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## ***Table of contents***

<b>LETTER FROM THE EDITOR.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>DOSSIER: WHO IS THE WORKING CLASS? .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>THE WORKING CLASS TODAY: THE NEW FORM OF BEING OF THE CLASS WHO LIVES FROM ITS LABOUR</b>	
<b><i>RICARDO ANTUNES</i> .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>MARX’S CONCEPT OF THE WORKING CLASS AND SOME TRENDS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF CAPITALISM</b>	
<b><i>NICOLÁS IÑIGO CARRERA</i> .....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>THE DESTINY OF LABOUR IN CAPITAL BOOK III</b>	
<b><i>JORGE GRES PAN</i> .....</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>WHO ARE THE WORKERS OF THE WORLD? MARX AND BEYOND</b>	
<b><i>MARCEL VAN DER LINDEN</i> .....</b>	<b>55</b>
<b>THE WORKING CLASS: A CONTEMPORARY APPROACH IN THE LIGHT OF HISTORICAL MATERIALISM</b>	
<b><i>MARCELO BADARÓ MATTOS</i> .....</b>	<b>77</b>
<b>NURSE MILITANCY AND STRIKE ACTION</b>	
<b><i>LINDA BRISKIN</i>.....</b>	<b>105</b>
<b>ENERGY WORKERS AGAINST THATCHERITE NEOLIBERALISM. SCOTTISH COALMINERS AND NORTH SEA OFFSHORE WORKERS: REVISITING THE CLASS STRUGGLE IN THE UK IN THE 1980s</b>	
<b><i>TERRY BROTHERSTONE</i>.....</b>	<b>135</b>
<b>“LAS ANSIAS DE PARTICIPACIÓN”: THE OFFENSIVE OF URBAN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN THE PROCESS OF POLITICAL CHANGE IN SPAIN (1975-77). A VIEW FROM BARCELONA'S METROPOLITAN AREA</b>	
<b><i>IVAN BORDETAS JIMENEZ</i>.....</b>	<b>155</b>
<b>L’ ORDINE NUOVO AND THE WORKERS’ COUNCILS MOVEMENT IN TURIN IN THE POSTWAR YEARS (1919-1920)</b>	
<b><i>ANGELO D’ORSI AND FRANCESCA CHIAROTTO</i>.....</b>	<b>169</b>

<b>A LAST DESPERATE, BUT FUTILE, ATTEMPT TO SHORE UP THE INDUSTRIAL PILLARS OF APARTHEID: THE MINERS' STRIKE OF 1979 AND THE IMPACT OF THE WIEHAHN REFORMS ON SOUTH AFRICAN LABOUR</b>	
<i>WESSEL VISSER</i> .....	<b>195</b>
<b>ADAMANT AND MULTIFACETED: DIAMOND WORKERS' STRIKES IN WORLD WAR II PALESTINE</b>	
<i>DAVID DE VRIES</i> .....	<b>215</b>
<b>THREE CHEERS FOR DATA! INTERVIEWS WITH BEVERLY SILVER AND SJAAK VAN DER VELDEN</b>	
<i>INTERVIEWER: VILJA HULDEN</i> .....	<b>231</b>
<b>OUR AUTHORS</b> .....	<b>248</b>

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## Letter from the editor

**Y**ou are looking at the second issue of *Workers of the World – International Journal on Strikes and Social Conflicts*. *Workers of the World* is the journal of the International Association Strikes and Social Conflicts (<http://iassc-mshdijon.in2p3.fr/>), born of the International Conference Strikes and Social Conflicts, held in Lisbon, UNL, on 16-20 March 2011. During the last year the Association kept growing and has now the participation of three dozen academic institutions from Europe, Africa, North and South America.

The *dossier* of this second issue discusses Who is the Working Class?, with articles by Ricardo Antunes, Nicolás Iñigo Carrera, Jorge Grespan, Marcel van der Linden and Marcelo Badaró Mattos. We also have articles by Linda Briskin on nurses' strikes; Terry Brotherstone revisiting two important British workers' struggles of the 80s: the coalminers' strike of 1984-5 and the offshore oil workers' industrial actions of 1989-90; Ivan Bordetas Jimenez on urban social movements in the process of political change in Spain (1975-77); Angelo d'Orsi and Francesca Chiarotto on Gramsci's *L'Ordine Nuovo* and the workers' councils movement in Turin (1919-1920); Wessel Visser discusses the miners' strike of 1979 and the impact of the Wiehahn reforms on South African labour; and David De Vries writes about the diamond workers' strikes in World War II Palestine. This issue closes with two interviews by Vilja Hulden to Beverly Silver and Sjaak van der Velden where they address different aspects of the problem of accurate, global-level data on labour conflict according to their experiences.

*Workers of the World* is an academic journal with peer review published in English, for which original manuscripts may be submitted in Spanish, French, English, Italian and Portuguese. It publishes original articles, interviews and book reviews in the field of labour history and social conflicts in an interdisciplinary, global, long term historical and non Eurocentric perspective.

Articles should be sent, according to the Editorial and publishing rules that you may find in our site (<http://workersoftheworldjournal.net/>), to the executive editor at [workersoftheworld2012@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:workersoftheworld2012@yahoo.co.uk).

António Simões do Paço  
Executive Editor

**The working class today: the new form of being of the class  
who lives from its labour<sup>1</sup>**

*Ricardo Antunes*

**W**ho constitutes the working class today? Does it still maintain its position of centrality in social transformations? These are not simple questions and for decades they have been subject to an avalanche of deconstructions.

The central thesis we seek here to develop is that the centre of social transformation, in the amplified destructive logic of contemporary capitalism, is still principally rooted in the whole of the working class. From the beginning, we will refute two equivocal theories: that nothing has changed within the workers' universe and, its opposite, that the working class is not capable of radically transforming capitalist society.

It is curious that, as the number of workers who live by selling their labour-power has increased on a global scale, so many authors have waved *farewell to the proletariat* and have defended the notion of the *loss of centrality of the category of labour*, or the end of human emancipation through labour.

What I shall demonstrate here is an opposite path. I will attempt a *critique of the critique* in order to make clear what I have been calling the *new morphology of labour* and its potentialities.

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<sup>1</sup> Translated by Daila Eugenio.

The definition of the working class today is a central issue. If the current working class is not identical to that which existed in the mid-twentieth century neither is it on the way to *extinction* nor has it *ontologically* lost its structuring sense in the everyday life of the social being. What then is its current *form of being*?

We know that both Marx and Engels regarded “working class” and “proletariat” as synonyms. Also, in the Europe of the mid-nineteenth century, workers that had inspired the reflections of both theorists had acquired bodily expression within the industrial proletariat, which enabled the shared and even undistinguished designation between working class and proletariat.

Our theoretical and political challenge is to understand therefore who is the *class-that-lives-from-labour*<sup>2</sup> today, and how it is formed.

We begin with the idea that it comprises *the whole of the male and female population who live by selling their labour power and who do not possess the means of production*, according to the Marxist definition.

Marx designated as *productive workers* those who formed the core of the working class – especially in *Chapter VI* (unpublished) and in numerous other passages in *Capital* where the idea of *productive labour* is elaborated, comprising the *productive workers who produce surplus-value; are paid money-capital; express a form of collective and social labour; and carry out both material and immaterial labour*<sup>3</sup>.

Hence, it becomes clear in our analysis that the working class today does not find itself restricted to direct manual labour, but incorporates the *totality of social labour*, anyone who sells their labour power as a commodity in exchange for a wage.

Therefore, it is still centrally composed of *productive workers producing surplus-value* who also *participate in the process of the*

<sup>2</sup> The “just a working-class man” (*nur arbeitenden Menschenklasse*), Marx’s designation in the *1844 Manuscripts*. Marx, Karl. *Manuscriptos Econômico-Filosóficos*, São Paulo: Boitempo, 1994.

<sup>3</sup> Marx, Karl. *O Capital*, vol. 1, Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1971; Chapter VI (unpublished), in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 34, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1994. Also see Lukács, Georg. *Ontologia Dell’Essere Sociale*, vols. 1 and 2, Rome: Riuniti, 1981 and Mandel, Ernest. ‘Marx, La Crise Actuelle et L’Avenir du Travail Humain’, *Quatrième Internationale*, 2: 9–29, 1986.



*valorization of capital* through the interaction between living labour and dead labour, between human labour and technological-scientific machinery.

This segment constitutes the central nucleus of the modern proletariat. The products made by Toyota, Nissan, General Motors, IBM, Microsoft, etc. result from the interaction between living and dead labour, making groundless the theses, from Jürgen Habermas<sup>4</sup> to Robert Kurz<sup>5</sup>, that *abstract labour* has lost its structuring force in contemporary society.

If *abstract labour* (the use of physical and intellectual energy to produce commodities, as Marx described in *Capital*) has lost its structuring force in contemporary society, how are Toyota's cars produced?, Who creates Microsoft's software, General Motors' and Nissan's cars, Nike's shoes and McDonalds' hamburgers? – to mention just a few examples from prominent transnational corporations.

We advance here to a second important element: the working class also includes *unproductive workers*, again in Marx's understanding of the term; that is, those whose forms of labour are used as services, both for public *use*, such as traditional public services; and for capital's *use*. *Unproductive labour* is labour that does not constitute itself as a living element in the process of the valorisation of capital and the creation of surplus value. This is why Marx differentiates it from productive labour, which participates *directly* in the process of the creation of surplus value.

As the real differences are blurred – it is enough to recall that in the sphere of production today the same work has at the same time a productive and unproductive dimension since it is done by the same worker – the amplified working class includes, therefore, the broad array of unproductive wage-earners, anti-value producers within the capitalist work process, but who experience situations clearly similar to those experienced by productive workers. They belong to what Marx called the “overhead costs of production” that are, however, completely vital to the survival of the capitalism and its social metabolism.

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<sup>4</sup> Habermas, Jürgen. “Técnica e Ciência como ‘Ideologia’” in *Os Pensadores*, São Paulo: Abril, 1975; The New Obscurity in *The New Conservatism: Cultural Criticism and the Historians' Debate*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989; *The Theory of Communicative Action vol. 1: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, London: Polity Press, 1991; *The Theory of Communicative Action vol. 2: The Critique of Functionalist Reason*, London: Polity Press, 1992.

<sup>5</sup> Kurz, Robert. *O Colapso da Modernização*. São Paulo: Paz e Terra, 1992; *Os Últimos Combates*. Rio de Janeiro: Vozes, 1997.

Given that all productive labour is waged (“exceptions” aside, due to the resurgence of slave labour) but not all wage labour is productive, a contemporary understanding of the working class must include *all wage-earners*.

Therefore, *the working class today is broader, more heterogeneous, more complex and more fragmented than the industrial proletariat of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.*

An important question to our debate remains: does the modern proletariat, which executes *productive activities* (whether *material* or *immaterial* activities; made manually or in information technology work operating in the most advanced modern factories, exercising “intellectualized” activities), still have a central role in anti-capitalist struggles, exactly for creating *exchange-values* and *surplus-value*? Or conversely, does the amplified modern proletariat or the *class-that-lives-from-its-labour* not have any *necessarily* central role in its heterogeneity – including its participation/production/amplification of value, as well its concrete ideological-political reality?

Reformulating: in the conflicts led by workers all around the world, is it possible to detect a greater potential and role amongst the more skilled strata of the working class, in those living under ‘more stable’ conditions and who therefore participate to a greater extent in the process of value-creation? Or conversely, are the more fertile pole of actions found precisely amongst the most marginalized, sub-proletarianized strata?

We know that the more skilled, more intellectualized segments which advanced along with technological-information-digital development, given their central role in the creation of exchange-values, could be endowed, at least objectively, with greater potential for rebellion.

On the other hand, and paradoxically, these more skilled segments are experiencing a systematic process of manipulation and “involvement” (which are actually contemporary forms of fetishism and estrangement) within the workplace. In contrast, the broad array of precarious, part-time, temporary, etc., workers – the so-called *modern sub-proletariat* – along with the huge contingent of the unemployed, due to their greater distance from the process of value-creation, would have, at a material level, a less important role in anti-capitalist struggles. Yet the condition of dispossession leads them to daily confrontations with the destructive order, since they

have nothing else to lose in capital's universe of (un)sociability. Their subjectivity could be, therefore, more prone to lead to rebellion.

It is always worth remembering that the working class is a *condition of particularity*, a *form of being* carrying clear, intrinsic and non-eliminable relational elements of *objectivity* and *subjectivity*.

The working class for Marx is ontologically decisive due to its fundamental role in the process of value creation and class struggle. In the very materiality of the system and in the *subjective potentiality* its role becomes central. It will only lose this *potentiality* if and when *abstract labour* no longer plays a central role in the reproduction of capital.

In a broader sense, the working class thus includes all those selling their labour power in exchange for a wage such as the rural proletariat that sells its labour power to capital, for example, the so-called *bóias-frias* [day labourers] of Brazil's ethanol and agro-industrial regions. Moreover, we may include the growing part-time industrial and service-sector proletariat, characterized by temporary employment contracts and precarious working conditions. The working class also embraces – in a decisive manner today – *unemployed workers*.

The issue of immigration is perhaps one of the most emblematic features of capitalism. Given the sharp rise in the *new informal proletariat*, of the manufacturing and service-sector sub-proletariat, new jobs are performed by immigrant labour, such as the *Gastarbeiters* in Germany, the *lavoratori in nero* in Italy, the *chicanos* in the US, eastern European immigrants (Polish, Hungarian, Romanian, Albanian workers) in western Europe, the *dekasegis* of Japan, the Bolivians/Latin-Americans and Africans in Brazil, Argentina, etc.

Our concept of the working class *excludes* managers of capital, who constitute a portion of the dominant class for the important role they play in the control, hierarchy, power and management of capital and in its processes of valorization; small-business owners; urban and rural propertied bourgeoisie that holds – even if on a small scale – the means of production. Also excluded are those who live by means of speculation and interest.

Therefore, a broader understanding of the working class today entails a comprehension of this heterogeneous, amplified, complex and fragmented set of social beings living by the sale of their labour power, wage earners deprived of the means of production.

Under Taylorism/Fordism during the twentieth century, workers were not homogeneous: there had always been male workers, female workers, young workers, skilled and unskilled workers, native and immigrant workers, etc., i.e. multiple variations within the working class. Clearly at that time there was also outsourcing (in general, such as in restaurants, cleaning and public transport). But in the last decades we have witnessed a huge intensification of this process that has qualitatively affected the structure of the working class, increasing and intensifying the already existing divergences.

Unlike Taylorism/Fordism (which, it is important to remember, still exists in many parts of the world, albeit in a hybrid or mixed form), under Toyotism or flexible accumulation processes, workers are internalized and encouraged to become *their own despots*, as I showed in my book *Adeus ao Trabalho? (Farewell to Work?)*<sup>6</sup>. They are oriented by notions of self-incrimination and self-punishment if their production does not reach the well-known “targets”. They work in *teams* or *production-cells*, and if one of them does not turn up to work, he/she is supposed to justify themselves to members of the team. This is how things work, for instance, in the ideal of Toyotism. Resistance, rebellion and denial are completely opposed by managers, regarded as acts against the “good performance of the company”.

If within the Taylorist/Fordist system, scientific management *elaborates* and the manual labourer *executes*, under Toyotism and *flexibilized lean-production* forms, *intellectual knowledge* is allowed to blossom and worker subjectivity is appropriated by capital.

This expansive and complex process within the *sectors at the cutting edge of the productive process* (which can by no means be generalized nowadays), results in more intelligent machines, which in turn have to be operated by “skilled” workers, more capable of operating computerized machines. Throughout this process, new smarter machines perform activities done before solely by humans, creating an interaction process between a distinctive living labour and a computerized dead labour.

This prompted Habermas to misleadingly say that *science has become the leading productive force*, making superfluous the labour theory

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<sup>6</sup> Antunes, Ricardo. *Adeus ao Trabalho? Ensaio sobre as Metamorfoses e a Centralidade do Mundo do Trabalho*. São Paulo: Ed. Cortez, 2010.

of value. On the contrary, I believe in a new interaction between *living labour* and *dead labour*; there is a process of the technologification of science (in the concept of Mészáros<sup>7</sup>) which, however, cannot eliminate living labour in the process of value creation. Indeed, there is considerable evidence that, parallel to the rise of new forms of labour, there are new modalities of work in which the law of value obtains.

In fact, we are witnessing the growth and expansion of forms of the *creation of surplus value*, resulting from the articulation of highly advanced machinery (exemplified by communication and information technologies invading the commodity sphere), with capital demanding a more “skilled” and “competent” workforce.

Given the *new morphology of labour* and its huge range of *invisible workers*, *value-creating mechanisms* have been made effective, although under a *non-value appearance*, using new and old mechanisms of the intensification of work (if not through the very *self-exploration* of labour).

Our hypothesis thus goes beyond the loss of the legitimacy of the theory of value (expressed by Habermas, Kurz and Gorz<sup>8</sup>): it states that *labour invisibility is an apparent expression that conceals the real creation of surplus value within almost all spheres of the world of work where exploitation takes place*. Therefore, to the contrary of the postulations of detractors of the labour theory of value, there has been an important increase, empowerment and even execution of *surplus value* creation in contemporary capitalism.

Otherwise, why would there currently be 17-hour working days in the clothing industry of Sao Paulo, Brazil, performed by Bolivian or Peruvian (or other Latin-American) immigrant workers, usually informally hired and controlled by Korean or Chinese employers? Or African workers packing textile and clothing products in the Bom Retiro and Bras neighbourhoods in São Paulo? Those products are sold in the African market, created by an arduous and mainly manual labour, as documented by the workers themselves. Examples from the agribusiness sector abound. The average amount of sugarcane cut in the state of Sao Paulo by one worker is ten tons per day, whereas the average amount in the Northeastern region of Brazil can reach 18 tons per day.

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<sup>7</sup> Mészáros, István. *The Power of Ideology*, London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989; *Beyond Capital: Towards a Theory of Transition*, London: Merlin Press, 1995.

<sup>8</sup> Habermas, Op.Cit.; Kurz, Op.Cit.; Gorz, André. *Imaterial*, São Paulo: Annablume, 2005.

