one-on-one basis (Name changed. Rodrigo (*1959) came to London from Colombia in 1996 and has been working in the cleaning sector ever since. Roberta (*1983) also came from Colombia in 2001 and worked in the cleaning sector till 2011). For the other interviews I had to rely on translators from the unions IWW and IWGB.

11 According to my interviewees, Poles and Africans are also employed in the cleaning sector as well as Latinos. But the former seem to be less tied down to cleaning, either because they already speak English or because they have fewer difficulties learning the language. Moreover, another alternative is provided by the building sector, a Polish domain.

12 Interview with Rodrigo, April 2013.

13 Ibid.

At a first glance, it may seem remarkable that some of my interviewees still have great difficulty in communicating fluently in English, even after living in London for years (in some cases decades), especially as they are perfectly aware of how language works as a barrier and an exclusion criterion – or as a significant key to social mobility, respectively. This seems even more remarkable when one bears in mind that there were, especially among the Colombians, many skilled people with a wealth of union experience and that all the people I spoke to openly expressed their distaste for cleaning work.[14]

> I don't like the cleaning. If fairy godmother gave me three wishes, my first wish would be winning the lottery and build a human rights organisation together with my daughter. She studied criminology. We could give legal advice to immigrants. My second wish would be to return to my old job as mechanical engineer.[15]

Roberta, in answer to my question as to what three wishes she would ask an imaginary fairy godmother to grant her at the workplace, said:

> To be treated like a person, to be treated with more respect. To get less work. Right now they take advantage at every place. They give people so much workload. Not a good salary.[16]

The reason why most cleaners have neither the time nor the leisure to master the language is the reality of their workday: the daily struggle for financial survival in several badly paid, extremely stressful jobs for different cleaning firms, leading to a completely fragmented daily and weekly routine.

> I used to work for three different companies at the same time. In total it has been so many of them during my ten years in that sector. I used to have an early morning job from 2 to 6 a.m., then two hours at midday and again from 6 to 10 p.m.[17]

However, working for different subcontractors at the same time does lead to a certain measure of autonomy. Losing your job is not a complete disaster, as

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14 For instance a teacher, an engineer, a metallurgist and a former teacher who had been employed by a bank in Spain.

15 Interview with Rodrigo, April 2013.

16 Interview with Roberta, April 2013.

17 Ibid.

long as it doesn't get you blacklisted. So now and then you can take the risk of getting sacked.

But on the whole, most cleaners are stuck in a vicious cycle. As they don't speak English, they can only work as cleaners behind the scenes. But because of the working realities described above, most of them lack the energy to learn the language. This is presumably aggravated by other barriers to learning: an aversion to the English language triggered by the condescension they experience on a daily basis.

> It is kind of a stereotype that as a cleaner you are no one. Sometimes you are bullied by your bosses, but also the people who work in the offices that you clean look at you as worse than rubbish. It is not general but you find lots of people that disrespect you, talk to you in a bad way. They do not say 'Please', or 'Could you', just: 'Pick that up!' with a loud voice. Things they would not do or say to someone else.[18]

The question arose as to why workers from Non-commonwealth States would even choose to emigrate to London. Rodrigo told me that emigration to London began with Pinochet's coup in Chile on 11 September 1973, followed by a wave of immigration from Colombia in the wake of the civil war and the threats to trade unionists and activists by the death squads. Until 1987, you could enter the country from Colombia without a visa. All the people I interviewed said they had found no alternative to London. They knew someone here, there were opportunities here – and they used them. London was far from the destination of their dreams and they did not really move there voluntarily.