In Japan, for instance, young workers migrating and immigrating to the big cities looking for jobs spend the night in glass capsules; as a result, I have called them *encapsulated workers*. Furthermore, there are the *cyber-refugees*: young workers in Tokyo who do not have money to rent rooms, so they use cybercafés to rest and look for work. The cybercafés in the outskirts of Tokyo have special prices for workers willing to spend their night searching for *contingent jobs* on the Internet.

Once the informalization of labour, in its polymorphic design, becomes more permanent and structural, it seems to increasingly assume the distinctive mark of capital accumulation in contemporary society.

There is a new working-class contingent booming: information and communication technology workers, composed of everything from software producers to call centre and telemarketing staff. These workers are part of the new morphology of labour, and have been designated the *cybertariat* (Huws<sup>9</sup>) or the *infoproletariat* (Antunes and Braga<sup>10</sup>).

As we know, the global privatization of telecommunications and the search for more profitability in these companies have unleashed the increasing practice of outsourcing, resulting in multiple new ways of making time and movement within the work process more precarious and intense.

It is worth remembering that labour within the information and communication technology sectors is contradictorily structured: it aligns twenty-first century technologies to twentieth-century work conditions. Similarly, it combines strategies of intense emulation and involvement, as in the Toyotised flexibility system, with Taylorist/Fordist management techniques over the prescribed workers.

Therefore, to the contrary of critiques of labour and of the law of value as the bases of the capitalist society, new modalities of labour, including immaterial labour, have arisen which are expressions of *living labour* that participate in value accumulation. Once science and labour are

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<sup>9</sup> Huws, Ursula 2003, *The Making of a Cybertariat (Virtual Work in a Real World)*. New York/London: Monthly Review Press/The Merlin Press, 2003.

<sup>10</sup> Antunes, Ricardo e Braga, Ruy. *Infoproletários: degradação real do trabalho virtual*. São Paulo: Boitempo, 2009. Also consult Vasapollo, Luciano. *O Trabalho Atípico e a Precariedade*, São Paulo: Expressão Popular, 2005.

directly blended in the sphere of production, the *creative power* of labour can assume both the *dominant form of material labour* or the *tendential modality of immaterial labour*, since the very creation of advanced digital-computerized machinery results from the active interaction between the intellectual knowledge of labour and computerized machines. In this process, some of the predicates of the intellectual knowledge of labour are transferred to the new computerized machines generated by the process and thus, *objectify subjective activities* (Lojkine<sup>11</sup>) or become “*organs of the human brain, created by the human hand*”<sup>12</sup>, as Marx characterised in the *Grundrisse*, providing *new dimensions and aspects to the theory of value*. When the cognitive dimension of labour is aroused by production, it becomes a constitutive part of the globally existent *complex, combining and social labour*.

Thus, in our analysis, when the immaterial form of labour and production occurs, it does not lead to the extinction of the *law of value*, but adds *living labour clots within the logic of capital accumulation in its materiality, inserting them into the average social time of an increasingly complex work process*. Contrary to the breakdown of the law of value, it is therefore mandatory to unleash new value creating mechanisms, pertaining to the *informational sphere of the commodity form*<sup>13</sup>. It is worth remembering Toyota’s Takaoka plant, where the following slogan is found outside its premises: “*Yoi kangae, yoi shina*” (Good thoughts mean good products)<sup>14</sup>. And the boom of China and India during the last decades, attached to the enormous extra workforce and to the incorporation of information technologies, seems to invalidate the thesis of the loss of the significance of living labour in the sphere of value creation. It deepens the fragility of theses defending immateriality as a form of the *overcoming* or the *inadequacy* of the law of value.

Finally, the design of the *new morphology of labour* configures itself in a more complex way within the real world, globally speaking: at the *top* of the social pyramid we find highly skilled jobs in the digital computerized

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<sup>11</sup> Lojkine, Jean. *A Revolução Informacional*, São Paulo: Cortez, 1995.

<sup>12</sup> Marx, Karl. *The Grundrisse*, Notebook VII. London: Penguin Books and New Left Review, 1993.

<sup>13</sup> Tosel, André. ‘Centralité et Non-Centralité du Travail ou La Passion des Hommes Superflus’. In: Bidet, Jacques e Texier, Jacques (eds.). *La Crise du Travail, Actuel Marx Confrontation*. Paris: Press Universitaires de France, 1995; Vincent, Jean-Marie. ‘Les Automatismes Sociaux et le “General Intellect”’, *Paradigmes du Travail*, Futur Antérieur, 16: 121–30, 1993; ‘Flexibilité du Travail et Plasticité Humaine’, in Bidet and Texier, Op. Cit, 1995.

<sup>14</sup> *Business Week*, November 18<sup>th</sup> 2003.

sphere; at the *bottom*, the structural expansion of precarious conditions and unemployment. In the *middle*, the hybrid form, the skilled labour capable of disappearing or eroding and thus becoming precarious and/or unemployed, due to (temporal and spatial) changes in the production plant. All these social segments are ruled by the growing informality of forms of being.

Thus, besides current diversities and transversalities related to the stable and precarious, male and female, young and old, white and black and Indians, skilled and unskilled, employed and unemployed native and immigrant workers – and so many other examples that constitute the new morphology of labour – immigrant workers best illustrate this global trend of a precarious labour structure.

It is worth adding a brief note for its symbolic meaning: in Portugal there is a precarious workers movement called ‘Precári@s Inflexíveis’ [Inflexible Precarious Workers]. In their *Manifesto*, this association states:

We are precarious in work and in life. We work without contracts or in short-term contracts. Temporary, uncertain jobs with no guarantees. We are call-centre workers, interns, unemployed ... immigrants, casual workers, student-workers ...

We are not represented in the statistics. Although we are more and more precarious, Governments conceal this. We live off temporary jobs. We can hardly provide for household costs. We can't take leave; we can't have children or be unwell. Not to mention the right to strike. Flexicurity? The ‘flexi’ is for us. The ‘security’ is for the bosses. ‘Modernization’ is thought and done by businessmen and Government, hand in hand. We are in the shadows, but we are not silent.

We won't stop fighting for fundamental rights alongside workers in Portugal or abroad. This struggle is not at all about union or government numbers. It is the struggle of workers and people like us. Things that ‘numbers’ will always ignore. We don't fit in these numbers. We won't let our conditions be forgotten.

And using the same force with which we are attacked by our bosses, we respond and reinvent the struggle. At the end, there



are many more of us than of them. Precarious, yes, but inflexible.<sup>15</sup>

This is therefore the *new morphology of labour* today. Understating its *form of being*, its attitudes, rebellions and resistances is a path for a better perception of the current multiple and polysemous anti-capitalist struggles.

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<sup>15</sup> (Our translation) For the Manifesto in Portuguese see <http://www.precariosinflexiveis.org/p/manifesto-do-pi.html>.



## **Marx's concept of the working class and some trends in the development of capitalism**

*Nicolás Iñigo Carrera*

**F**rom different, and even opposed, theoretical perspectives, there is nowadays almost unanimous agreement that during the 1960s and 1970s capitalism went through important changes. The main and most widely circulated points of view state that there has been a deep change in society, and that this change implies the disappearance of social classes, particularly of the working class, which have been replaced by new social and political subjects.

These statements are not politically naïve, and must be considered within the historical context in which they emerged: no matter how conscious their authors were of their political implications, the assertion of the disappearance or lack of importance of the working class became an important part of the capitalist offensive led by the most concentrated capital (financial capital) in response both to the social and national liberation struggles around the world during the fifties and the sixties, and to the tendency of the rate of profit to fall. Thus, this offensive, which is clearly recognized in the policies implemented by governments such as those headed by Reagan in the USA, Thatcher in Great Britain and military dictatorships in South America (and, less evidently, in the fall of the Soviet Union), also had its “special forces” in the intellectual and academic world.

The capitalist offensive in the intellectual field, which contributed to isolate workers' struggles from the rest of society, was displayed in two converging assertions: a) the working class disappears or, at least, loses economic, social and political weight and is replaced, in these fields, by

“new social movements”; b) the Marxist definition of the working class is no longer applicable to the new society.

My purpose here is not to present a new theoretical argument, but to recover Marx's concept of the working class<sup>1</sup> and show its pertinence to account for the most important tendencies in the present capitalist phase. Therefore, the first part of this article deals with Marx's concept of the working class, which is not restricted to factory workers, though, at the same time, distinguishes them from other workers exploited by capital. The second part deals with some tendencies pointed out by Marx and later Marxists – the decreasing rate of rural and agricultural Population and the absolute and/or relative increase of proletarians, of the non-productive population and of the surplus population. Finally, I analyse these tendencies in the Argentinean case.

### Marx's concept of working class

The argument that sustains the disappearance or weakening of the working class in today's capitalism requires a theoretical license: to restrict the working class only to industrial or factory workers. This reductionism has also been common among acknowledged Marxist intellectuals. Jürgen Kuczynski, for example, pointed out that “the modern working class is a product of the machine”: “the machine created the working class. The authentic modern workers, therefore, are those of the factories”.<sup>2</sup> Although Kuczynski expanded his definition to include miners and building workers and then referred to factory workers as the “industrial proletariat”, his general idea was that the working class was directly linked to machines. This assertion distinguishes modern workers of the capitalist mode of production from pre-industrial, pre-capitalist workers; but it excludes all non-industrial workers and the relative surplus population, that has increased in number and relative weight along with the development of capitalism, as a result of the “general law of capitalist accumulation”.

According to Marx, productive activity is not only *production*, but also *distribution, exchange* (circulation) and *consumption* of commodities,

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<sup>1</sup> There are several interpretations of Marx's theories, some of them opposing “juvenile” and “mature” writings or *Capital* and the *Grundrisse*. We believe these are false oppositions.

<sup>2</sup> Kuczynski, Jürgen. *Evolución de la clase obrera*. Madrid: Guadarrama, 1967, pp. 50-51 and p. 59. (My own translation from the Spanish edition).

including labour power.<sup>3</sup> Although a great part of his analysis focuses on industrial workers, reducing the working class to them is only possible if we fail to follow Marx's method, research and argument from general abstractions to the determined concrete. When we observe the multiple concrete historical situations it is highly likely to find differences between them and the "purity" of capitalist relations presented by Marx. But emphasizing these differences and presenting them as a proof of the incapability of Marx's theory to explain reality is to ignore that Marx was presenting the general laws, the tendencies of capitalist society,<sup>4</sup> and that, as he himself frequently pointed out, these tendencies show themselves modified, in a greater or lesser degree, when we analyze concrete situations.<sup>5</sup> To what extent laws (tendencies) are modified in a concrete situation is, precisely, the main problem to tackle in every research project.

Let us now summarize Marx's analysis of the working class.

*The sphere of circulation: relationships between individual owners: workers as "sellers" of a specific commodity*

Applying what he considered "the scientifically correct method" in *Capital*, Marx displayed his analysis from "determinant, abstract, general relations" to the "concrete" ones as "the concentration of many determinations, hence unity of the diverse".<sup>6</sup> The consideration of labour-power as a commodity, source of value, and of the worker as its possessor, "free" to sell it and "free" from any other relation with any conditions or means of production corresponds to this moment of his analysis.

Still remaining at the level of "sellers" and "buyers" of labour force it must be noticed that Marx himself considered intermediate situations between "pure" capitalist and non-capitalist relationships. In his analysis of the relationships between wage-earners and owners, he made countless references to wage relations where money is not directly involved and to

<sup>3</sup> Marx, Karl. *Outline of the Critique of Political Economy (Grundrisse). 1. Production, Consumption, Distribution, Exchange (Circulation). The general relation of production to distribution, exchange, consumption.* <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1857/grundrisse/ch01.htm#2>

<sup>4</sup> Marx, Karl. *Capital; Volume I; Preface to the First German Edition.* Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965, p.8.

<sup>5</sup> When discussing "the absolute general law of capitalist accumulation" Marx asserts that "Like all other laws it is modified in its working by many circumstances (...)" (Marx, *Ibid*, p.644). As well, when presenting the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, he devotes a chapter to the analysis of the influences that modify the law (Marx, Karl; *Capital; Book III; Chapter XIV "Counteracting Influences"*).

<sup>6</sup> Marx, Karl. *Outline of the Critique of Political Economy (Grundrisse). 3. The Method of Political Economy;* <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1857/grundrisse/ch01.htm#2>

combinations of monetary and non-monetary wage relations, to different forms of coercion that set limits to free labour power trade, such as the “truck system” and “forms of servitude” under monetary forms,<sup>7</sup> peonage and debt bondage as the form of relationship between capitalists and workers. He also refers to situations in which the worker is not completely deprived of his instruments of work, etc.

*Workers considered as deprived of material conditions of existence*

So far, we are still dealing with “personifications”,<sup>8</sup> where the capitalist and the worker meet in the market of commodities as owners – one of capital, the other of labour-power. But we are still not dealing with social classes. We are still in the sphere of relationships established in the market, in the sphere of circulation, and, consequently, considering labour-power as a commodity. But

To be sure, the matter looks quite different if we consider capitalist production in the uninterrupted flow of its renewal, and if, in place of the individual capitalist and the individual worker, we view them in their totality, the capitalist class and the working-class confronting each other.<sup>9</sup>

So, if we aim to define the working class, we cannot just observe relationships established in the market, between individuals, between “owners” of commodities. In the capitalist system, the property laws of commodity production change into the laws of capitalist appropriation. As we are considering social classes and not individual histories of ascendant or descendent social mobility, we have to take into account that the capitalist system constantly reproduces “the complete separation of the labourers from all property in the means by which they can realise their labour”.<sup>10</sup> The need to obtain their means of living – under the form of a wage – in order to reproduce their life forces workers to give away their labour-power. And “individual consumption provides, on the one hand, the means for the maintenance and reproduction; on the other hand, it secures by the annihilation of the necessaries of life, the continued re-appearance of the workman in the labour market”.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Marx, Karl. *Capital*; Volume I; chapter XV.7, p.457-458.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter V.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p.586.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p.714.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.573-4. “The Roman slave was held by fetters: the wage-labourer is bound to his owner by invisible threads”.

The same shift from the property laws of commodity production to the laws of capitalist appropriation occurs in the analysis of the workers' reproduction process: the distinction between "productive consumption" – the consumption of the labour-power in the working process – and "individual consumption" – reproduction of the worker's life "takes quite another aspect, when we contemplate, not the single capitalist, and the single labourer, but the capitalist class and the labouring class, not an isolated process of production, but capitalist production in full swing, and on its actual social scale".<sup>12</sup> And "the individual consumption of the labourer (...) forms therefore a factor of the production and reproduction of capital".<sup>13</sup>

As a result, when we consider them as a class, *workers are not owners or free* in any sense, but, on the contrary, they are *owned by capital*, personified by the capitalist class, no matter if "the appearance of independence is kept up by means of the constant change of employers, and by the *fictio juris* of a contract".<sup>14</sup> And this situation is not restricted to active, employed workers, but it extends also to the surplus population, "that belongs to capital, quite as absolutely as if the latter has bred it at its own cost".<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, it belongs to capital even if an increasing part of this surplus population is never employed in the core of capitalist production by the most concentrated capital, or not employed at all, as it happens today more frequently than in Marx's days. Marx points out that the same happens to the whole working family, even if they are not working in factories or workshops: women's and children's work in the household contributes to the reproduction of the labour-power appropriated by capital.<sup>16</sup>

In short, when we consider productive activity, productive relationships, what defines workers as a class is their position as *non-proprietors, non-owners of their material conditions of existence*, unable to reproduce their lives but as *capital's appendage, attribute*, as living capital, submitted to the class that owns capital. This position is usually defined as non-ownership of the means of production, but very often these ones are reduced to "objects" – instruments, machines, tools, raw materials, etc.–, disregarding social relationships and human labour-force. "Material

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p.572.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p.572.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p.574.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p.632.

<sup>16</sup> "(...) the capitalist may safely leave its fulfillment [of the reproduction of the labour-power] to the labourer's instincts of self-preservation and of propagation". Ibid., p.572).

conditions of existence” are the *productive forces of society*<sup>17</sup>, that refer to a mode of production, of cooperation, a *mode of life*, “that depends on the material conditions of production”<sup>18</sup>.

Thus if we leave the narrow sphere of commodities circulation and the relationship between the individual worker and the individual capitalist, and we consider the capitalist reproduction process and the relationship between the working class and the capitalist class, we can see that Marx's concept of working class *includes all those deprived of their material conditions of existence that are forced to sell their labour-power, including the surplus population* – formed by the unemployed, by those living on the dole, by many public servants whose wages are only hidden relief payments<sup>19</sup> and by workers employed in obsolete branches of economic activity.

#### *Workers not included in Marx's definition*

It is important to point out that, no matter how broad it might be, Marx's definition of working class does not include all workers producing value appropriated by capital. “Self-employed” workers may be submitted to capital in different ways, but only a part of them are members of the working class, that is, those who have no property of their means of existence. Many workers in this situation regard themselves as “self-employed” or “independent”, but this false perception is only possible because they compare themselves with workers with steady jobs. As Marx pointed out, and has been quoted before in this paper, the constant change of employers creates the appearance of an independent worker. Workers can be really “self-employed” only if they own some kind of property of

<sup>17</sup> “These conditions of existence are, of course, only the productive forces and forms of intercourse at any particular time.” (Marx, Karl & Engels, Friedrich. *The German Ideology*; MECW; volume 5; Part I: Feuerbach. Opposition of the Materialist and Idealist Outlook. D. Proletarians and Communism. Individuals, Class, and Community. <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01d.htm#5d7>

<sup>18</sup> “This mode of production (...) is a definite form of activity of these individuals, a definite form of expressing their life, a definite mode of life on their part”. Ibid., <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01a.htm#a2>

<sup>19</sup> Marx pointed out that one of the state machinery's functions was to serve as source of employment for the surplus population (Marx, Karl. *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*; Marx/Engels Collected Works (MECW), as compiled and printed by Progress Publishers of the Soviet Union in collaboration with Lawrence & Wishart (London) and International Publishers (New York); volume 11. <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch04.htm>



instruments or conditions besides their labour-power that allows them to reproduce their life without “selling” themselves to the capitalist class. “Self-employed” workers sell the product of their labour and consequently they are commodity producers. Considering them as “working class” (or eliminating the distinction between them and the working class) annuls the divisive line marked by the ownership of material conditions of existence. This does not mean that small owners are not exploited by mechanisms different from the wage form (i.e. taxes, excessive loaning interests or the monopoly of demand by big companies *vis-à-vis* the dispersion of the small producers’ offer of their products).<sup>20</sup> In the Marxist tradition the ensemble of those deprived of the material conditions of existence – the working class – and small owners exploited by capital have been named the *working and exploited masses* (Lenin) and the *subordinate classes* (Gramsci), a term used also by Eric Hobsbawm. However, the existence of different modes of value appropriation by capital and of transitional situations does not eliminate the specificity of the material basis of different class interests within the *working and exploited masses*: those deprived – the working class – or as small proprietors – peasants, artisans, etc.

### *Proletarianisation Processes*<sup>21</sup>

The relation between the different social classes and capital is linked to the moment of capitalist development in a concrete society, to the proletarianization of social fractions that join the working class as being deprived of their material conditions of existence, and to the processes of repulsion of the surplus population. The so-called transitional situations and the existence of combinations with non-capitalist modes of production (slavery, serfdom) are not only due to their persistence even after the development of capitalist relations, but also because, in certain circumstances, capitalist development itself generates them. These are long-term and not lineal processes –capitalism can generate or renew non-capitalist (in the sense of *non wage*) forms of production. There is a large

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<sup>20</sup> There is a large bibliography on this subject, as, for example, my own book *Génesis, formación y crisis del capitalismo en el Chaco*. Salta: Edunsa, 2011.

<sup>21</sup> “Proletarianization” refers to the process of deprivation of material conditions of existence that transforms a part of society into workers disposable for capital by means of wage relations, that is to say, by means of the appearance of a free meeting between commodity owners. It does not mean that this is a one way process.

accumulation of knowledge about this in the Latin American scholarly literature.<sup>22</sup>

The combination of different modes of production has existed throughout the whole history of capitalism, and the existence today of forms of appropriation of value produced by social fractions deprived of their material conditions of existence, but by no means free to sell their labour force, or only partially deprived and involved in wage relations, sets the problem of the inclusion or not of these fractions as working class, according to Marx's definition. Marcel van der Linden<sup>23</sup> criticizes Marx's concept of the working class as he considers that it is too narrow and only exists in a small part of the world. He proposes the concept of a "*class of subaltern workers*":

Every carrier of labor power whose labor power is sold (or hired out) to another person under economic (or non-economic) compulsion belongs to the class of subaltern workers, regardless of whether the carrier of labor power is himself or herself selling or hiring it out and, regardless of whether the carrier himself or herself owns means of production.

In his definition, these range from free workers to self-employed and slaves, all of them subdued to some kind of compulsion to transform their labour force into a commodity. We have already pointed out that Marx considered very different combinations of exploitation relations in his time, but he did not disregard the qualitative differences between: 1) workers that sell the product of their work, even if a part of the product's value is appropriated by capital through various mechanisms; 2) workers who cannot "sell" their labour force because they are not formally free people, 3) workers who do not "sell" a product, but sell their labour force, the only commodity that produces value. Van der Linden unifies in one concept only a variety of forms of exploitation that imply different objective contradictions and constitute the basis of different struggles.

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<sup>22</sup> I.e. the classic book by Assadourian, Carlos, Cardoso, Ciro et al. *Modos de producción en América Latina*. Buenos Aires: Cuadernos de Pasado y Presente N° 40, 1973. For Europe, see Dobb, Maurice. *Estudios sobre el desarrollo del capitalismo*. Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 1971, pp. 56-61. Also Karl Kautsky's *Die Agrarfrage*, about German peasants going through the proletarianization process.

<sup>23</sup> van der Linden, Marcel. "Conceptualising the World Working Class". In: Kannan, K.P. and Rutten, Mario (eds). *Labour and Transformation in Asia. Critical Reflections and Empirical Studies*. New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003. Van der Linden, Marcel. *Workers of the World, Essays toward a Global Labor History*. Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2007.

As Marx pointed out in numerous occasions, especially in the chapter on primitive accumulation in *Capital*, throughout the history of capitalist accumulation, exploitation was based many times on non-wage compulsive relations. The fact that these types of relations exist today around the world highlights the capacity of capitalism to expand over non-capitalist territories. Nevertheless, these “intermediate situations” cannot hide the fact that wage relations tend to impose themselves all over the world, and that wage relations broadly prevail in the regions where capitalism first emerged (wage earners are about 90% of the economically active population).<sup>24</sup>

Something similar happens with economic and extra-economic forms of coercion. Marx points out the existence of coercion in all the relations between classes in capitalism: “The Roman slave was held by fetters: the wage-labourer is bound to his owner by invisible threads”. And not only by economic coercion. Non-economic coercion exists in developed capitalism.<sup>25</sup> “Direct force, outside economic conditions, is of course still used, but only exceptionally”<sup>26</sup> even though the existence of such coercion does not mean that it constitutes “the economic law of motion of modern society”.<sup>27</sup>

Another example of non-free labour in developed capitalism is posed by Marx in reference to the situation of women and children, “every member of the workman’s family, without distinction of age or sex”, that work in modern industry “under the direct sway of capital”:

(...) now the capitalist buys children and young persons under age. Previously, the workman sold his own labour-power, which

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<sup>24</sup> Wage relations prevail around the world, with few self-employed and family workers, few employers and many wage-earners (more than 60% of the economically active population); the exceptions are Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. In East Asia (45%) and South East Asia and Pacific (38%) wage-earners are a little less than half the economically active population; in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa they are a minority (between 20 and 25%) (International Labour Organization; *Global Employment Trends. January 2008*; Geneva, 2008, p. 37, Figure 8 “Status of employment share in total employment, 2007 all regions (%)”).

<sup>25</sup> For example, when Marx refers to the prohibition to emigrate of mechanics of the English cotton districts demanded by manufacturers (Marx, Karl. *Capital*. Volume I; chapter XXIII, p.574). Marx also states that “as soon as (in the colonies, e.g.) adverse circumstances prevent the creation of an industrial reserve army and, with it, the absolute dependence of the working-class upon the capitalist class, capital along with its commonplace Sancho Panza, rebels against the ‘sacred’ law of supply and demand, and tries to check its inconvenient action by forcible means and State interference” (Marx, Karl. *Capital*; Volume I; chapter XXV, p.640).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p.737.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p.10.

he disposed of nominally as a free agent. Now he sells wife and child. He has become a 'slave-dealer', with the subsequent 'moral degradation' and 'intellectual desolation'.<sup>28</sup>

In short, the combination of productive modes and the persistence of extra economic coercion lead us to the issue of the passage from the forms under which the working class presents itself in real, concrete situations, to the delimitation of the concept of working class; the passage from abstraction to the totality comprising many determinations and relations, the unity of the diverse.<sup>29</sup> If we define social classes by their position concerning the property of their income sources<sup>30</sup>, the analyses of a specific situation will allow us to know to what degree the life of a certain human ensemble depends, completely or in part, on "selling" its labour-power in order to obtain its means of life under the form of wages, to what degree wages adopt a monetary form and whether there is an element of extra-economic coercion.

Another issue to consider here is that the working class is not homogeneous. The classical approach to these differences has focused on the existence of fractions within the working class according to the capital that exploits them – i.e. producers of the means of production, producers of the means of consumption, industrial or commercial capital – and strata according to the conditions in which they reproduce their lives – i.e. the poor or rich strata of the working class.

### *The concept of working-class*

Up to this point I have tried to conceptualize the "working class" within the limits of the relations established in productive activity, in the production and reproduction of material life, that is to say, considering the working class only as an attribute of capital, only as living capital. We have not reached Marx's definition of the working class as a historical totality.

Marx stressed that considering the working class in such a way is incomplete:

The separate individuals form a class only insofar as they have to carry on a common battle against another class; otherwise

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p.396.

<sup>29</sup> Marx, Karl. *Outline of the Critique of Political Economy*, Op.Cit.

<sup>30</sup> Marx, Karl. *Capital*; Book III, chapter LII; op. cit.; pp. 885-6.

they are on hostile terms with each other as competitors. On the other hand, the class in its turn achieves an independent existence over against the individuals, so that the latter find their conditions of existence predestined, and hence have their position in life and their personal development assigned to them by their class, become subsumed under it. (...) We have already indicated several times how this subsuming of individuals under the class brings with it their subjection to all kinds of ideas, etc.<sup>31</sup>

Therefore, it is in considering the processes of struggle, of social confrontations, that we may find the working class as a historical totality. By analyzing the processes of social confrontation we can discover which of the multiple relationships in which individuals are involved are playing the main role in a specific historical moment, and, therefore, which is the class interest that guides confrontation and whether the subjects involved are becoming a social class. Each individual is the result of multiple social relationships: an individual can be, simultaneously, a wage-earning worker exploited by his employer, and a landlord who rents rooms to other people and, occasionally in his free time, an odd-job self-employed worker; and also a member of a political party, a church or a club, and a neighbour in his neighbourhood. The class interest that moves him depends on which of these relations, and their context, is at stake in a specific confrontation.

We are now getting into the consideration of the forms of rebellion, which should not be limited to union and parliamentary forms, but should consider every means of struggle that appear in historical processes concerning the working class: from riot to insurrection, from strike to revolutionary war, from revolt to parliamentary confrontation, from barricade struggle to elections. Eric Hobsbawm and George Rudé<sup>32</sup> made a great contribution to the knowledge of forms that, though considered “primitive” or “pre-political”, exist today in societies where capitalism is highly developed (i.e. riots in USA and Europe).

However, historical processes do not develop in a linear way and only in one possible direction. The element of will is crucial in historical processes, which are the results of the conflict between many individual

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<sup>31</sup> Marx, Karl & Engels, Friedrich. *The German Ideology*; MECW, volume 5; Part I: “Feuerbach. Opposition of the Materialist and Idealist Outlook. D. Proletarians and Communism. Individuals, Class, and Community”; <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01d.htm#p76>

<sup>32</sup> With classic books such as *Primitive Rebels* and *Bandits* by Eric Hobsbawm and *The crowd in History and Ideology and popular protest* by George Rudé.

wills that intersect and hamper one another, in an “infinite group of parallelograms of forces”<sup>33</sup>, that give rise to the historical event, a process that does not respond to any individual will but contains them all.

Some left-wing authors, such as Antonio Negri, have opposed the determinism of certain Marxist trends and have properly emphasised the autonomy of the subaltern classes. But we must also remember that, although the historical process is not determined, there are not infinite alternatives: we make history in certain conditions that are the result of the historical process, which sets limits to the existence of human groups, their goals and interests.

### **Long term trends in capitalist development and their effects on the working class**

We have so far considered Marx's conceptual apparatus on class, indicating the nature of the relations, both economic and political, that define the working class: its condition as those deprived of the material conditions of existence who can only obtain their means of life under the form of a salary (although they do not always achieve it) and that, grasping consciousness of its situation, fights to modify it. Has the nature of these capitalist relations really changed?

Let us set aside those academic trends who state that, as a result of “globalisation” and “technical progress” a “new society” has been born (such as the *information society* or *network society*, as Manuel Castells names it) or that social relations have ceased to exist (according to Alain Touraine). From the point of view of these trends, class analysis is irrelevant.

Based on some of Marx's works, Negri considers that a qualitative change has taken place in capitalism since the 1960s and 1970s. The working class is not the same as before and neither is it the subject of processes of radical changes. Yet before considering these changes we must remember that Negri's starting point is the restricted definition of the working class or proletariat that reduces it to industrial factory workers. When Hardt and Negri state that “In a previous era the category of proletariat centred on and was at times effectively subsumed under the

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<sup>33</sup> Engels, F. *Letter to Bloch*, London, September 21, 1890. [http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1890/letters/90\\_09\\_21.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1890/letters/90_09_21.htm).

*industrial working class*<sup>34</sup>, they are reducing the working class. Since the beginning of capitalism, the working class has comprised fractions and strata of workers that have largely exceeded the number of industrial workers.

Negri stresses the automatization of factories and the informatization of the social plane. Based on an excerpt in which Marx posed a hypothesis about the future development of labour in capitalism, Negri states that work becomes more “immaterial”, depending “mainly on the intellectual and scientific energies that constitute it”.<sup>35</sup> The “social worker” emerges, an interpreter of the labour cooperative functions of the social productive networks. The composition of the proletariat becomes social, but also more immaterial from the point of view of the substance of work, and mobile, polymorphic and flexible from the point of view of its forms. In Hardt and Negri’s words, “in conceptual terms we understand *proletariat* as a broad category that includes all those whose labour is directly or indirectly exploited by and subjected to capitalist norms of production and reproduction”.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, it includes wage earners and workers that do not receive a wage, factory and non-factory workers, poor and well-off workers. The new subject is the *multitude*: a multiplicity of singularities, a non-working class, capable of autonomous development.<sup>37</sup>

Thus, as we noted before, the distinction between those deprived of their material conditions of existence that are exploited by capital by means of wage relations and those who keep the property of those conditions, even if capital manages to appropriate a part of the value produced by them, vanishes. And a variety of forms of exploitation, that imply different objective contradictions and constitute the basis of different struggles, disappear. We must insist on the capability of capital of appropriating value produced by different social classes, and not only by those deprived of the material conditions of existence, not only today, but throughout the whole history of capitalism.

Negri states that nothing remains outside the dominion of capital. And it is true. But following the hypotheses from the *Grundrisse*, he leaves aside the population law in capitalism discovered by Marx: capitalist

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<sup>34</sup> Hardt, Michael & Negri, Antonio. *Empire*. Cambridge – London: Harvard University Press, 2000, p. 53.

<sup>35</sup> Negri, Antonio, *Guías. Cinco lecciones en torno a Imperio*. Buenos Aires, Paidós, 2004, p.75.

<sup>36</sup> Hardt & Negri. Op. Cit, p. 52.

<sup>37</sup> Negri. Op. Cit., p. 118.

accumulation produces an increasing relative surplus population, that, completely or partially deprived of its material conditions of existence and unable to fully reproduce its life by means of wage, can only live on public (i.e. unemployment benefits) or private charity. What Negri calls the “social worker” is a small portion of the deprived population and he does not pay much attention to the huge process of repulsion that is happening nowadays: unemployment, the most evident sign of the growth of surplus population, has never been bigger than today.<sup>38</sup>

Marx and his followers have emphasized four trends that seem to be specific features of the present stage of capitalism, at least in some local cases: the decreasing rate of the rural and agricultural population – especially peasants – (for the first time in human history, the majority of the world population are urban inhabitants), and the absolute and/or relative increase of proletarians, of the non-productive population and of the surplus population. The first trend was noted by Marx in the third volume of *Capital* (chapters 37 and 47), by Lenin (*Development of Capitalism in Russia*) and Kautsky (*Die Agrarfrage*); the second and the fourth in the first volume of *Capital* (chapter 25) and the third in the same volume (chapter 15, section 6).

The surplus population becomes acute during the moments of crisis of the economic cycle. But, as a result of capital's accumulation process, there are also two historical trends: a) the decrease of the relative weight of workers employed in modern industry and the increase of what Marx called “modern domestic slaves”<sup>39</sup> – a part of the non-productive population – and b) the increase of the mass of surplus population<sup>40</sup>, that exceeds capital's need of a labour force, but fulfils the role of a disciplinary force over the working class.

### **An exercise of empirical verification: the working class in Argentina**

The actual existence and importance of these features in capitalism as a whole must be confirmed by empirical research. We have been involved in such a project for the last thirty years in Argentina. Is this

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<sup>38</sup> International Labour Organization. *Global Employment Trends 2011. The challenge of a jobs recovery*; Geneva, 2011.

<sup>39</sup> Marx, Karl. *Capital*; Volume I; p. 447. Today these workers can be found under the census category “personal and social services”.

<sup>40</sup> “The labouring population therefore produces, along with the accumulation of capital produced by it, the means by which itself is made relatively superfluous, is turned into a relative surplus population; and it does this to an always increasing extent” (Ibid., p. 631).



portion of world capitalism representative of the whole? We think that, to a great extent, it is. For more than a century capitalist relations have been broadly extended in Argentina and the most concentrated capital (financial capital) dominates all the spheres of economic activity, subordinating all existing productive forms. And due to its conditions as a dependant country, contradictions appear more acutely.

During the 1960s and 1970s the working class, and particularly the industrial proletariat, was considered the main social subject. This importance was confirmed by the national census data (72% of the economically active population were wage earners in 1960, 73.8% in 1970) and the industrial proletariat was the leader of great mass mobilisations with insurrectional features (*Cordobazo, Rosariazo, Viborazo*). Since 1976, after the military coup d'état, many features of Argentinean society have changed – i.e. markets were opened to international capital, industries that belonged to less concentrated capitals disappeared and work laws were modified – in a long term process that continued during the eighties and nineties, under elected governments. These changes fed the thesis of the disappearance, or at least the lack of importance, of the working class. This thesis was supported by a rather simple use of the national census data – wage earners had decreased to 71.5% of the economically active population in 1980 and to 64.6% in 1991 – that did not consider its growth in absolute terms – 5,190,790 in 1960; 6,380,500 in 1970; 7,147,327 in 1980; and 7,980,327 in 1991.

Argentinean census data, nevertheless, allowed another approach.<sup>41</sup> Relating occupational category, occupational group and activity we could distribute population identifying social classes (proletarians, small proprietors, bourgeoisie) rather than occupational categories (wage earners, employers, self-employed or family workers), which avoids reducing the working class either to industrial workers or to the census category “wage earners”. I will offer a few examples: 1) an important number of workers categorized by the census as “self-employed” are in fact “unskilled workers” or “maids”, deprived of any property except their labour force, sold to different employers, that presented the fiction of independent work; 2) A part of the census’ “wage earners” (teachers, doctors and other professionals) are, according to their social background or economic function, a part of a petty bourgeoisie that was going through a

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<sup>41</sup> Iñigo Carrera, Nicolás & Podestá, Jorge. *Análisis de una relación de fuerzas sociales objetiva*. Buenos Aires: Cicso, 1985.

proletarianization process; 3) Activities considered by census as “Services” correspond in fact to productive and circulation activities.