The Unions Set Foot on Canary Wharf

According to the sociologist Davide Però, the Latin American cleaners began unionising in 2004.[19] Three Colombian and one Chilean worker, all four of them members of the Transport & General Workers Union (T&G), founded the Latin American Workers' Association (LAWAS). At first, the LAWAS constituted a sort of employees' branch within a broader community-based organisation called 'Frente Latino' (Latin Front), whose goal was to offer a classical representation of interests vis-à-vis politics and the administration as well as improving self-

18 Ibid.

19 Però 2008, p. 19.

presentation and visibility. This concern gained urgency following the death of Brazilian national Jean Charles de Menezes on 22 July 2005. The 27-year-old, who had been living in London for three years, was mistakenly shot dead at close range by the London Metropolitan police at Stockwell tube station.[20] According to Rodrigo, LAWAS had already begun to organise in 2002:

> I belonged to the first persons who started LAWAS about 2002. We gave advice to workers at cafés, McDonald's employees, cleaners. We did not have any local to do that, we gave our personal phone numbers. In 2005 a very active member, Ernesto R., got the opportunity to open an office in the T&G building in Manor House.[21]

For many months, LAWAS acted as a sort of autonomous section within an ambitious T&G organising campaign that took place inside a modern and prestigious complex of office blocks at Canary Wharf. This is the site of a central hub of financial capitalism, with banks such as HSBC, Citigroup, Morgan Stanley, Barclays, the world's largest law firm specialising in commercial law Clifford Chance, the news agency Reuters, and the auditing giant KPMG.

Within a short period of time, LAWAS saw rapid growth, expanding to around 1,000 members. Following the example of the 'Justice for Janitors' campaign in Los Angeles, T&G took public action against arbitrary dismissals, wage theft, and harassment and disrespectful behaviour from supervisors. Not only did the London campaign take its lead from campaigns in the US, it was also guided by SEIU organisers who had been part of the Los Angeles campaign. Rodrigo told me his perspective as a cleaner and LAWAS activist:

> In the Justice for Cleaners Campaign we tried to organise workers from everywhere despite we started the thing with LAWAS and pushed the union to do the campaign. It was in the Canary Wharf area which was a big space. I think approximately 3,000 cleaners were organised at that time, a big part were Latin Americans. But the majority was African.[22]

20 Apparently they mistook him for a terrorist due to his skin colour. The Menezes case, which caused a public outcry, forms part of the background to the London riots of 2–11 August 2011, which were triggered by the police again fatally shooting an innocent man. But it must also be viewed as a direct consequence of the Islamist bomb attacks of 7 July 2005, in which 52 people were killed and over 700 injured by four bombs detonated in the London Underground.

21 Interview with Rodrigo, April 2013.

22 Ibid.

According to Rodrigo, organising with African co-workers did not go very smoothly. I was unfortunately unable to coax the reasons for this out of him, but widely different preconditions were presumably a contributing factor: 'The African people speak English but many of them do not have a good level of education. So they are excluded from other jobs'.[23]

The T&G campaign gave rise to great hopes and left equally great disappointments behind:

> T&G recruited people and trained them as paid organisers. The target at that time was to recruit 100 organisers, but they only recruited 16. In 2013 there are only six or seven left. Organising a new sector is very difficult. There are many languages for example, many ethnicities and cultures, living all across the city. At the beginning of the campaign there was a lack of staff. They started at Canary Wharf and in the City of London but they did not complete the organising in the City. They just did one part and did not complete other parts in 2008. There is still a lot of potential to organise people right now.[24]

The South Americans, with their union background, presumably had different expectations and would most likely not have proceeded in the same way as the T&G organisers:

> Basically, joining a union is the best way to oppose the boss or the company. But the Latin American workers have a wrong idea about unions according to our countries. In our countries the union activities are better, here they are more like a company. Their only interest is to receive the money. When the workers have a problem there is nobody to deal with properly … I am still a member [of T&G/Unite], but I have little contact to them. Sometimes they invite me to meetings, but it's a waste of time.[25]

The Justice for Cleaners campaign's greatest success was to lead the cleaners out of their invisibility and make them conscious of their own numbers and strength. Additionally, on the basis of a broader campaign to call attention to the high cost of living in London, they presented demands for a London Living

23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.

Wage, which were actually met in some of the buildings.[26] Unlike the nationally fixed legal minimum wage, the London Living Wage (LLW) takes the exorbitant costs of living in the metropolis into account. It is calculated annually by the mayor of London's Greater London Authority economics department. In 2005, researchers estimated that 400,000 full-time and 300,000 part-time workers in London were earning less than the £6.70 per hour calculated at the time. In 2014, the London Living Wage was £8.80.

Who is Behind the UK Citizens?