As a result of these research projects, which can be consulted in [www.pimsa.secyt.gov.ar](http://www.pimsa.secyt.gov.ar), we can point out four trends:

1) The agricultural population (employed in agriculture, considered in its broadest sense) diminished from 1,351,869 (16.2%) in 1960 to 910,982 (5%) in 2001 – date of the last available data from national population census – and the rural population (countryside inhabitants) from 5,252,198 to 3,828,180.

2) The proletariat had its ups and downs and finally grew in number but remained almost unchanged in its relative weight: 4,447,935 (68.3%) in 1960 and 10,356,938 (69%) in 2001; but these figures do not consider the increasing process of proletarianization of a part of the petty bourgeoisie, particularly professionals, teachers and technicians, engaged in salary relations – 31% in 1960, 58% in 2001.

3) The non-productive population increased from 2,343,500 (28,1%) in 1960 to 9,489,509 (51,9%) in 2001.

4) It is impossible to know the precise number of the surplus population, which includes the partially or completely unemployed, the population living on the dole, a part of civil servant and the part of wage earners and the self-employed occupied in obsolete branches of the economy. But we can find some clues of its growth: open, complete unemployment was, from the 1960s to the late 1980s, between 3 and 6% of the economically active population; during the 1990s and the first years of this century the lowest unemployment rate was about 12% and it reached its peak (about 22%) in 2002; the change in government policies – including support and subsidies to workers' cooperatives and an increase in public employment – lowered it to about 7%; so today's minimum is higher than the historical maximum previous to the 1990s: the expanding moments of the economic cycle cannot absorb the increasing part of the population deprived of its conditions of existence. And according to

the most concentrated capitalist ideologues, 25 to 40% of public employment is redundant. Another structural change is indicated by the volume of the population that receives some kind of aid from the state, the *official pauperism*.

As regards the processes of social confrontations, our research results show that wage earners – working class and petty bourgeoisie going through a proletarianization process – were the main subject of social conflict and that unions were the main type of organization calling for social struggle and protest. According to PIMSA's data base, in which we have recorded every protest or struggle event published in the four main national newspapers since 1993, wage-earners performed 55.7% of the 7743 events between December 1993 and December 2001. And unions called for 37.2% of these events, followed by small employers' organisations (7.2%), organisations of the unemployed (7%) and students' organisations (6.8%); the rest called even less protest events.<sup>42</sup>

Workers are, and never ceased to be, the main subject not only considering the number of events performed by them *vis-à-vis* the rest of participants, but also for their role in the most important events. The same can be stated for unions, by far the main type of organization calling for social struggle and protest, and for general strike as the form of struggle capable of mobilizing not only workers – employed and unemployed – but also small owners, the self-employed and the poor. Although the mobilization of the “piqueteros” – mainly the unemployed – was a specific feature of social struggle in Argentina at the turn of the century, employed workers performed more events almost every year. But two important differences must be pointed out: since the beginning of the counterrevolutionary period that began in the mid-seventies, the industrial proletariat has not always been the leader in social struggles, as it had been during the previous period. And since the 1980s all confrontations occur within the institutional system, and even in events that take place beyond the institutional system, there is no attempt for a radical change of society, for a new mode of social organisation.

Are the trends pointed out in the case of Argentina present in today's capitalism as a world system? New research would be necessary to answer this question. Global statistics are built on theoretical and methodological

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<sup>42</sup> The importance of unions in Argentina's social protest is also demonstrated in Schuster, Federico et al. *Transformaciones de la protesta social en Argentina. 1989 – 2003*. Documento de Trabajo N° 48, IIGG-UBA, 2006.

criteria that do not meet this need. So, as we did with the Argentine census information, it is necessary to re-elaborate them. And all the present efforts to record and analyse workers' struggles and social conflicts should be redoubled, a task that largely exceeds the purpose of this article.

## **The destiny of labour in *Capital* Book III**

*Jorge Grespan*

### **T**he Problem

In its recent and more advanced forms, capitalism has seemingly overwhelmed the framework of traditional relations between capital and labour. This is at least what is affirmed by some authors, to whom value is today produced much more through technical advances and knowledge than through labour, depriving Marx's theory of value partially or entirely of its validity. The workers of this new sphere, called "immaterial", would have much more importance than those associated with the production of real commodities, and necessary labour time would have been replaced by deviating and particular forms of determining time in the creation of exchange value. In this cognitive capitalism, based on access to information, the theory of social classes and of historical movement as class conflict would be relegated to the past. For a convincing theoretical and practical appraisal of social conflicts in the XXI century, an adequate understanding of these new forms is therefore crucial.

These changes cannot be simply denied, for they express something that has actually happened. Nor can they have their importance diminished by showing the prevalence of classical forms of work in countries situated

in the periphery of the capitalist system. Although these indeed predominate in the world, and they exist even in advanced capitalist countries, the new forms also exist and are strategic to modern capital reproduction. Although they are wrongly interpreted by those who want to deny the centrality of labour, they indicate, on the other hand, real phenomena disguised in a twisted way.

There is no shadow of doubt that these phenomena do not deny Marx's criticism of capitalism, provided this criticism is taken in its totality, i.e. in the final result corresponding to Book III of *Capital*. The greatest part of Marxist studies is however concentrated in Book I, especially because it deals directly with the capital-labour relation in its various spheres, from the buying and selling of labour power to its employment in the successive phases of commodity production and finally to the reproduction of the working class itself as a commodity for and by capital. This is the level called by Marx "capital in general", i.e. capital in its fundamental definition of self valorizing value, capital that is valorized through buying and using labour power. Book III however deals with the distribution of surplus value among capitalists representing the many industrial branches. At this level, of the "multiplicity"<sup>1</sup> of capital, of individual capital competition, labour appears in a secondary role. This perhaps explains why Book I is more read by those interested in the basis of Marx's criticism of capitalism, in the concepts of exploitation and of surplus value, in the very process of work.

But Marx projected his work following a rigorous presentation order, beginning from general categories and coming to more complex ones. Before going further, two points must be observed here. First, in their presentation the categories correspond to real relations between social agents, so that the deduction of a category from another one does not follow the criteria of any logic, revealing instead how social relations themselves are articulated in real practices. The so formed whole is ideally rebuilt by the categorical presentation, which exposes the articulating order already in the more general categories, where the constituent opposition of capitalist society is simpler. Second, these more general categories – commodity and money – cannot be considered as more "abstract" than the following – wage labour and capital, for instance – and these last are not more "concrete" in the sense of being closer to reality. They are more general in the sense of

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<sup>1</sup> The expressions "capital in general" and in "multiplicity" were discovered and their meaning in Marx' work was explained by Roman Rosdolsky in his classic book. Rosdolsky, Roman. *The making of Marx's Capital*. London: Pluto Press, 1977.

their generality, i.e. in the sense that all social relations occur under their form. A commodity is not something “abstract”. On the contrary, it is very tangible and can be found everywhere around us; it is the most generalized form and the first one by whose power capitalism transforms modes of production and ways of life different from those convenient to him. But the opposition inherent to every commodity, the one between use value and exchange value, is also the simplest. And through its movement in social practices emerge more complex oppositions, like the opposition between labour power and capital, or the opposition between productive and unproductive labour.

The relation of Book I and II with Book III of *Capital* fulfills the same determination. The forms dealt with in the level of “capital in general” appear before, because they ground the forms of competition among capitalists. But in this resulting level the first forms acquire the most complex articulation. Whereas the first establish social averages, like value, competition occurs by a process of deviating from averages. At the same time, nevertheless, always seeking to escape from averages, competition establishes them. It is precisely in this way that value is socially fixed, so that only in Book III is it possible to understand how the entire process described in Book I actually works, as in a kind of retrospective definition, fulfilled by categorical presentation.

Let us examine this point in more detail and precision.

### Values and Prices

Competition among capitalists was thought of by Marx as the culminating point of his theoretical system since its first version, written between 1857 and 1858 and published only in the XX century under the name of *Grundrisse der Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie*. Competition is defined in this work as follows:

Conceptually, *competition* is nothing other than the inner *nature of capital*, its essential character, appearing in and realized as the reciprocal interaction of many capitals with one another, the inner tendency as external necessity. Capital exists and can only exist as many capitals, and its self-determination therefore appears as their reciprocal interaction with one another.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Marx, Karl. *Grundrisse*. London: Penguin, 1973, p. 414.

Whereas the beginning of the presentation develops the “inner nature” of capital – its “essential determination”, based on the relation to labour power –, the sequence shows how the internal element becomes effective by the imposition that every individual capital makes on any other, as something external, an “external necessity”. Namely, the contradiction of “capital in general” is that it excludes the wage labourer from property of the means of production, but also includes him as an employee. In other words, capital needs labour in order to create value, but tends also to replace him by advanced machines and technology.

With the exception of times of open class struggle, however, this “internal determination” is imposed on each individual capital by competition, in which capitalists try to reduce their production costs for the purpose of selling commodities cheaper than their rivals, thus taking away their market. Book III of *Capital* indicates this as the cause of the tendency in capitalism for scientific research and adoption of new techniques, a general tendency fulfilled through individual interests. Once an average technical standard of labour productivity is set up for all capital in a determined industrial branch, each of its members has the reference of the exploitation rate of labour and of average earnings. They will then strive to obtain a larger portion of the market, selling more products than their rivals by the reduction of prices and costs, by the rise in productivity of the labour power they employ. The denial of living labour by dead labour,<sup>3</sup> as stated by the “inner” capital contradiction, occurs through pressure exerted by competition among capitalists.

Furthermore, the whole movement so described in the first parts of Book III is grounded on the simultaneous existence of value as individual value – resulting from the particular labour productivity obtained by certain individual capital – and value as a social average. This last one is always set up again, when the other capitalists imitate the innovation created by those who had differentiated themselves. They also raise the productivity of the labour power they now employ, making the relative advantage of the former disappear. Value is therefore set up as a social average by this movement of constant differentiating and constant removal of difference. As mentioned above, the working-out of abstract labour time described in chapter I of Book I, must be understood in retrospect: only Book III explains how competition among individual capitalists actually sets it up.

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<sup>3</sup> The reference here is to the famous metaphor of Book I: “Capital is dead labour, that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks”. Marx, Karl. *Capital*, vol.1. New York: International Publishers, p.241.



What is fundamental in these processes is that differentiation and removal of difference are simultaneously complementary and opposite, thus happening together and shaping a dialectic. According to its traditional definition of socially necessary labour time, value as average is posited through its opposite, i.e. through the deviating value that results from the particular productivity of labour obtained by an individual capitalist against his rivals.

Things become complicated, however, when beside these values and determined by them, emerge prices. Here we do not have to reconstitute the complexity and articulation of the many kinds of prices presented in the first two parts of Book III. Not even the famous and difficult transformation problem, about which so much has already been written.<sup>4</sup> It suffices to define cost price and production price in general terms.

The former is the sum of constant and variable capital. It is different from value because it excludes the part correspondent to surplus value, included in value. In such addition, capital presents itself as a whole, so that it is impossible to see that only its variable part creates surplus value. Capital in its entirety is then proposed as creator of surplus value, as if surplus value were just added to cost price. This is an evident development of fetishism, defined since the beginning of *Capital*. But here the development is set in motion by competition among individual capitalists, and not among individual producers and proprietors of their means of production, as in Book I. Individual capitalists aim at the reduction of cost price when they adopt a new technology.

The rate of profit is calculated on the basis of cost price, and is distinguished from the rate of surplus value by the fact that this one reveals only the degree of exploitation of labour power, taking therefore into consideration just variable capital. The rate of profit, on the other hand, takes into consideration the cost price, i.e. not only variable, but also constant capital, and on this total cost the surplus obtained by the capitalist is measured. Calculated upon this rate, profit is therefore smaller than surplus value, hiding exploitation and the fact that only labour power creates value. Constant capital, the private property invested in means of production, seems to be justified in its condition of value creator. We will return to this point later, when dealing with the fetishism of capital.

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<sup>4</sup> See chapter 3 of Mandel, Ernest. *Capital*. London: Penguin, 1976.

The price of production results from adding the average profit to the cost price of each individual capitalist. In other words, each one of them has his own cost structure, generally different from others. But from their competition an average profit is imposed upon an entire industrial branch, and even among different branches, places, and countries:

“Under capitalist production (...) it is rather a matter of realizing as much surplus value, or profit, on capital advanced for production, as any other capital of the same magnitude, or *pro rata* to its magnitude in whichever line it is applied”.<sup>5</sup>

Capitalists are always comparing their individual possibility of profit to that of their rivals, and if it is smaller than what can be obtained in another sphere of production, or in another country, no one hesitates in at least trying to transfer their investments. The consequence is the equalization of the many rates of profit forming an average that, once added to cost prices – and here individual differences are actually conserved – results in the price of production.

In the composition of this reference price, both levels of competition are present: the level of the average general profit, and the level of the difference between costs of each capitalist. Even more, they are present in the permanent movement by which each one tries to deviate from the average, in order to get an extraordinary earning, but by doing so contributes to the restoration of the average. And then, through this movement the permanent division of social labour between the various activities where use value is created occurs. That which in Book I was done by commodity producers, now is done by capital for capital, i.e. with the purpose of profit. The mediated and negative form by which the average is constituted, form imposed by competition, recovers the central characteristic of capitalist society, as formulated by Marx for the simple commodity circulation, “namely, that the labour of private individuals takes the form of its opposite, labour directly social in its form”.<sup>6</sup>

But now an essential difference between these two moments of the presentation of *Capital* is clear. The division of social labour executed by capital through prices of production, through average and differential profits, fulfills a rule totally distinct from the former. Each individual

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<sup>5</sup> Marx, Karl. *Capital*, vol.3. New York: International Publishers, 1998, p.194.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

capitalist appropriates a portion of surplus not correspondent to that created by him, but to that attributed to him by competition, according to the general rate of profit. In this case the principle of distribution of surplus value deviates from that of its production. In Marx' words,

But the other element of the price of commodities, the profit added to this cost price, does not depend on the amount of profit produced in a given sphere of production by a given capital in a given period of time. It depends on the mass of profit which falls as an average for any given period to each individual capital as an aliquot part of the total social capital invested in social production. When a capitalist sells his commodities at their price of production, therefore, he recovers money in proportion to the value of the capital consumed in their production and secures profit in proportion to his advanced capital as an aliquot part in the total social capital.<sup>7</sup>

The difference between both moments is related to the passage of surplus value into profit, i.e. to the inclusion of constant capital in cost calculation. Constant capital acquires a decisive weight in the surplus distribution: individual capitals or industrial branches in which this portion of capital is absolutely or relatively larger grab a larger portion of surplus than the one actually created by this individual capital or industrial branch. The converse occurs with capitals or branches where constant capital is smaller than the average case, absolutely or in relation to variable capital.

Variable capital, nevertheless, keeps being the only actual creator of surplus value. What is altered is its distribution principle. The rate of profit does not necessarily correspond to the rate of surplus value, by deviating itself more or less according to the magnitude of capital as a whole in each individual hand or sphere of production. Therefore, the very prices of production include a mass of surplus value different from that produced with the employment of capital.

That is why prices seem to nullify the existence of value in itself, and the theory of value seems "incompatible with the actual process", seen as something that "should be refused in order to conceive the actual movement".<sup>8</sup> Herein lays a crucial point for the question posed at the

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 158.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. 152. The complete quoted text is: "(...) on the assumption which has being the basis of all our analysis so far, namely that the commodities are sold at their values. There is no doubt, on the other hand, that aside from unessential, incidental or mutually compensating distinctions, differences in the average rate of profit in the various branches of industry do not exist in reality, and could not exist without abolishing the

beginning of this article. An important objection to the centrality of labour in contemporary capitalism refers to the alleged suppression or weakness of the law of value. In markets oriented by speculative prices, what could value really mean?

This question, however, would not have surprised Marx. On the contrary, he designated it as the key for the passage from Books I and II to Book III. In a world in which the social sphere is accessible only through competition within the private sphere, value cannot be achieved without being inverted as a distributive principle. It still exists, but it is dialectically transformed and hidden. The rule of labour in value is effective through its opposite: dead labour, labour immobilized in the means of production, enters in the cost price calculation and so distorts the distribution of surplus value. On the other hand, capitalist property over dead labour puts workers as non-proprietors, as opposite to capital. This opposition is not only evident at the beginning of Marx's presentation in Book I, it also organizes *Capital's* very presentation, especially in the passage to Book III, where it is present in the difference between price and value. Here, the passage from labour as the basis of the production of value to private property as the basis of distribution value is crucial.

### **From labour to private property**

Book III of *Capital* can thus be understood in the sequence of its parts through the progressive detachment of private property from labour. This is already the case when industrial capitalists divide social surplus value among themselves according to the total magnitude of their capital, and not only to the magnitude of its variable part. It is property over constant capital, as opposed to living labour, that makes the difference here.

In a second moment, commercial capital appears as a sector separated from the productive sector, taking as its exclusive charge activities like selling and buying first executed by the former. This is the subject of the fourth part of Book III.

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entire system of capitalist production. It would seem, therefore, that here the theory of value is incompatible with the actual process, incompatible with the real phenomena of production and that for this reason any attempt to understand these phenomena should be given up". This last part, deviates from the original text of Marx. A closer translation would be: "(...) the theory of value should be refused in order to conceive the actual movement". In the original German, see Marx, Karl. *Ökonomische Manuskripte 1863-1867*, MEGA 4.2. Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1992, p.230.

At this point, productive and unproductive labour is the decisive distinction. It is again impossible within the narrow limits of this article to resume all the details involved in this distinction and in the debate it has provoked. What must be said is that both characters of labour result from its use by capital, not from any inherent quality of labour itself. According to Marx, labour is productive when it produces surplus value, and unproductive when not. But this depends on the activity in which it is employed by capital. Industrial capital<sup>9</sup> uses labour to produce commodities, whereas commercial capital does it generally just to change the value form in them – from commodity to money and vice versa. Of course, some activities necessarily associated with trade are not restricted to modification of the value form, they also interfere in the matter of the product, to conserve it until consumption or to bring it to the consumer. The major part of the activities of commercial capital, however, those which define it as commercial properly speaking, is indeed circumscribed as a mere change of the value form.

The principle of distribution deviates in this case even more from the pure rule of labour, because commercial capital normally does not create surplus value but is entitled to appropriate part of the surplus value created through industrial capital. This right to participate in the division of social surplus value derives from the fact that commercial capital executes an indispensable task for the reproduction of social capital and also that it invests in this task a considerable amount, added to industrial capital to compose the social aggregate. Indirectly it contributes to the creation of surplus value, setting industrial capital free to concentrate on its proper productive activity. And finally, it is an important part of social wealth, of the mass of property in the social aggregate. This part in the aggregate has a weight within the general competition among capitalists, for an extra profit in the autonomous trade activity would bring capitals from the productive activities, in the broad equalization movement. The resulting average rate of profit must therefore include commercial profit, inserted in the price of production the part of social surplus value deviated to the commercial sector.

The next step of categorical presentation corresponds to what Marx calls interest-bearing capital, in the fifth part of Book III. Here the process becomes more complicated, but it is possible in general to say that in the

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<sup>9</sup> It must be here remembered that the concept of industrial capital is not limited to that invested in industry properly speaking, but includes that invested in agriculture, fishing, mining etc.

distribution principle private property is even more detached from labour. Subordinated to the valorization of value, credit is directed to facilitate production and commercialization of commodities that contain surplus value. Property of money entitles to lend it at interest, because the borrower will use it to produce surplus value, part of which he must pay back to the proprietor. This is a right secured by the loan contract. A new division of social surplus value occurs now, once again corresponding to the division between two distinct groups of capitalists: those who can lend, as money capital proprietors, and those who are not money proprietors and who must then borrow it in order to invest it in surplus value productive activities. In this division, the productive capitalist deducts from the whole profit the part he has to pay as interest, keeping the rest as profit of enterprise.

Behind this division of surplus value, the division between both groups of capitalists is revealed, derived from a real unfolding of capital forms separating the mere property from the use of it. Property presents itself as established rather by law than by purely economic relations, associated to the use of means of production and of labour power. Each one of the parts in which surplus value is now divided follow different working principles: competition, for the profit of enterprise, and the loan contract, for interest. Both parts go to “two different persons who both have different legal claims to the same capital, and hence to the profit created by it”.<sup>10</sup> In other words, what ultimately divides both parts of profit and both groups of capitalists is the difference in the “legal claim” they own. Through the legal form, private property as a fundamental principle is totally evident.

With the consolidation of this division between both groups and both forms of capital, supply conditions of money capital are always in the hands of those who concentrate it, making it appear as a thick mass. They can impose their terms and so the distribution of surplus value inverts its order: after interest being paid, the rest will be divided among industrial and commercial capitalists; the average rate of profit is now deducted from the average rate of interest, not the contrary. In this inverted form, pure property of capital subordinates the entire production and competition process, i.e. the very distribution of individual capitals, and through them of labour, among the many branches of society. The resulting confusion conceals the fact that the total profit is obtained by productive capital through exploitation of labour, conceals the origin of surplus value, and puts in its

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<sup>10</sup> Marx, Karl. *Capital*, vol.3. New York: International Publishers, 1998, p.372.

place mere property under the form of interest as the source of social surplus.

Not the relation between worker and capitalist, but between two kinds of capitalists now appears as the form of value valorization. And all this happens within the distribution level, not the production level. Distribution, however, by inverting the fundamental order of capital, now commands production. Even if labour is still central for value and surplus value creation, it is relegated to a second place by the fetishism, completed and expressed by the famous formula D-D. It is not by chance that in the visible modern social processes, the materiality of labour appears with diminished importance.

Yet there is a last step in the detachment of private property, a step represented by ground rent in the sixth part of Book III. Marx there presents a new social division, between a group of landowners that only own land without using it, and another group of rural capitalists that uses natural resources to obtain surplus value from rural workers. Part of this surplus value is destined to the payment of rent, in a new deduction from total social surplus. It consists of a kind of premium that non-proprietors must pay to proprietors for using a resource from which they are excluded by property itself. Marx speaks of “monopoly” to characterize such exclusion and emphasize how the power of “certain persons over definite portions of globe, as exclusive spheres of their private will to the exclusion of all others” is arbitrary.<sup>11</sup> It is noteworthy that exclusion here occurs by the “private will” of “certain persons”, something belonging to the legal sphere as much as the “legal claims” that entitles the proprietor of money capital to lend at interest. But property appears now as a “monopoly”, because it must necessarily exclude, in order to force the excluded ones to pay rent. And Marx’s irony about the right of disposition “over definite portions of globe” shows the patent absurdity of the situation.

It is again impossible to explain in detail here how Marx presents this subject matter. But it must be said that from ground rent he opens the possibility of deriving new forms, as for instance rent over natural resources in general and building site rent. From all this, a first element to be retained is that in rent the distributive principle through private property completes the process of detachment from the principle of labour as value creator. Rent takes part of the total surplus value of society, and for it the proprietor of nature does not have to give employment to anybody, just receiving what

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<sup>11</sup> Marx, Karl. *Capital*. vol.3. Op.Cit., p. 609.

corresponds to his mere property. Gradually labour loses its power of determining distribution, being replaced by private property.

Taking into consideration that this entire movement occurs by an inversion of production and distribution, executed by credit, and taking into consideration how strong interest-bearing capital and ground property are today linked in speculation, it is quite understandable the enormous implications of the problem discussed in Book III. Despite the fact that labour employed in a productive way is still the only creator of surplus value, labour employed in unproductive distribution forms gives to commercial and financial capitalists, together with landowners, a “legal claim” to parts of the social plunder. These are just the deviating forms of distribution, objectified in prices of production, interests and ground rents. They appear, however, determining social standards, commodity values and money. And indeed deviations help to compose averages. Mistaking deviations as if they were averages, however, is a mere result of the inversion really completed by capitalism, a system where a “claim” to share profits is taken as the very creator of profits, where the relation between capitalists in the various branches of the economy seems to replace labour as the basis of sociability.

### **Immateriality and crisis**

A second element to be retained from Marx’s presentation of ground rent is the absurdity of the social circumstance, by which “definite portions of globe” are in possession of “certain persons”. Property receives here the best possible characterization as “monopoly” over something that is not even a product of human labour. If in Book I of *Capital* commodities are defined as market destined products of labour, Book III adds, once again inverting a definition, that there are commodities which are not products of human labour:

In the consideration of the *appearance forms* of ground rent (...) we must insist that the *price* of things which have no *value* in themselves or by themselves, i.e. are not product of labour, as ground, or that at least cannot be reproduced by labour, as antiques, can be determined by very casual combinations. In



order to sell something, it is only needed its monopolization and alienation.<sup>12</sup>

The word “monopoly” appears again here, now as a condition of “alienation” in the sense of selling and buying. In order to become a commodity, something must only be capable of “monopolization”, so that if human labour cannot produce it or its producing labour is so singular that it cannot be reproduced, even so this thing can be capable of “alienation”. The condition for it is private appropriation, excluding other people from the right to its use.

Precisely at this point, the application of science to production is introduced by capital. Before its closer examination, however, let us recapitulate another problem. As we have seen, individual capitals in competition try to deviate from the reference of the average rate of profit, for this reason inserting into their particular production process technical improvements which will reduce costs and therefore prices. Lower prices afford them the possibility of acquiring markets by selling more than their rivals. But this advantage is annulled when rivals imitate the new technique, so reducing their costs and prices too, and recovering lost markets. Application of science in production is broken out by individual and rivalling interest, its socialization being an indirect result of competition.

The general case presented by Marx in Book I of *Capital* is already a clear manifestation of the typical fetishist form in commodity production. Scientific innovations represent the culminating point of the process examined through chapters 11 (“co-operation”), 12 (“division of labour and manufacture”) and 13 (“machinery and modern industry”), corresponding not exactly to the course of history, but to the evolution of capital’s fetishism. For co-operation, capital assembles a vast number of workers, whose combined strength creates more products. For manufacture, capital distributes tasks among workers now specialized, increasing their potentiality of creating use values. For industry, capital associates labour to new technical conditions through the application of science. In other words, labour continues as the only creator of value, but capital is the agent that increases labour productivity, by which a larger production of use values is possible. This fetishism is particular to capital: it employs, it organizes workers, it proposes new techniques. Of course, it can only do it by

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<sup>12</sup> Marx, Karl. *Ökonomische Manuskripte 1863-1867*. Op.Cit., p. 681. This text was not included by Engels in his edition of Book III, and has no correspondence in the English translation of *Capital*.

excluding workers from property of the means of production, of which it always keeps the monopoly. But it does it anyway, thus revealing the real side of fetishism.

And fetishism is even deeper in the modern forms of application of science that constitute the so-called cognitive capitalism. They mean a progress of the general case above examined and at the same time a differentiation from it. Imitation by rivals of the new productive process adopted by an individual capitalist, formerly conducive to propagation of the techniques, today is hindered by the presence of patents and copyrights. It is precisely this point that is stressed by critiques of the permanence of labour in a central position, who affirm that science also creates value. More than a mere recognition of the fact, nevertheless, a good understanding of its meaning for actual capitalism is needed.

As we have seen, individual capitalists tend to apply science to productive processes in the interest of deviating from normal conditions and of obtaining an increased productivity for the labour employed. Not only the price, but the very value of commodities is reduced, because more use values are produced in less time by means of application of more complex machines and techniques. This can either reduce the value of variable capital, by dismissing workers, or reduce the value of constant capital, by saving energy or raw materials. If the adopted technology saves energy or raw materials in such a degree that it compensates the expenditure in buying new machines, then the value transferred from means of production to the product is reduced. If the adoption of new technology saves labour power, so much the better, for then the newly created value is itself reduced in each commodity.

Only the individual value is in this way reduced, not the average value by which the rest of the branch produces a commodity. Individual capitalists are interested in obtaining a patent for the new technology they develop and adopt, preventing their rivals from imitating it, in order to conserve the exceptional advantage it gives them. Scientists and technicians are hired, as their labour power becomes a commodity, but if their product is copied, it loses value, i.e. the individual value differentiated from average values. New techniques can support this difference only if they can somehow be the object of “monopolization”.

Therefore, the text of Marx quoted immediately above receives a broader meaning. Among the many kinds of labour whose product “cannot be reproduced” – and Marx was thinking of antiques – now scientific and

technical labour are fundamental. Its reproduction and generalization must be somehow hindered by non- economic means, by social processes outside the spheres of production and distribution of commodities. This occurs even outside scientific activity, since the modern definition of science requires the universal possibility of repeating an experiment. Even scientific method is distorted under the dominion and interest of capital.

It is within the sphere of law that devices are found to hinder the imitation of scientific and technical work, because this sphere provides the “legal claims” characteristic of the entire system by which surplus value is distributed through deviations. This explains the need of the system in obtaining and keeping “monopoly” over intellectual products, the patents vital for actual business and for so many jurists hired to find means for expanding copyrights.

In the present conditions of distribution and production, science creates values not as social averages, but as individual deviations from normal standards, as legal forms of appropriation of surplus value created by productive social labour. But once these individual values permanently deviate from averages through intellectual property, they acquire the social relevance that averages had.

The dialectics of competition formulated by Marx, i.e. between differentiation of values and suppression of difference, is then annulled or at least weakened. Private property wins even here. This is however the logic of the deviating movement presented in Book III, according to which the appropriation of surplus value by branches that never contributed to create it assumes the form of a genuine expropriation of a group of capitalists by another group – the group that employs labour productively by the group that employs labour unproductively or that simply do not employ it. This expropriation right is completed through the dominance of credit and financing of production and consumption. Now titles are more valuable than labour, trade-marks and brands are taken as the creation of products. With this new confusion, the limit between social and private disappears, turning individual values into norms that claim to be social averages.

The so called “immaterial” labour pretends to create value under these circumstances. Although they present deviations as averages, deviations are still deviations, belonging to the sphere of the forms of distribution of surplus value. If distribution now predominates over production, this is notwithstanding a formal inversion inherent to the existence of capital “in general”, within which value form dominates the creation of the substance of value. This entire inverted world reveals the real

side of capital's fetishism. And it is not casual that deviations from the essential forms of value distribution through social averages are today decisive as a guarantee to the reproduction of capital. Indeed, competition and mutual expropriation among capitalists are the only strategies for survival in an historical moment of the chronic fall of profit rates. Patents over products of "immaterial" labour, not exactly over this labour itself, represent a central element of these strategies.

But in no moment, patents and brands really substitute the creation of value by socially necessary labour time. The formal character of the process by which social substance is dominated, i.e. labour by capital, is always menaced by the contradiction between form and substance. Expropriation of capital by capital is not able to restore the force to expropriation of labour by capital. However much competition invents devices to distribute surplus value among the various branches of social capital, a time arrives in which this does not resolve anymore the problems in effective creation of surplus value.

Present technology acts much more in the sense of making possible appropriation, not production of surplus value. And even being important as consumers, unproductive workers do not have the same social relevance as productive workers have. Capital in the so called "service sector" is not able to employ workers in the creation of surplus value, but it exploits them more and more brutally, because they create for their employers the "legal claims" to social surplus value. The more they work, the greater is this claim of their employers, the portion these capitalists can capture from the whole. This is the meaning of profit for bankers and merchants. Mistakenly it is registered in social accounting books as profit, together with profits of the productive sector; yet it is just a deduced part of total profit correspondent to the surplus value created by workers of productive sectors. Therefore, the calculations made in the 1990s to demonstrate that the rate of profit was rising, when it actually was already depressed, were wrong.

The present crisis can well be understood as an obliged return of deviations to patterns, of prices to values, of unproductive to productive labour. The predominance of credit is not itself affected, only transferred to public debts, but governments are incapable to permanently resolve chronic debt and speculation problems, because these problems are the answer found by capitalism to deeper and older valorization problems. A technical and organizational revolution like that which occurred as an answer to the Great Depression of the 1930s would be today irrelevant, in view of the fact that it already happened in the 1990s, but acted in the sense of the

distributive deviations and not of the production of value. As always, it is not possible to predict the inevitable end of capitalism; and it is also not desirable to do so, in order not to diminish the importance of the subjective side in fighting against it. The depth and magnitude of the crisis urge us to search for an equally deep and vast solution within the system of private property. Such a solution is not easy to find, but at least it is easier for those whose interest is not supporting private property, but, on the contrary, relegating it to the past.



## Who are the workers of the world? Marx and beyond<sup>1</sup>

*Marcel van der Linden*

### **M**arx: his strengths and weaknesses

We urgently require a critical theory that allows us to analyse the development of the capitalist world-system and work out prospects for a comprehensive reordering of society. Such a theory should allow us to indicate the transcontinental possibilities for action open to a new anticapitalist International, while defining history as an open process. Marxian theory provides important elements for such a reorientation. But it is not sufficient, as it leaves open, or fails to comprehensively address, too many questions. This is already true of the longevity of the capitalist system. Karl Marx thought that he would live to see the transition to a socialist order. For example, he drafted the *Grundrisse* because he expected the 1857–8 economic crisis to mark the beginning of the great transformation. In late 1857, he wrote to Engels: “I am working like mad all night and every night collating my economic studies so that I at least get the outlines clear before the *deluge*”.<sup>2</sup> The fact that capitalism has proven more resilient than its enemies thought and hoped has often induced Marxists to resort to the most varied intellectual constructs. One need think only of Fritz Sternberg’s theory of the “reprieve”, by which he hoped to explain

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<sup>1</sup> I am plundering here earlier publications, some of which I wrote together with my friend Karl Heinz Roth, the discussions with whom have taught me so much. See especially the editorial introduction and conclusion in van der Linden and Roth, K.H. (eds), *Über Marx hinaus*. Berlin: Assoziation A, 2009, and chapters 2-4 in my *Workers of the World. Essays toward a Global Labor History*. Chicago: Haymarket, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Marx, Karl. ‘Letter to Friedrich Engels, 8 December 1857’. In: Marx, K. and Engels, F. *Collected Works*, vol. 40. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1983, p. 217.

capitalism's recovery from the depression of the 1880s and 1890s, or of the theory of the "rising surplus", developed by Paul Baran and Paul Sweezy to account for the boom of the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>3</sup> The "socialist" experiments in the Soviet Union, the People's Republic of China and elsewhere are also difficult to understand from a Marxian perspective: these social formations were characterised by structural exploitation, but they lacked consolidated ruling classes. In other words, they did not constitute a real alternative to capitalism, and they could, in many cases, be toppled relatively quickly.<sup>4</sup> This is of course related to the ineluctable question concerning the working class as revolutionary subject. Why has it, until now, hardly lived up to the hopes of Marx and the Marxists?

Here, I want to focus on this last question, but I can discuss only one aspect of it, namely: what is the working class? *What might a critique of the political economy of labour look like that critically reviews the experiences of the past five hundred years while moving beyond the Eurocentrism that continues to dominate Marxism?*

To begin with, we need to note that Marx neglected studying the working class in favour of studying capital. Marx conceived of *Capital* as the first part of a six-part work; the "Book on Wage-Labour" was to be another such part, but it was never written. To be sure, there are some rough indications of what Marx would have said in this book.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, much remains entirely unclear. The well-known British social historian Edward P. Thompson rightly observed that *Capital* discusses the logic of capital, but not capitalism; it neglects the social and political dimensions of history, the anger and outrage that become apparent in class struggle. This anger and outrage must remain incomprehensible for as long as one considers only the closed system of economic logic. The "human experience" is neglected, even though it expresses something essential:

Men and women also return as subjects, within this term – not as autonomous subjects, 'free individuals', but as persons experiencing their determinate productive situations and relationships, as needs and interests, and as antagonisms, and

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<sup>3</sup> Sternberg, Fritz. *Der Imperialismus*. Berlin: Malik, 1926; Baran, Paul A. and Sweezy, Paul M. *Monopoly Capital. An Essay on the American Economic and Social Order*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1966.