The interplay here between union-based and community organisation is interesting. Not only are both influenced by US-American examples, the organisations supporting the campaigns are also personally and financially connected via North-American unions like the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and foundations. The London Living Wage Foundation is part of the organisation UK Citizens, which sees itself as 'the home of Community Organising in the United Kingdom'.[27] Its founder, Neil Jameson, states that he was inspired by a community organising training programme in the USA in the early 1990s. The concept of UK Citizens, which also supports numerous sub-organisations in London boroughs, is not only reminiscent of the Chicago based Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF)[28] founded by Saul Alinsky in 1940, it is actually an official affiliate of the IAF.[29]

The wage demands presented by the London Living Wage Foundation created a political framework that found wide support among local politicians, even in conservative circles.[30] Within this framework, unions are able to put public pressure on companies who pay only the legal minimum wage, which in London – in light of astronomic rents and living expenses – can safely be seen as a poverty wage. This moral and political pressure can be increased and focused even more by pointing out the profits made by the respective companies and the personal salaries and bonuses enjoyed by top staff members.

26 Datta 2005, pp. 6–7.

27 http://www.citizensuk.org/about.

28 The IAF trained the young Barack Obama and Hilary Clinton, among others.

29 http://www.industrialareasfoundation.org/affiliate-members#intl.

30 Not only left-wing Ken Livingston, but even Tory mayor Boris Johnson officially supports the London Living Wage.

Accordingly, after the financial crash in 2008, public opinion turned against bankers and managers of banks that needed bailing out with public funds, while continuing to approve generous bonuses for themselves. In 2009, the financial news provider Bloomberg reported on a manager at the Royal Bank of Scotland: 'CEO Fred Goodwin's house was vandalized this week … Public anger erupted at Goodwin's £703,000 annual pension after RBS was bailed out by the government'.[31]

In this context, it is somewhat paradoxical to note that the community organisation 'London Citizens' – a subsidiary of UK Citizens and affiliate of the London Living Wage Foundation – receives funding from, of all things, banking giant JP Morgan and global-scale law firm Freshfields.[32] But after all, in 2008, the *Guardian* reported that high street banks HSBC, Citicorp, and Barclays and two of the Big Four audit firms, PriceWaterhouseCoopers and KPMG in Canary Wharf, were persuaded to pay their employees the London Living Wage.[33]

Leaving the Professional Union Unite

In 2008 the Latin American cleaners and the union T&G began to part ways. Rodrigo, now a dual card member of both the business union Unite and the syndicalist union IWW, describes the day the LAWAS cleaners moved into their own office, placed at their disposal by the T&G, as the greatest moment in his career as a trade unionist in the cleaning sector. But the T&G was also linked to his greatest disappointment.

> It was a publicity campaign. I took part in a demonstration in front of Parliament. We were doing all the job, but when TV cameras and photographers arrived the T&G General Secretary suddenly appeared. After that we never saw him again. Now, I guess it was just a public relations campaign for T&G.[34]

On 1 May 2007, T&G merged with the private sector union Amicus to form the union with the most members in the UK: 'Unite the Union'. In 2010, it represented around 1.1 million workers, but according to information provided

31 Penny and Lysaght 2009.

32 Other supporters of the London Citizens are Deptford Trust, High Street Fund, Proticus Oak Foundation, and Trust for London.

33 Hennecke 2008.

34 Interview with Rodrigo, April 2013.

by former Unite leader Tony Woodley, it lost 262,740 members between 2007 and 2010.[35] T&G may well have invested in the image-improving Justice for Cleaners campaign in order to be able to wield more clout within the new organisation. The upper ranks' enthusiasm and organising verve certainly took a sudden and conspicuous downturn once the merger had taken place.