<sup>4</sup> The extensive debates on this question have been reconstructed in Marcel van der Linden, *Western Marxism and the Soviet Union. A Survey of Critical Theories and Debates since 1917* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> Lebowitz, Michael. *Beyond 'Capital': Marx's Political Economy of the Working Class*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992.



then ‘handling’ this experience with their consciousness and their culture ... in the most complex ... ways, and then (often but not always through the ensuing structures of class) acting upon their determinate situation in their turn.<sup>6</sup>

For example, Marx convincingly explains why capital repeatedly attempts “to extend the working day to its physical maximum”, but he leaves it unclear why “the working man constantly presses in the opposite direction”.<sup>7</sup> Michael A. Lebowitz has pointed out that *Capital* has nothing to say about the way in which ever-new needs are created for workers. Marx does point out, in the *Grundrisse*, that the capitalist attempts to spur the workers on “to consumption, to give his wares new charms, to inspire them with new needs by constant chatter etc”. He notes that “the contemporary power of capital” rests on these ever-new needs.<sup>8</sup> But *Capital* is silent on the golden chains binding workers to capitalism.<sup>9</sup>

After all, *Capital* assumes that “in a given country at a given period, the average amount of the means of subsistence necessary for the worker is a known datum”<sup>10</sup> and should be treated as “a constant magnitude”.<sup>11</sup> Marx had already noted in the *Grundrisse* that the general study of the changes undergone by proletarian needs belonged in the chapter on wage-labour.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, Marx hardly took note, analytically, of worker-organisations (trade-unions). In *Capital*, historical developments are consistently initiated by the capitalists – to the point that Marx even explains the wage-level in terms of capital’s needs. Since the worker is mortal, Marx argues, he must reproduce himself.

The labour-power withdrawn from the market by wear and tear, and by death, must be continually replaced by, at the very least, an equal amount of fresh labour-power. Hence the sum of means of subsistence necessary for the production of labour-power must include the means necessary for the worker’s

<sup>6</sup> Thompson, E.P. *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*. London: Merlin, 1978, p.164.

<sup>7</sup> Marx, Karl. ‘Value, Price and Profit’. In Marx, K. and Engels, F. *Collected Works*. vol. 20. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1985, p. 146.

<sup>8</sup> Marx, Karl. *Grundrisse. Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*, trans. with a foreword by Martin Nicolaus. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973, p. 287.

<sup>9</sup> Lebowitz, Michael. *Following Marx: Method, Critique and Crisis*. Leiden and Boston: Brill 2009, p. 308. I will also be following Lebowitz in the sections that follow.

<sup>10</sup> Marx, Karl. *Capital*. Vol. I, trans. Ben Fowkes. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976, p. 275.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 655.

<sup>12</sup> Marx, Karl. *Grundrisse*. Op.Cit., p. 817.

replacements, i.e. his children, in order that this race of peculiar commodity-owners may perpetuate its presence on the market.<sup>13</sup>

Just like a machine, the worker “will wear out”, which is why he needs the means “to bring up a certain quota of children”.<sup>14</sup> Lebowitz comments on this as follows:

Frankly, to propose that the value of labour-power contains provisions for the maintenance of children because capital wants future recruits twenty years hence – rather than because workers have struggled to secure such requirements – is a teleological absurdity! However, it is a logical result of the disappearance of wage-labour-for-itself from *Capital*. Marx himself must bear responsibility for some of the functionalist absurdities of his disciples.<sup>15</sup>

These sorts of tacit assumptions are precisely what we should discuss critically.

### **The working class as a historical concept**

The concept of the “working class” emerged towards the end of the 18th century, and was at first used especially in the plural form. The “working classes” comprised all those people employed to work for wages in manual occupations. Probably the term came into use when, because of the rise of manufactures and factories, new groups of wage earners became visible who could be counted neither among domestic servants, nor among day-labourers or journeymen.

The precise meaning of the term “working class” is disputed. While some emphasize manual labour, broader interpretations are also advanced. Not infrequently, lower-level white-collar employees are also included in the working class, and sometimes the position is defended that *all* wage-earners belong to the working class, except for higher managers. Nevertheless, all definitions of the working class being used have three aspects in common. Firstly, they assume that members of the working class share at least one characteristic, namely that they are *dependent on a wage* for their survival, while other sources of income are either lacking or much

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<sup>13</sup> Marx, Karl. *Capital*, Vol. I. Op.Cit., p. 275.

<sup>14</sup> Marx, Karl. *Value, Price and Profit*. Op.Cit., p. 129.

<sup>15</sup> Lebowitz. *Following Marx*. Op.Cit., p. 311.

less important. Secondly, they involve the (often implicit) assumption that workers are part of *families* who in principle also belong to the working class. Sometimes it is assumed that there is a male breadwinner who earns the income of the whole household, while other members of the family perform at most subsistence labour; sometimes the possibility is recognized that other family members can also contribute to household income. Thirdly, all definitions assume that the working class is next to, or counterposed to, *other social classes*, in particular the employers (“capitalists”), the self-employed, the unfree, and so-called “lumpenproletarians” (beggars, thieves, etc.).

All these descriptions emphasize structural, social-economic characteristics. But the working class also has a subjective side, as shown by its culture, mentality and collective action. E.P. Thompson accordingly considered “class” as an outcome of experience, emerging out of those socio-economic characteristics. “Class”, he argued, “happens when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs.”<sup>16</sup> The ways in which “class happens” can diverge strongly, and are unpredictable: “We can see a *logic* in the responses of similar occupational groups undergoing similar experiences, but we cannot predicate any *law*. Consciousness of class arises in the same way in different times and places, but never in just the same way.”<sup>17</sup>

### Formation

In the early 21st century, wage labour has probably become the second most prevalent form of work (after domestic subsistence-labour). But wage labour is not a phenomenon of recent vintage. Wage labour has been performed more or less sporadically for thousands of years. Originally it concerned work activities without a permanent character, such as the work of itinerant artisans, the service of military recruits or help with the harvest. The New Testament provides a good example of casual wage labour with the parable about the “householder who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard.” (Matthew 20)

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<sup>16</sup> Thompson, E.P. *The Making of the English Working Class*. London: Gollancz, 1963, pp.8-9.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p.9.

What is special about modern wage-labour is not only that it has become a socially dominant phenomenon, but also that a relatively large part of wage workers have longer-term jobs which often last for years, or sometimes even a lifetime. This historical change has occurred gradually or more rapidly from the 15th century, beginning in the North Atlantic region and then spreading to other parts of the world. Background causes of this development were, among others, the rise of capitalist production and distribution, growing state apparatuses which intervened more powerfully in economic and social life, and growing populations. These processes contributed to the emergence of regional, national and international labour markets, and new forms of social inequality.

These trends did not always lead to a growing number of wage workers (in the 17th and 18th century they were accompanied by an intensification of slavery), but in the long term they meant that more and more families depended on a wage for their survival. This “proletarianization” made a growing part of the world population dependent on one kind of income and therefore socially vulnerable.

The opportunities or risks for such workers are determined by markets and market changes. They do not possess the tools they use, the raw materials they process, or the products they produce. Their work is determined by those who possess all of this in the form of capital and who, on this basis, employ and direct them (often through managers, supervisors, or other types of middlemen). The relation between wage workers and employers is based on a contract of exchange (work for wages), terminable by both sides, and not by extra-economic compulsion or tradition.<sup>18</sup>

Parts of the large group of wage workers so emerging develop collective identities, based on shared interests, experiences, opinions, fears and expectations. They articulate these collective identities in all kinds of ways, through sociability, religious rituals, or organizations for mutual aid. Not infrequently the new identity is also the expression of a beginning of class awareness, based on the consciousness that the interests of workers are different and often counterposed to those of the employers. Whether such consciousness emerges, and what exact forms it will have, always depends on the circumstances, and cannot be predicted in advance.

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<sup>18</sup> Kocka, Jürgen. Problems of Working-Class Formation: The Early Years, 1800-1875. In: Ira Katznelson and R. Zolberg, Aristide R. (eds), *Working-Class Formation: Nineteenth-Century Patterns in Western Europe and the United States*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986, p. 282.

In some circumstances, class awareness becomes more militant, because groups of workers try to defend their perceived common interests against the state or the employers through economic or political action. In support of this struggle for their interests, they can form diverse kinds of organizations, such as trade unions, political parties or sometimes even paramilitary units. Here again it is true that this can happen in all kinds of different ways, and that the content of a conflict of interest can show great variations. Only rarely do such interest groups strive to unite all workers; more often they exclude segments of the class because of reasons of gender, ethnicity, nationality, education, etc.

### **“Peripheral” working classes**

In recent decades, more and more voices argue that the interpretation of the working class given above is too restrictive. The distinctions between “classical” wage-earners and some other subordinate groups are very fine indeed. Thirdly, there are all kinds of forms of “hidden” wage labour, such as sharecropping where a peasant family supplies labour and the landowner the land and means of production, while the revenues are shared between them according to some formula; or self-employed workers, who are formally employers without staff, but in reality are often dependent on one specific client who is therefore their *de facto* employer. This relativization of the boundaries of the working class has recently motivated historians to redefine the working class, such that slaves and other unfree workers can also be included, just like ostensibly “independent” self-employed operators.<sup>19</sup> The historians Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, for example, revealed how in the early-modern North Atlantic region a multiform proletariat of “hewers of wood and drawers of water” developed, with various sites of struggle: “the commons, the plantation, the ship, and the factory”.<sup>20</sup> They made it seem likely that slaves and maroons from Africa, indentured labourers from Europe, native Americans, and “free” wage earners and artisans constituted a complex but also socially and culturally interconnected amorphous “multitude”, which was also regarded as one whole (a “many-headed Hydra”) by those in power. Linebaugh and

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<sup>19</sup> van der Linden, Marcel. *Workers of the World: Essays toward a Global Labor History*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008.

<sup>20</sup> Linebaugh, Peter and Rediker, Marcus. *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2001.

Rediker referred to the 1791 rebellion of Haitian slaves as “the first successful workers’ revolt in modern history”. They suggested that this revolution contributed to the segmentation of that rebellious “multitude” afterwards: “What was left behind was national and partial: the English working class, the black Haitian, the Irish diaspora”. The narrow nineteenth-century concept of the proletariat we find in Marx and others was, they suggest, a result of this segmentation.

We have to rethink the traditional notion of the working class. On the one hand, the experience of the *contemporary* global South tells us, that the distinctions between “classical” wage-earners and some other subordinate groups are vague indeed. “Pure” wage workers have been a minority in the labour force of many countries in the Global South; there, a process of class formation often did not develop until the very end. Most of these wage-earners do not freely dispose of their own labour power—for example, because these workers are tied down by debts—or they do not have any formal (legally recognized) contractual relationship with their employers. In addition, wage labour in the South is carried out by households and families whose survival very often remains partly dependent on subsistence labour as well—performed especially, but not exclusively, by women—and on independent production of commodities for the market, etc. The economic roles that different family members take on are often not fixed and permanent, but instead signify a transient social relationship, one that can be replaced rather quickly by other sources of income. That is one reason why the dividing line between workers and so-called *lumpenproletarians* (people who survive by means of begging, crime, prostitution, and so on) is not always easy to draw. Referring to Africa, Vic Allen concluded some forty years ago that “In societies in which bare subsistence is the norm for a high proportion of all the working class, and where men, women, and children are compelled to seek alternative means of subsistence, as distinct from their traditional ones, the *lumpenproletariat* is barely distinguishable from much of the rest of the working class”.<sup>21</sup> Next to that, there are all kinds of forms of hidden wage labour, such as sharecropping, in which a peasant family supplies labour, and the landowner supplies the land and means of production, while the revenues are shared between them according to some formula. Another form of “hidden” wage labour includes *self-employed workers*, who are formally employers without staff, but in reality often dependent on one specific client who is therefore their *de facto* employer.

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<sup>21</sup> Allen, V.L. The Meaning of the Working Class in Africa. *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 10, 2 (1972), p. 188.

On the other hand, *historical* studies reveal that in the past, the dividing line between chattel slaves, serfs, and other unfree subalterns taken together and “free” wage-earners was rather vague at best. On the African East Coast around 1900, for example, there lived quite a number of slaves who:

worked as self-employed artisans or skilled workers, some of whom had previously worked as day labourers but had learnt a more lucrative trade. ... These self-employed slaves ... were respected for their knowledge and thus commanded exceedingly high prices in the market, but they were rarely for sale. With almost the same status as freed slaves, a number of them actually owned small garden plots, and occasionally even slaves.<sup>22</sup>

Brazilian historians especially have pointed to the fluid dividing line between “free” wage labour and chattel slavery, for example in the case of the *ganhadores* (slaves-for-hire) who earned their own wage, part of which they had to hand over to their owners.<sup>23</sup> In South Asia other ambivalences occur, for example in the case of indentured labourers (*coolies*) who were employed in South Asia itself, but also in the Caribbean, Malaya, Natal, Fiji and elsewhere. Their situation is sometimes described as a “new form of slavery”, but at other times as “nearly free” wage labour.<sup>24</sup> In Australia, after lengthy hesitations, labour historians have no difficulty anymore to describe the numerous convict labourers originally settling in the country as “working class” in the broad sense of the word, even though these workers performed forced labour.<sup>25</sup> And for Europe, the new research reveals that many so-called “free” workers were really *bonded* labourers, far into the 19th century. Master-and-servant laws, apprenticeship arrangements, etc., ensured that workers were tied to their employers, and had significantly

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<sup>22</sup> Deutsch, Jan-Georg. *Emancipation without Abolition in German East Africa c.1884-1914*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, pp. 71-72.

<sup>23</sup> Groundbreaking was the article by Lara, Silvia Hunold. *Escravidão, cidadania e história do trabalho no Brasil*. *Projeto História*, No. 16, February 1998, pp. 25-38. See also the important case study by Reis, João José. “The Revolution of the Ganhadores”: Urban Labour, Ethnicity and the African Strike of 1857 in Bahia, Brazil. *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 29, 1997, pp. 355-393.

<sup>24</sup> Tinker, Hugh. *A New System of Slavery: The Export of India Labour Overseas, 1830-1920*. London: Oxford University Press, 1974.

<sup>25</sup> An excellent overview is provided by Roberts, David Andrew. The ‘Knotted Hands that Set Us High’: Labour History and the Study of Convict Australia. *Labour History* [Sydney], No. 100, May 2011, pp. 33-50.

fewer legal rights than the literature previously suggested. In this context, there has indeed been mention of “industrial serfdom”.<sup>26</sup>

### Critiquing the classics (I): wage labour versus slavery

These trends make it necessary to rethink the connection between wage labour and capitalism. Classical thinkers like Max Weber and Karl Marx believed that capitalism and wage labour were two sides of the same coin. *Marx* reduced the working class to workers who as free individuals can dispose of their labour-power as their own commodity, while they have no other commodity for sale.<sup>27</sup> Capitalism is the mode of production based on such workers. Other labour relations may also occur under capitalism, but they form an “anomaly opposite the bourgeois system itself”, which is “possible at individual points within the bourgeois system of production”, though “only because it does not exist at other points”.<sup>28</sup> Other social groups like independent artisans and peasants have no real future and will “decay and finally disappear in the face of Modern Industry”.<sup>29</sup> *Weber* considered the “formally purely voluntarist organization of labour” as the “typical and dominant form for the satisfaction of the needs of the masses, with expropriation of the workers’ means of production”.<sup>30</sup>

Marx’s distinction between chattel slave and “free” wage earner was not correct. Marx engaged with issues related to slave labour in many passages of his work. He was more aware of the contrast between “free” wage labour and slavery than most 21st century scholars. As an expert on European antiquity (on which he wrote his PhD thesis) and as a contemporary to the American Civil War, Marx was very much aware of the slavery problem.<sup>31</sup> The first volume of *Capital* was published two years

<sup>26</sup> See e.g. McKinlay, Alan. From Industrial Serf to Wage-Labourer: The 1937 Apprentice Revolt in Britain. *International Review of Social History*. Vol. 31, 1, April 1986, pp.1-18. Comparative perspectives are offered in Steinfeld, Robert J. *The Invention of Free Labor. The Employment Relation in English and American Law and Culture, 1350-1870*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991; Hay, Douglas and Craven, Paul (eds.). *Masters, Servants, and Magistrates in Britain and the Empire, 1562-1955*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004 and in Stanziani, Alessandro Stanziani (ed.). *Le travail contraint en Asie et en Europe: XVII-XXe siècles*. Paris: CNRS, 2010.

<sup>27</sup> Marx, Karl. *Capital*, Vol. I. Op.Cit., p. 272.

<sup>28</sup> Marx, Karl. *Grundrissse*. Op.Cit., p. 464.

<sup>29</sup> Marx, Karl and Engels, Friedrich. The Communist Manifesto. In: Marx, K. and Engels, F. *Collected Works*, vol. 6. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976, p. 494.

<sup>30</sup> Weber, Max. *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*. Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1921, p. 96.

<sup>31</sup> Backhaus, Wilhelm. *Marx, Engels und die Sklaverei. Zur ökonomischen Problematik der Unfreiheit*. Düsseldorf: Schwann, 1974 ; de Sainte Croix, Geoffroy E.M. Karl Marx and



after the abolition of slavery in the United States in 1865 and 21 years before it was officially proclaimed in Brazil. Marx considered slavery a historically backward mode of exploitation that would soon be a thing of the past, as “free” wage labour embodied the capitalist future. He compared the two labour forms in several writings. He certainly saw similarities between them – both produced a surplus product and “the wage-labourer, just like the slave, must have a master to make him work and govern him”.<sup>32</sup> At the same time, he distinguished some differences that overshadowed all the common experiences they shared. Let me offer some brief critical comments on them and indicate some doubts.

First: wage workers dispose of labour capacity, viz. “the aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in the physical form, the living personality, of a human being, capabilities which he sets in motion whenever he produces a use-value of any kind”<sup>33</sup> – and this labour capacity is the source of value; the capitalist purchases this labour capacity as a commodity, because he expects it to provide him with a “specific service”, namely the creation of “more value than it has itself”.<sup>34</sup> The same is not true of the slave’s labour capacity. The slaveholder “has paid cash for his slaves”, and so “the product of their labour represents the interest on the capital invested in their purchase”.<sup>35</sup> But since interest is nothing but a form of surplus value, according to Marx,<sup>36</sup> it would seem that slaves would have to produce surplus value. And it is a fact that the sugar plantations on which slave labour was employed yielded considerable profits, because the commodity sugar embodied more value than the capital invested by the plantation owner (ground rent, amortisation of the slaves, amortisation of the sugar cane press, etc.). So is it really the case that only the wage worker produces the equivalent of his/her own value plus “an excess, a surplus-value”?<sup>37</sup> Or is the slave a “source of value” as well?

Second: Marx states that labour power can

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the History of Classical Antiquity. *Arethusa*, 8, 1975, pp. 7-41; Lekas, Padelis. *Marx on Classical Antiquity. Problems of Historical Methodology*. (Sussex: Wheatsheaf, 1988); Reichardt, Tobias. Marx über die Gesellschaft der klassischen Antike. *Beiträge zur Marx-Engels-Forschung*. New Series, 2004, pp. 194-222.

<sup>32</sup> Marx, Karl. *Capital*, Vol. III. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981, p. 510.

<sup>33</sup> Marx, Karl. *Capital*, I. Op.Cit. p. 270.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 301.

<sup>35</sup> Marx, Karl. *Capital*, III. Op.Cit., p. 762.

<sup>36</sup> “Rent, interest, and industrial profit are only different names for different parts of the surplus value of the commodity, or the unpaid labour enclosed in it, and they are equally derived from this source and from this source alone.” Marx, Karl. *Value, Price and Profit*. Op.Cit., p. 133.

<sup>37</sup> Marx, Karl. *Capital*, I. Op.Cit., p. 317.

appear on the market as a commodity only if, and in so far as, its possessor, the individual whose labour-power it is, offers it for sale or sells it as a commodity. In order that its possessor may sell it as a commodity, he must have it at his disposal, he must be the free proprietor of his own labour-capacity, hence of his person.<sup>38</sup>

The future wage worker and the money owner “meet in the market, and enter into relations with each other on a footing of equality as owners of commodities, with the sole difference that one is a buyer, the other a seller; both are therefore equal in the eyes of the law”.<sup>39</sup> In other words: labour power should be offered for sale by the person who is the carrier and possessor of this labour power and the person who sells the labour power offers it exclusively. Why should that be so? Why can the labour power not be sold by someone other than the carrier, as for example in the case of children who are made to perform wage labour in a factory by their parents? Why can the person who offers (his or her own, or someone else’s) labour power for sale not sell it conditionally, together with means of production? And why can someone who does not own his own labour power nevertheless sell this labour power, as in the case of rented slaves, whose owners provide them to someone else for a fee?<sup>40</sup>

Third: the wage worker embodies variable capital.

It both reproduces the equivalent of its own value and produces an excess, a surplus value, which may itself vary, and be more or less according to circumstances. This part of capital is continually being transformed from a constant into a variable magnitude. I therefore call it the variable part of capital, or more briefly, variable capital.<sup>41</sup>

It is only because labour is presupposed in the form of wage-labour, and the means of production in the form of capital (i.e. only as a result of this specific form of these two essential agents of production), that one part of the value (product) presents itself as surplus-value and this surplus-value presents

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 271.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 271.

<sup>40</sup> Marx was quite aware of this practice of renting slaves, but he drew no theoretical conclusions from it. See for example: Marx, *Capital*, III. Op.Cit., p. 597: “Under the slave system the worker does have a capital value, namely his purchase price. And if he is hired out, the hirer must first pay the interest on this purchase price and on top of this replace the capital’s annual depreciation”.

<sup>41</sup> Marx, Karl. *Capital*, I. Op.Cit., p. 317.

itself as profit (rent), the gains of the capitalist, as additional available wealth belonging to him.<sup>42</sup>

To Marx, the slave is part of fixed capital and no different, economically, from livestock or machinery. “The slave-owner buys his worker in the same way as he buys his horse”.<sup>43</sup> The slave’s capital value is his purchasing price, and this capital value has to be amortised over time, just as with livestock and machinery.<sup>44</sup> But how justified is Marx in defining only wage labour as variable capital, on the grounds that “this part of capital” can “be more or less”?<sup>45</sup> Is the same not true of commodity-producing slave labour?

Fourth: when the wage worker produces a commodity, this commodity is “a unity formed of use-value and value”, for which reason “the process of production must be a unity, composed of the labour process and the process of creating value [*Wertbildungsprozess*]”.<sup>46</sup> No one will doubt that slaves producing cane sugar, tobacco or indigo are producing commodities, just like wage workers. But if this is the case, then slaves also produce value. Marx denies this, since he considers slaves part of constant capital and holds that only variable capital creates value.

Fifth: the wage worker always divests himself of his labour power “for a limited period only, for if he were to sell it in a lump, once and for all, he would be selling himself, converting himself from a free man into a slave, from an owner of a commodity into a commodity”.<sup>47</sup> Normally, one would refer to such a transaction (the “sale” of a commodity in instalments, without any change of owner) as a lease and not as a sale – an obvious idea that was already formulated much earlier.<sup>48</sup> The distinction between a lease

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<sup>42</sup> Marx, Karl. *Capital*, III. Op.Cit., p. 1021. This is why surplus labour appears in two very different forms in these two cases. In the case of wage labour, the wage form eradicates “every trace of the division of the working day into necessary labour and surplus labour, into paid labour and unpaid labour”. Marx, Karl. *Capital*, I. Op.Cit., p. 680. By contrast, in the case of slave labour, ‘even the part of the working day in which the slave is only replacing the value of his own means of subsistence, in which he therefore actually works for himself alone, appears as labour for his master. All his labour appears as unpaid labour.’ Ibid., p. 680.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 377; the *Grundrisse* contains a similar passage. Op.Cit., pp. 489–490.

<sup>44</sup> Marx, Karl. *Capital*, III. Op.Cit., p. 597.

<sup>45</sup> Marx, Karl. *Capital*, I. Op.Cit., p. 317.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 293.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 271.

<sup>48</sup> Marx himself referred repeatedly to the analogy between rent and wage labour. He did so most extensively in the *Theories of Surplus Value*, where he writes that the worker is paid for his commodity (his labour capacity) only after he has finished working: “It can also be seen that here it is the worker, not the capitalist, who does the advancing, just as

and a sale may appear insignificant, but it is not. As Franz Oppenheimer has rightly noted:

When a sales contract is closed, the substance of the commodity becomes the property of the other party, whereas when a lease contract is closed, the other party merely purchases the right to use the commodity; the seller only makes his commodity available temporarily, without relinquishing ownership of it.<sup>49</sup>

When A sells B a commodity, B becomes the owner in lieu of A. But when A leases B a commodity, A remains the owner and B merely receives the right to use the commodity for a fixed term. The “substance” of the commodity remains with A, whereas B receives its “use and enjoyment”.<sup>50</sup> Thus, if wage labour is the leasing of labour power, the difference between a wage worker and a slave does not consist in the “definite period of time”<sup>51</sup> for which labour power is made available, but in the fact that in one case, labour power is leased, while in the other it is sold. Why do we not find this consideration in Marx? Presumably because it makes the process of value creation appear in a different light. The substance of the value of labour power is retained by the worker rather than being yielded to the capitalist. Engels held that lease transactions are “only a transfer of already *existing*, previously *produced* value, and the total sum of values possessed by the landlord and the tenant *together* remains the same after as it was before”.<sup>52</sup> Thus if wage labour were a lease relation as well, it could not create surplus value.

Sixth: according to Marx, the rate of profit tends to decline because the social productivity of labour increases constantly:

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in the case of the renting of a house, it is not the tenant but the landlord who advances use-value”. Marx, Karl and Engels, Friedrich. *Collected Works*, vol. 32. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1989, p. 302; see also Marx, *Capital*, I. Op.Cit., p. 279: “The price of the labour-power is fixed by the contract, although it is not realized till later, like the rent of a house”. On this, see also Kuczynski, Thomas. Was wird auf dem Arbeitsmarkt verkauft? In: van der Linden, Marcel and Heinz Roth, K. *Über Marx hinaus*. Op.Cit.

<sup>49</sup> Oppenheimer, Franz. *Die soziale Frage und der Sozialismus. Eine kritische Auseinandersetzung mit der marxistischen Theorie*. Jena: Gustav Fischer, 1912, p.120.

<sup>50</sup> Differently from what Oppenheimer believed – “[...] only the labour capacity that is intended for sale (e.g. that of the work ox, the slave) is a commodity, not that intended merely for lease” (Ibid., p. 121) –, a lease contract also operates according to the logic of the commodity; this is precisely why the leasing fee depends on the value of the leased commodity.

<sup>51</sup> Marx, Karl. *Capital*, I. Op.Cit., p. 271.

<sup>52</sup> Engels, Friedrich. The Housing Question. In: Marx, Karl and Engels, Friedrich. *Collected Works*, vol. 23. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1988, p. 320.

Since the mass of living labour applied continuously declines in relation to the mass of objectified labour that sets it in motion, i.e. the productively consumed means of production, the part of this living labour that is unpaid and objectified in surplus-value must also stand in an ever-decreasing ratio to the value of the total capital applied.<sup>53</sup>

The endpoint of this tendency would of course be a situation in which variable capital has been reduced to zero and total capital consists exclusively of constant capital. In such a situation, the collapse of capitalism would be a fact. But the odd thing is that there already existed such a terminal phase prior to the industrial revolution, namely on the plantations of the 17th and 18th centuries. These plantations employed slave labour, so that according to Marx's premises, total capital consisted exclusively of constant capital. How are we to account for the economic dynamism of the plantations on this basis?

The example of slave labour shows Marx did not provide a consistent justification for the privileged position productive wage labour is given within his theory of value. There is much to suggest that slaves and wage workers are structurally more similar than Marx and traditional Marxism suspected. The historical reality of capitalism has featured many hybrid and transitional forms between slavery and "free" wage labour. Moreover, slaves and wage workers have repeatedly performed the same work in the same business enterprise.<sup>54</sup> It is true, of course, that the slave's labour capacity is the permanent property of the capitalist, whereas the wage worker only makes his labour capacity available to the capitalist for a limited time, even if he does so repeatedly. It remains unclear, however, why slaves should create no surplus value while wage workers do. The time has come to expand the theory of value in such a way as to recognise the productive labour of slaves and other unfree workers as an essential component of the capitalist economy.

### **Critiquing the classics (II): the so-called lumpenproletariat**

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<sup>53</sup> Marx, Karl. *Capital*, III. Op.Cit., p. 319.

<sup>54</sup> E.g. on the coffee plantations around São Paulo, or in a chemical factory in Baltimore. Hall, Michael and Stolcke, Verena. The Introduction of Free Labour on São Paulo Coffee Plantations. *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 10, 2/3, 1983, pp. 170-200; Whitman, T. Stephen. Industrial Slavery at the Margin: The Maryland Chemical Works. *Journal of Southern History*, 59, 1, 1993, pp. 31-62.

As a contemporary concept the *lumpenproletariat* makes its first appearance during the years 1848-51, when Marx analyses French revolutionary and counterrevolutionary trends. Marx was struck by the observation that workers had acted on both sides of the barricades – an apparent absurdity that he could only explain by valuing those on the good side as “real” proletarians, and devaluing those on the wrong side as pseudo-proletarians.<sup>55</sup>

When, in 1851, the workers were again divided and a part of them supported Louis Bonaparte, Marx saw his analysis confirmed. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1851-52) he includes in the *lumpenproletariat* not only “decayed *roués*” of aristocratic descent and “ruined and adventurous offshoots of the bourgeoisie”, but also

vagabonds, discharged soldiers, discharged jailbirds, escaped galley slaves, rogues, mountebanks, *lazzaroni*, pickpockets, tricksters, gamblers, *maquereaus*, brothel keepers, porters, *litterati*, organ-grinders, rag-pickers, knife grinders, tinkers, beggars – in short, the whole indefinite, disintegrated mass, thrown hither and thither, which the French term *la bohème*.<sup>56</sup>

This characterization suggests some analytical and empirical questions. Which groups could Marx have meant specifically? Apparently, he is lumping together a range of social groups:

(i) displaced peasants. The *Manifesto* speaks about the “passively rotting mass thrown off by the lowest layers of old society”. Probably, this is a reference to those former peasants, who through enclosures or other measures were robbed of their means of existence, migrated to the cities and became the unskilled part of the modern proletariat.

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<sup>55</sup> This led to a certain ambivalence: the “wrong” workers *were* and *were not* proletarians. Hal Draper points this out and observes “a certain ambivalence on the question whether the lumpenproletariat is to be regarded as a part of the proletariat or not”. Draper, Hal. The Concept of the “Lumpenproletariat” in Marx and Engels. *Etudes de Marxologie*, 15, 1972, p. 2294. In *The Class Struggles in France* (1850) one can for instance read, that the counterrevolutionary Mobile Guards “belonged for the most part to the *lumpenproletariat*, which in all big towns forms a mass sharply differentiated from the industrial proletariat [...]”. Just a few lines later, Marx writes, however, that “the Paris proletariat was confronted with an army, drawn from its own midst”. Marx, Karl and Engels, Friedrich. *Collected Works*, vol. 10. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1978, p. 62.

<sup>56</sup> Marx, Karl. *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. In: Marx, Karl and Engels, Friedrich. *Collected Works*, vol. 11. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1979, p. 149.

(ii) displaced proletarians, that is urban workers without means of existence – people who have lost their jobs, or are too old or too sick to find employment.

(iii) Self-employed, such as the “porters, *literati*, organ-grinders, rag-pickers, knife grinders, tinkers”.

(iv) Dubious professions, including the mountebanks, tricksters, gamblers, brothel keepers and prostitutes. What unites them is not a specific type of labour relation, but the seemingly immoral nature of their work. “What is going on here seems to be that Marx is including an assortment of occupations which command widespread dislike to make the lumpenproletariat seem less reputable rather than engaging in any kind of serious social (or socialist) analysis”.<sup>57</sup>

Apart from these logical considerations, there are also empirical problems with Marx’s analysis. The historical sociologist Mark Traugott has made a careful and detailed study of six battalions (comprising 3,845 individuals) of the “wrong” Mobile Guard in 1848. He concludes, that the social composition of the workers on the false side of the barricades does not confirm the *lumpenproletarian* hypothesis:

First, if self-reported occupations tell us anything at all, the Mobile Guard consisted in the main of workers in artisanal trades requiring relatively high levels of skill and training. This is not to deny the presence of a scattering of occupations that fit descriptions of the lumpenproletariat. If, unsurprisingly, no Mobile Guardsman listed his previous occupation as pimp, beggar, or thief, one does find listed a handful of itinerant peddlers, a single ragpicker, several street musicians, a magician, a mountebank, and a number for whom ‘no profession’ is specified. But even if one were to adopt a broad definition of *lumpenproletarian* status that included tinkers, scrap-metal dealers, market porters, and *literati* of all kinds, one could come up with only eighty-three such individuals or 3.0 percent of the total sample.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Cowling, Mark. Marx’s Lumpenproletariat and Murray’s Underclass: Concepts Best Abandoned?. In: Cowling, Mark Cowling and Martin, James (eds.). *Marx’s Eighteenth Brumaire: (Post)Modern Interpretations*. London: Pluto Press, 2002, pp. 228-242, at 232.

<sup>58</sup> Traugott, Mark. *Armies of the Poor. Determinants of Working-Class Participation in the Parisian Insurrection of June 1848*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985, pp. 76-77.

Marx's concrete analysis of the French situation was thus misleading. Besides, the social groups considered by Marx as lumpenproletarians have certainly not always been reactionaries. Victor Kiernan has, for instance, argued that the London lumpenproletariat after periods of seeming resignation could break out like a cyclone; and once in movement, its actions were characterized by "above all, audacity, spontaneity, disregard of the arbitrary chalk-lines within which society coops up its fowl; a cheerful conviction that the law is an ass". Usually, such waves of militancy followed in the wake of protests by "ordinary" workers: "It was when those who normally had jobs suffered acute spells of unemployment, and showed signs of mutinying, that the stragglers joined in, and might go further".<sup>59</sup> Moreover in general, *lumpenproletarians* have often been a driving force in social struggles.<sup>60</sup> Naturally, this does not make them a new vanguard, as has sometimes been suggested (e.g. by Frantz Fanon). It underlines, however, that the *lumpenproletariat* is not so much an analytical, as a moral category.

The concept's untenability becomes particularly clear in the Global South. Fuzzy concepts like "the informal sector" are an expression of such social conditions under which semi-proletarian households combine numerous activities to ensure their survival.<sup>61</sup>

### A new concept

The implications are far-reaching. Apparently, there is a large class of people within capitalism, whose labour power is commodified in various ways. I would like to call this class the *extended or subaltern working class*. Its members make up a very varied group: it includes chattel slaves, sharecroppers, small artisans and wage earners. It is the historic dynamics of this "multitude" that we should try to understand. We have to consider that in capitalism there *always* existed, and probably will continue to exist, several forms of commodified labour subsisting side by side.

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<sup>59</sup> Kiernan, Victor. Victorian London – Unending Purgatory. *New Left Review*, 76, 1972, pp. 73-90, at 82.

<sup>60</sup> Bovenkerk, Frank. The Rehabilitation of the Rabble: How and Why Marx and Engels Wrongly Depicted the Lumpenproletariat as a Reactionary Force. *The Netherlands Journal of Sociology*, 20, 1, 1984, pp. 13-41.

<sup>61</sup> See e.g. Breman, Jan. *Wage Hunters and Gatherers. Search for Work in the Urban and Rural Economy of South Gujarat*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994, pp. 3-130.



In its long development, capitalism has utilized many kinds of work relationships, some mainly based on economic compulsion, others with a strong non-economic component. Millions of slaves were brought by force from Africa to the Caribbean, to Brazil and in the southern states of the USA. Contract workers from India and China were shipped off to toil in South Africa, Malaysia or South America. “Free” migrant workers left Europe for the New World, for Australia or the colonies. And today sharecroppers produce an important portion of world agricultural output. These and other work-relationships are synchronous, even if there seems to be a secular trend towards “free wage labour”. Slavery still exists and sharecropping is enjoying a comeback in some regions. Capitalism could and can choose whatever form of commodified labour it thinks fits in a given historical context: one variant seems most profitable today, another tomorrow. If this argument is correct, then it behooves us to conceptualize the wage-earning class as one (important) kind of commodified labour among others. Consequently, so-called “free” labour cannot be seen as the only form of exploitation suitable for modern capitalism but as one alternative among several.

A possible new definition of the working class could be: *the ensemble of carriers of labour power whose labour power is sold or hired out to another person under economic or non-economic compulsions, regardless of whether the carrier of labour power is him- or herself selling or hiring it out and, regardless of whether the carrier him- or herself owns means of production.* All aspects of this provisional definition will require further reflection.