In September 2009, the union cancelled the lease on the LAWAS cleaners' office. The dispute behind this action was sparked off mainly by the LAWAS' vehement support of workers with no legal residency status and the, in their view, hesitant support of Unite functionaries in defending organisers. Some of the organisers, such as Alberto Durango, who was later to become an IWGB leader, were blacklisted, others were threatened with deportation.[36] In hindsight, Rodrigo had second thoughts as to whether it actually was worth breaking with T&G/Unite:

> Maybe we should have made more compromises with the unions at the time we accepted help from them. I did not have any idea about unions in London, although I already stayed seven years in the country. How they work. I thought they were comparable to Colombian unions.[37]

The people I interviewed also criticised T&G's methods for their rigid organising plan, which only included workers in the Canary Wharf district. LAWAS, on the other hand, was present all over central London and was embroiled at the time in acute conflicts in buildings owned by the National Physical Laboratory and the BBC, but had faced obstruction from T&G organisers. By the end of 2009, the LAWAS workers had found a new union home in the London branch of the syndicalist union Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). 'In a meeting there were two proposals: one was to create a Latin American union, the other one was to join the IWW. We did the last thing at that time'.[38]

Joining the IWW led to a tricky basic setup. A relatively small group of British activists, who – due to their lack of funding on the one hand and their adherence to the principles of creating a non-professional grassroots union on the other – had to do without paid functionaries or an experienced bureau organisation, 'inherited' a considerably larger, sectoral group, already engaged in a great number of workplace conflicts. Together, they fought out

35 Harding 2011.
36 Ibid.
37 Interview with Rodrigo, April 2013.
38 Ibid.

a number of high-profile conflicts, for instance against the United Bank of Switzerland (UBS), the venerable Guildhall and its subcontractors, suffered a few defeats and scored a couple of remarkable successes. For instance, after several strikes, the IWW Industrial Union 640 was able to prevent drastic pay cuts and dismissals for cleaners working for the department store chain John Lewis.[39]

Another Split

But in August 2012 there was a rift here too. A large number of cleaners surrounding the organisers Alberto Durango and Chris Ford split off again to form the International Workers of Great Britain (IWGB). The reasons given for this vary according to perspective. With some sense of humour Rodrigo comments: 'For Latin American organisations it is normal to split up. It happens all the time [laughs]'.[40]

The IWGB has a slight but discernible Trotskyist-Leninist tendency, which may be difficult to reconcile with the principles of the IWW.[41] But these may be merely symptoms, or ideological trimming. The main reason for the rifts that occurred is more likely to be found in the extreme tension between the revolutionary zeal of individual organisers, the real distress of the workers resulting in an enormous response to the campaigns, and the straitened (unpaid) resources. Some IWW activists criticised the IWGB's political model, calling it a nine-day wonder. People were activated at short notice, there were campaigns going on all the time, a lot of bluster and red flags, but no sustainable growth and, measured against the effort expended, not much success. The entire organisation was seen to revolve around only two or three big chiefs. 'I first started to unionise with protests, with Alberto and all that stuff. But that is the worst way to do it. People do not identify with it'.[42] Roberta left the cleaners' protests in the summer of 2012. She describes her personal disillusionment, her progressive burning out as follows:

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39 See 'Cleaners' success heralds a rebirth of industrial unionism', available at: http://libcom.org/blog/cleaners-success-heralds-rebirth-industrial-unionism-15082012, 15 August 2012.

40 Interview with Rodrigo, April 2013.

41 On 29 March 2014, the IWGB held a conference with the Trotskyist organisation 'Workers' Liberty'.

42 Interview with Roberta, April 2013.

> Things that made me tired were like this: One day there was a big protest at the Guildhall. And it started at six in the morning. To get there we had to get up at about 5 a.m. I identified with it until then, but I realised that I was about to stop living my life to live a different life that was not giving anything to me. That did not give anything for my little son and was not giving anything to anyone. If you fight you don't have to win anytime. But you have to improve the situation a little bit in the end at least. Sometimes they give you a little more money but you do not change anything in the end. You have to wake people up more. Sometimes it was really fun on the other hand. When we first got active with the IWW Cleaners branch it felt like a family. You got things in common. But then it started with drinking. I do not drink, but I am not against events with alcohol. But if you have to do it every weekend and even during the week … It started to affect my life in a negative way and I started to move away from it. Organising and unionising is good until it affects your life negatively. What also bothered me was all the fall outs and factional fights inside.[43]

While the IWW still represents a number of cleaners in the British Medical Association (BMA)[44] and the department store chain John Lewis, the last high profile action of the IWW Cleaners Branch took place in November 2012 when they organised a lobby to a BMA Council meeting and spread leaflets to demand a London Living Wage for the cleaning staff of BMA House. In comparison, the IWGB was able to develop a far greater momentum. For instance, in November 2013 and January 2014, by their own account and confirmed by media reports, not only the cleaners, but also porters, security staff and maintenance workers employed by the contractor Cofely GDF-Suez at the University of London went on strike.

Lacking Power of Production

The real problem faced by the cleaner organisation lies deeper than these differences between the various chosen forms of organisation. The cleaners had few options for striking at their workplaces, as Rodrigo explains: 'It may be possible to refuse to work in our job, but everybody is afraid to lose the job. This does not regularly happen here'. The cleaning work is carried out according

43 Ibid.
44 IWW London 2013.

to general guidelines rather than situational necessities. Cleaners are usually pressured to treat basically completely clean rooms and surfaces frequently and repeatedly with, in part, highly toxic and harmful substances.

> Chemicals. That is the worst thing about cleaning, I think. They are really strong. They even got a black and orange X-sign on the back, which means it is really dangerous. For example if you work in a kitchen you are not allowed to keep liquids with that sign at your workplace. I used to clean toilets with a liquid called Descaler every morning. I ended up with really strong headaches that lasted for more than a year even after I quit the cleaning job. I had to take special treatments. I have a friend that almost lost her eyesight from it. And my dad got intoxicated by bleach. He was cleaning something and put more than he should and he started coughing really bad. He had to go to the doctor who diagnosed him with intoxication. His lung was affected, he had to take special medication.[45]

It is not only the fear of dismissal, or even of deportation, that keeps workers in the cleaning sector from going on strike. The central problem is not a lack of union organisation or an underdeveloped culture of industrial action – the Colombians in particular had a number of militant trade unionists in their ranks. The problem lies rather in the low power of production wielded by the cleaning sector. Pilots and engine drivers can, by striking for a week or two, bring an entire economy grinding to a halt; if the London cleaners go on strike for two weeks, this will become evident, at most, in the toilets. Hardly any measurable damage will be inflicted.

Occupy the Subcontractor System

The union protests and strikes by cleaners began before the crash in 2008; at this stage, the RMT (Rail, Maritime and Transport Union) seems to have been particularly successful in calling various strikes on London's tube. A widespread resentment at the excesses of the neoliberal era – especially bank bail-outs with public funds – took on physical form in numerous protests from 2009 onwards, also in central London. One milestone was a mass demonstration organised by the union federation TUC on 26 March 2011. The cleaners managed to mobilise activists from human and civil rights groups (for instance those fighting against

45 Interview with Roberta, April 2013.

racist discrimination and deportation) as well as the anti-capitalist movements Anonymous and Occupy London for their protest campaigns in front of banks, office blocks, and prestigious facilities such as the Royal Opera House or the Barbican Centre. For the time being, this growing potential strengthened their movement and raised it up to a more universal political level. This support may have been a factor in loosening their ties to the more established and financially powerful union T&G/Unite and taking the risk of organising themselves.

According to Rodrigo, the autonomous cleaners' protests started off with a defeat:

> It was at National Physical Laboratories (NPL), 2008, where a Company named Amey took over the cleaning contract and initially reduced the staff from 35 to 29 for the same job. There also was some kind of discrimination. I tried to organise everybody there. There were some conflicts. I advised my colleagues. We joined the official NPL union named Prospect. As we got into conflict we asked for solidarity from them but nobody would give it. Five of us were dismissed. We had a meeting, all 29 workers. We were working at nightshift. We wrote a leaflet to ask the NPL staff for solidarity and explained our situation: harassment, work overload … The five of us were dismissed because we stayed in line whereas the others retreated. One of them called the manager and the next day we were suspended. After that we had big demonstrations, every time NPL had an event we showed up. At the end we lost. But for me personally it was a very good experience. We won a lot on the other hand because it was the first time we started demonstrations at the workplace. Everybody came. After that, demonstrations followed at UBS and others. We started alternative methods to fight the employers and increase salary. For me, it was a very impressing point to start that.[46]

With the momentum provided by the abovementioned movements, the cleaners managed to drag themselves and their working conditions up from the depths of anonymity and, on the one hand, to use public direct actions to assert moral pressure on well-known companies and, on the other, at this delicate stage, with looming threats of government regulations and further bank crashes (which failed to materialise), to threaten them with a further loss of image.

46 Interview with Rodrigo, April 2013.

At the same time, the facility corporations reacted to their waning profits as a consequence of the crisis by turning up the exploitative pressure:

> In times of crises the bosses go to the vulnerable workers – which is cleaning and catering workers – we have to reduce staff to do the job. That means increase of workload to reach the same payment. This continues at the moment. At my workplace they reduced staff from 20 to 15 people because the budget was reduced as they said.[47]

Systematic Wage Dumping and Bullying

The neoliberal era and its strategies also encompass outsourcing a business structure as much as possible into a tangle of owners, operators, contractors and subcontractors. For example, an office block is built by a trust, which then commissions an operating company, which in turn rents it out to, e.g., UBS or Barclays. The cleaning work is then assigned to facility corporations such as MITIE (Management Incentive Through Investment Equity), the most despised company amongst my interview partners for alleged wage theft and harassment, Integrated Cleaning Management (ICM/Compass Group), Dynamic, Atlas Cleaning, Integrated Service Solutions (ISS), or Maintenance Management Ltd. (mml). The subcontractor system not only harnesses the pressure of competition to drive the respective companies to deploy constant wage dumping. The system also leads to a cascading shift of responsibilities and passing the buck. In the example given here, then, UBS and Barclays Bank might simply shrug their shoulders at the cleaners' protests against scandalous working conditions: we're just renting this office block, we didn't know. With enough pressure, they might even ensure that the contract with one cleaning firm is cancelled and another firm is appointed for the task. While the affected workers would then have the right to continue working at the same location, realistically, this is difficult to enforce. The people I interviewed reported that new supervisors would often try to force people into giving up their jobs:

> If you managed to stay over three years it is really hard to sack you. So when a client changes the cleaning sub-contractor and a new company comes in, they have to take over the same staff. What usually happens is that the new company tries to get rid of the workers and finds ways to

47 Ibid.

> bring in their own staff. They ask for your papers again to find out how long you have worked there, what your legal status is.[48]

Systematic Wage Theft

Subcontractors automatically reacted to any pay rises that were won by reducing staff, so that fewer cleaners had to cope with the same number of rooms and hallways and work pressure increased accordingly. Four of the people I interviewed told me that the greatest mistake they made at the workplace was working too fast at the beginning. Cleaning work is not paid by the hour; instead it is a sort of concealed piecework – its criterion is the number of rooms and floors that must be completed within a single shift. If you finish early, that does not mean you can leave early; instead, you are given more work to do. If you finish late, on the other hand, you will not, in most cases, be paid for overtime.

Roberta was subjected to special pressure once she had risen in the cleaning company's ranks to area supervisor. This made her, a young woman, 26 years of age, responsible for the cleanliness of four buildings in one area, where she had to coordinate nearly 60 cleaners who were given instructions by three supervisors on different floors. She was on location from morning till night and had to be reachable by phone around the clock.

> One of the difficult things was: if you work with 30 people, usually on Monday less people come because they went on parties during the weekend. So if four or five persons do not come, each working two-and-a-half hours, you have to cover that time. Usually as a supervisor you have one or two people to help you. But if nobody comes you have to do it yourself.[49]

On top of all this, she became pregnant during this time:

> All this responsibility was really hard, especially while I was pregnant. The company gave me a phone, a headset. I worked there physically four hours in the morning and four hours at night. But they called me anytime. And every two weeks they called me to deal with wages. Which people did not come, what people earned, holidays. It was a huge mess. I also had to deal with clients. If anything went wrong they called you. I had to make sure

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48 Interview with Roberta, April 2013.

49 Ibid.

> that everything was done. We had to wear uniforms, put warning signs on the floor, all that stuff. I phoned them three times a week asking if they were satisfied.[50]

Unlike Roberta, who was unionised from 2010 on and left the cleaning sector in 2011, many supervisors will often show no restraint in taking out the pressure they are under on their subordinates. The Colombian cleaner Alberto told me that his bully of a boss at MITIE would verbally abuse him on a regular basis:

> He calls me for example 'Marica', 'Marron' [homosexual]. He is Colombian. *Es lo que mas duele, que es de tu tierra*. [What hurts me most is that he is coming from my country.] As we say: no stick is harder than the stick coming from the same tree.[51]

But there are – just – a few positive examples. Roberta managed to create a sense of solidarity among the office workers in one building.

> In my last job I worked for a company called MITIE. They are huge. And I worked in their own administration building. That was really interesting because all the employees in their offices – like engineers, builders, environmental experts etc. – they used to love me and cared about me. So every time I had a problem with my managers at MITIE Cleaning they had to deal with people from other departments of that company. Although they tried to sack me, they did not succeed. They tried to shift wages from £6 to £5.50, or they wanted to cut the estimated time for one job from two-and-a-half hours to two hours. Sometimes when I checked my account there was no money at all. So I called some bosses that gave my managers a hard time.[52]

A Longer Run-Up Would be Necessary

The terrain of the London Cleaners struggle is characterised by extremely low power of production, which can be compensated for only by a high degree of public pressure. This is exceedingly difficult to maintain permanently. The

50 Ibid.

51 Interview with Alberto, April 2013.

52 Interview with Roberta, April 2013.

success of a union should really be measured according to what gains they make for their workers and how well they manage to defend their members' rights. A union should not be an end in itself. In the case of the London cleaners, however, this may not be quite the case.

The fact that the London cleaners have been organising public protests for nearly a decade now, that they still even exist – in whatever form – is, in the face of the conditions they work under – an accomplishment in itself. Within their union-based organisations, the London cleaners have achieved stability through community, solidarity and the exchange of experiences; with their support, they have forged ties with political organisations, campaigns and the media.

In the ten years with which it deals, this London case study has featured four different organisational forms: a community organisation based on Latin American roots and Spanish and Portuguese language and culture (LAWAS); a professional union (T&G/Unite), requiring a lot of money to launch their organising plans in the industry (in Canary Wharf) as well as in the political sphere (Justice 4 Cleaners/London Living Wage) – only to curtail them again; a syndicalist approach to union organisation (IWW) based to a high degree on voluntary work and political activism – that is to say, a lack of resources and professionalism; and a new union organisation (IWGB) that appears to combine Leninist elements and campaigning styles with a blend of community and industry sector organisation. Over time, the IWGB may well have developed into a sustainable hybrid form. We can only hope that the organisation will be spared any further fractionalisations and ideological, sectarian schisms that are such a common feature within the unfathomable parallel universe of Marxist-Leninist-inspired groups in London.

Today, the IWGB cleaners' group meets every Saturday at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). The IWGB is recognised there as an official union and maintains good relations with left-wing student organisations as well as other institute employees. Besides providing union counselling, the IWGB keeps up the LAWAS tradition of community organisation by offering English and Spanish language classes. You can learn samba dancing there too.[53] Their protest actions are regularly accompanied by a samba ensemble. Remarkably enough, from 2013 on, Portuguese flags have also been turning up at IWGB rallies. Starting out from a Colombian-Ecuadorean core, the IWGB may well grow to become a Latino-Ibero union in the low-wage sector – above and beyond London and the cleaning sector.

53 http://iwgb.org.uk/whats-going-on/ (last retrieved September 12, 2014).

The goal of the One Big Union, as propagated by the IWW since 1905, does however still seem a long way away – an organisation that on the one hand does not curtail or curb the organisational strengths inherent in various communities and, on the other hand, does not stay within the limits posed by these communities, but rather dissolves the boundaries, for instance, between Polish, African and of course British workers. In the face of the limited resources available to independent grassroots organisations such as the IWW and the IWGB, this would seem a herculean task – especially if we bear in mind the financial power, deriving from foundations and sponsors, wielded by organisations such as UK Citizens and various NGOs.[54]

54 These organisations, who promote a liberal version of capitalism tamed by civil society, constantly incorporate and assimilate political activists into their ranks, luring them in with promises of jobs and funding.

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