Such a reconceptualization and broadening of the notion of the working class will help us to better understand the many forms of resistance that have been used by subaltern workers over time. The classical approach suggests, for example, that strikes are a form of collective action that is associated especially with free wage labourers. But if we look at the ways in which protest is expressed and pressure is exerted by the different groups of subaltern workers (including slaves, the self-employed, the *lumpenproletarians* and the “free” wage labourers), these appear to overlap considerably. In the past, all kinds of subaltern workers went on strike. The sharecropping silver miners in Chihuahua protested as early as the 1730s against the termination of their work contracts by the owners of the mine. They entrenched themselves in the nearby hills.

There they built a makeshift stone parapet, unfurled a banner proclaiming their defiance, and vowed to storm the villa of San Felipe, kill [the mine owner] San Juan y Santa Cruz, and burn

his house to the ground. For the next several weeks they refused to budge from their mountain redoubt, where they passed time by composing and singing songs of protest.

The miners returned only after mediation by a priest sent by the bishop.<sup>62</sup>

Slaves regularly went on strike too. Serfs in Russia refused “to recognize their owner’s authority over them”; they stopped working for him and decided “to go on strike”.<sup>63</sup> On plantations in the British Caribbean in the early nineteenth century there were walkouts by slaves:

The rebellions in Demerara in 1829 and Jamaica in 1831 both began as versions of the modern work strike, coupled with other acts of defiance, but not with killing. Only when the local militia retaliated with force, assuming that this was another armed uprising, did such an occurrence actually take place”.<sup>64</sup>

A broadened concept of the working class will enable us to rethink the strike phenomenon. By including slaves and indentured labourers, it becomes possible to see that the strike is a very important, but also a specific form of the collective refusal to work. So-called unfree workers have used other forms of collective refusal that deserve to be integrated in our analysis. We all know of the maroons, the slaves who fled the plantations in North America as well as the Caribbean and South America. But this kind of resistance is not confined to the New World. Already in the ninth century the *Zanj*, slaves of East-African origin working in the salt marshes of South Iraq, left their masters as a group and constructed the city of Al Mukhtara, in a spot chosen for its inaccessibility. And at the mainland coast of Tanganyika in 1873, plantation slaves fled in huge numbers and founded the village of Makorora, “hidden in a thicket of thorny bushes” and with “heavy fortifications”.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Martin, English. *Governance and Society in Colonial Mexico. Chihuahua in the Eighteenth Century*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996, p. 51.

<sup>63</sup> Kolchin, Peter. *Unfree Labor. American Slavery and Russian Serfdom*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1987, p. 258.

<sup>64</sup> Craton, Michael. *Testing the Chains. Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1982, p. 301; Schuler, Monica. Ethnic Slave Rebellions in the Caribbean and the Guianas. *Journal of Social History*, 3, 1970, pp. 382-383.

<sup>65</sup> Glassman, Jonathan. The Bondsman’s New Clothes: The Contradictory Consciousness of Slave Resistance on the Swahili Coast. *Journal of African History*, 32, 2, 1991, p.308.

In 1921 coolies on tea plantations in the Chargola Valley in Assam protested when the authorities refused a wage increase. They deserted the plantations en masse:

They resolved to go back to their home districts, chanting victory cries to Mahatma Gandhi and claiming to have served under his orders. Soon, the entire Chargola valley looked deserted, with two gardens reported to have 'lost' virtually their entire labour force, and on an average, most gardens had suffered losses of around thirty to sixty percent. The coolies of Chargola Valley marched right through Karimganj, the subdivisional headquarters, continuing their onward journey either by train or on foot, and also by steamer they made their way back to their home districts.<sup>66</sup>

Seen against this background, the strikes of so-called free wage-earners constitute just *one* form of collective resistance against the exploitation of commodified labour. And we should also acknowledge that conversely free wage labourers have often used methods of struggle which are usually associated with other groups of subaltern workers, such as lynching, rioting, arson, and bombing.

By broadening our view on commodified labour under capitalism, we will be better placed to write the history of all those anonymous individuals and families who, as the playwright and poet Bertolt Brecht, wrote, "built Thebes of the seven gates", and so often "cooked the feast for the victors".

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<sup>66</sup> Varma, Nitin. Chargola Exodus and Collective Action in the Colonial Tea Plantations of Assam. *SEPHIS e-magazine* [[http://sephisemagazine.org/issues/vol.\\_3\\_2.pdf](http://sephisemagazine.org/issues/vol._3_2.pdf)], 2, January 2007, p. 34.



## **The working class: a contemporary approach in the light of historical materialism**

*Marcelo Badaró Mattos*

**T**his article has been written, and it could hardly have been otherwise, on the basis of the author's own research experience. As a historian I have been studying the Brazilian working class, its organizations and forms of struggle for many years now. I see history as being much more than a mere study of the past, "the science of men in time with its incessant urge to join the study of the dead to that of the living", as Marc Bloch<sup>1</sup> would have it; or Josep Fontana's affirmation that all historical inquiries involve, in addition to a reflection on the past, a distinct way of understanding the present (which he defined as a "political economics") and of taking a stance in the face of the future (which he calls "social project").<sup>2</sup> That is why, particularly in the last few years, I have been developing two study programs in parallel: one directed at gaining an understanding of certain particular forms of working-class formation in the peripheral conditions of a former slave-based colony (which took me back to the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>); and the other focused on an attempt to understand the current pattern of the class struggle in contemporary capitalist society,

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<sup>1</sup> Bloch, Marc. *Apologia da História; ou o ofício do historiador*. Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar, 2001, p. 67.

<sup>2</sup> Fontana, Josep. *História: análise do passado e projeto social*. Bauru, SP: Edusc, 1998, p. 10.

which means trying to get a clearer picture of the current profile of the working class, especially in Brazil's situation, as peripheral as ever.

What has made it possible, and to a great extent complementary, for me to develop research programs with such widely separated time frames has been a reflection on the working class founded in the conceptual sphere. From that more strictly theoretical point of view, I have based myself on two considerations that I will endeavor to develop in the course of this exposition: it is necessary to get beyond the narrower concepts of working class and arrive at a broader concept; and, that effort, in my view, can only be successful if we take up, once more, Marx and Engels' original discussion of the working class, alongside the best elaborations of historical materialism in the critical tradition produced in the 20th century. In doing so, we should certainly not address them as if they were ready-made responses to the challenges of historical research, but rather a valid set of references which, provided they are duly updated and duly take into account contemporary complexity, will continue to be the best we have available.

### **The new morphology of the working class**

In order to understand the nature of the working class today we need to gain an understanding of labour (abstract/wage earning) as it is currently used by capital to ensure its own expanded reproduction.

In her recent theoretically ambitious and highly provocative book, Virginia Fontes coined the term 'capital imperialism' to address global capitalism's configuration from the second half of the 20th century on.<sup>3</sup> This combination of the two terms is an attempt to achieve a double recuperation and consequently a double updating of these classic concepts of historical materialism. On the one hand, she seeks support for a comprehension of capital's contemporary dynamics in Marx, and sees it as centered on accumulation commanded by monetary capital (or interest-bearing capital) as it is analyzed in *Capital*. What was identified as potentially occurring at Marx's time has now become fully materialized, with a maximum concentration of capitals. On the other hand, her analysis strives to deepen and update the idea of Imperialism as it was put forward by Lenin, in order to account for the sheer scale of imperialist expansion in the post-war period whereby the exportation of goods and capitals were no longer the only

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<sup>3</sup> Fontes, Virginia. *O Brasil e o capital-imperialismo: teoria e história*. Rio de Janeiro: Edufij, 2010.

forms of imperialist expansion and the notions of banking capital and industrial capital, which when fused were to give rise to financial capital, are no longer adequate for addressing the current forms of concentration “that stems from, and drives the growth of all forms of capital, pornographically entwined”.<sup>4</sup>

In Fontes’ analysis, one of the characteristics of capital-imperialist expansion is its tendency to directly oppose capitalist appropriation (not only of the means of production, but also of the “effective possibility of imposing or superimposing itself on any form of extraction of surplus-value”) to humanity as a whole. The author proposes that we are living in a phase of tremendous expropriations, understood by her to be just as much “primary” expropriations (those which separate humans from the land driving them to sell their labour in the market to guarantee survival as consumers in the very same market) as “secondary” expropriations, which reverse even those hard-won “rights” conquered in the fray of earlier social struggles.<sup>5</sup>

This discussion conducted by Fontes is fundamental to enabling us to understand how, today, the erosion of stability in labour relations takes place within the sphere of the expropriation process currently in course. Strictly speaking, more workers are being produced, but not necessarily wage earners with formal employment in the terms in which we are used to thinking of the working class. There are more factories and factory workers than ever before, in absolute numbers at least (the percentage figures for the global scale are hard to come by), but the factories appear increasingly in the global periphery (Asia, Latin America) while at the heart, in the countries where development is more longstanding, in many of the countries there are fewer factories and fewer jobs in the secondary sector. The combination resulting from that process is: lower wages, higher unemployment rates, fewer legal guarantees in labour contracts, fewer rights, more “informality” in employment, and so on.

The population of the world today is around 7 billion people. Of these more than 3 billion are considered to be part of the economically

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 198.

<sup>5</sup> Such considerations on the centrality of expropriations, albeit tracing out different pathways, are consistent with similar concern displayed in Harvey’s portrayal of contemporary accumulation considered by him to be driven by “dispossession” or again with the emphasis Linebaugh places when highlighting the classic cycle: expropriation – exploitation – expropriation. See Harvey, David. *The new imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003. Linebaugh, Peter. *The Magna Carta manifesto: liberties and commons for all*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008.

active population; roughly 65% of the population in the 15 or over age group.<sup>6</sup> Since 2007, the urban population has been bigger than the rural one. Data for the year 2004 (and therefore prior to the effects of the most recent manifestation of the capitalist crisis) show a level of 6.4% unemployment in the workforce. Among those in employment, the percentage of those working on their own account or doing unpaid family work characterized as “vulnerable employment”, is as high as 37.2% in the Middle East and North Africa, 31.7% in Latin America and the Caribbean and 18.7% in Europe and Central Asia, according to data for 2008. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), 165 million children around the world in the age group 5 to 14 are working, 74 million of them in hazardous activities.

In the case of Brazil, this situation presents itself in concrete terms in the form of an accentuation of the centuries-long social inequality. According to the 2010 census, Brazil has a population of 190,732,694 inhabitants;<sup>7</sup> 160,879,708 live in cities and a mere 29,852,986 in the rural areas. Data for 2007 show that there are 98,846,000 economically active individuals altogether and that 82.6% of them live in cities. Of the 90,786,000 with jobs only 18.3% are engaged in agricultural activities. This scenario is in glaring contrast to Brazil’s population profile just a few decades ago. In 1940 only 31.2% of the country’s 41,236,315 residents lived in the cities. It was in the 1960s that the urban population first surpassed the rural one. The 1970 census showed that, at that time, 55.9% of a population of 93,139,037 inhabited urban areas. This means it is essential to recognize that the Brazilian working class is highly concentrated in the urban milieu, but also, that such concentration came about at a dramatic speed in the latter decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These facts have strong implications for urban life in those big metropolitan areas that expanded so much in such a very short space of time, leading to all kinds of social contradictions associated to that phenomenon, and having many implications for class experience and class culture, given the enormous contingents of workers still strongly marked by their former rural lifestyles or those of still-living generations of their families. Furthermore, there are tremendous regional differences among those statistics and, indeed, among all other statistics on Brazil. In the short time available here we would be unable to address that aspect satisfactorily.

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<sup>6</sup> Here I am using the World Bank’s figures available at: <http://www.worldbank.org/>

<sup>7</sup> When no other comment accompanies them, the data presented are those of the Brazilian Geography and Statistics Institute (*Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística – IBGE*) which can be accessed at: [www.ibge.gov.br](http://www.ibge.gov.br).



Among the 159,361,000 inhabitants aged 10 or over, 98,846,000 are, as mentioned above, economically active according to the statistics for 2007. Furthermore, among the latter, 8,060,000 were registered as unemployed (5,684,000 had worked at some time and another 2,375,000 were looking for their first jobs).

In the sphere of urban workers alone, two decades of production restructuring were sufficient to introduce a high degree of precariousness into the lives of the working population which, precisely because of its intense and recent concentration in metropolitan areas, tended to produce large [labour] contingents in excess of demand. The overall picture for the year 2007 shows that among the 74,207,000 people working in the cities, 72.9% were employed, 20.4% self-employed, 2.5% working without pay and 4% were employers. Among the employed, 23.6% had no formal labour contract and if they are added to the self-employed it means that 44% of workers were working in vulnerable labour conditions. Another way of detecting the absence of workers' rights is to observe that 50.7% of the employed contributed to the Social Security system. Discounting the 4% in the category of employers (who generally speaking also contribute), it can be seen that the majority of workers do not do so and, accordingly, are excluded from their full social security rights and in the future, at best, they might be served only by social assistance services.

In regard to unemployment levels, the IBGE (the principal Brazilian statistical agency) data, which glaringly underestimate the total numbers of unemployed, register 6,0% of unemployment in the main metropolitan regions of the country in 2011. The highest rate recorded since 2003 has been 12% registered in 2004. Data published by the Dieese (a trade-union funded research institution) show that the situation is actually more serious and that there was 10.5% in 2011.<sup>8</sup>

By adding the approximately 40% of those employed without formal labour contracts or contributions to the Social Security schemes, that is without access to their labour rights, to the more than 10% unemployed we get a good idea of the extent of vulnerability present in labour relations and the fragmentation of the urban working-class contingent, which was the majority. Even more shocking is the existence of 1,234,000 children from 3 to 13 years old that were working in Brazil in 2007 (around 750 thousand in rural areas), the overwhelming majority of them for no pay.

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<sup>8</sup> According to information displayed on this site: <http://www.dieese.org.br/ped/metropolitana.xml#>.

Data on outsourcing and sub-contracting would have helped us to complete the picture of this process of fragmentation and intensification of vulnerability, but they are not to be found among the general statistics. We can, however, illustrate the issue with the example of the case of the National Iron and Steel Company (*Companhia Siderúrgica Nacional - CNS*) in the city of Volta Redonda, which was privatized in the early 1990s. Immediately prior to the privatization, in 1989, the company employed 23 thousand workers while today it employs a mere 8 thousand. What that means is that there are 9 thousand employees working for sub-contracted firms that provide services to the CNS, apart from those involved in other service provision contracts that completely externalize activities formerly undertaken inside the company itself.<sup>9</sup> So, even if we limit our observations to the sphere of employed workers with formal labour contracts, the ongoing degradation of workers' labour conditions is still a starkly apparent reality.

Reflecting on the overall aspects of the process of change in the class's way of being or "morphology", as he puts it, Ricardo Antunes put forward a proposal for broadening the very concept of the working class. The expression "*class-that-lives-from-labour*", which he set out,<sup>10</sup> was the target of an intense polemic (after all, do not all classes live off their work, even though some live off the "work" of exploiting others?). The importance of his contribution, however, goes beyond that polemic insofar as his aim was "*to emphasize the current meaning of the working class, its form of being*", defending the analytical value of Marx's concept of the working class in the contemporary context, in which, I consider him to have been successful. His critical efforts directed at those who have declared the extinction of the class (or of the analytic validity of the concept) required a prior definition of a much broader notion of the working class that would include:

all those who *sell their labour-power in exchange for a wage*, incorporating, in addition to the industrial proletariat and wage-earners in the service sector, the rural proletariat that sells its labour-power to capital. This notion includes: the *precarious proletariat*; the *modern sub-proletariat*; *part-time* work; the new proletariat of fast-food restaurants; (...)the tertiarised and precarious workers of *lyophilised* enterprises (...) *wage-earning*

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<sup>9</sup> Data presented at the Fluminense Federal University by Edílson Gracioli, professor at the Federal University of Uberlandia, in March 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Antunes, Ricardo. *The Meanings of Work: Essay on the Affirmation and Negation of Work*. Leiden: Brill, 2013

workers of the so-called ‘informal economy’ who are very often indirectly subordinated to capital; as well as unemployed workers.<sup>11</sup>

I am entirely in agreement with Antunes and his proposal to demonstrate the contemporary relevance of Marx’s reflection based on a broadened definition of the working class. After all, even Marx had recourse to a fairly broad definition of class.

To that end, our initial observation regarding the concept of working class in Marx is of a terminological nature. In neo-Latin languages, there is a strong tendency to translate the German expression employed by Marx, *arbeiterklasse*, or its English language equivalent ‘working class’ by the phrase *classe operária* (*ouvrière*, *obreira*) where *operária* gives the idea of workers from the industrial sector. That gives the impression that the real revolutionary subject is the industrial factory worker, the productive worker, and it is she/he alone who suffers the real subsumption of capitalism stemming from the interaction with modern technology used in big industry.

Daniel Bensaïd perceives the problem associated to the use of restrictive vocabulary to refer to class:

Marx speaks generally of proletarians. In general, in the 19th century, people spoke of the working classes in the plural. The terms in German, “*Arbeiterklasse*”, and English, “working class”, stayed general enough, whereas the term “*classe ouvrière*”, current in French political vocabulary, entails a restrictive sociological connotation prone to ambiguity: it relates to the modern industrial proletariat, excluding employees in the services and commerce, although these undergo analogous conditions of exploitation, from the point of view of their relation to private ownership of the means of production, location in the division of labour or still more in terms of their status as wage-earners and the amount of their remuneration<sup>12</sup>.

Marx did not always make very precise terminological distinctions when referring to class, but there are two fundamental terms that we always come across, and almost always used as if they were synonymous, namely, proletariat and working class. We understand proletariat to mean those that

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 88.

<sup>12</sup> Bensaïd, Daniel. *Os irredutíveis: teoremas da resistência para o tempo atual*. São Paulo: Boitempo, 2008, p. 36. (English version <http://www.marxists.org/archive/bensaïd/2004/12/resist.htm>)

own nothing, or rather, those that have no other way of surviving, in a marketable goods-based society than to sell, also as a form of marketable goods, their own labour.<sup>13</sup> The expression working class, in the texts of Marx and Engels, is almost always associated to the total set of those that sell their own labour, and almost always in exchange for a wage.

Defining the process of proletarianization as being the key to any understanding of the primitive accumulation of capital – “the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production” –, Marx explains the formation of a class of workers “as free as birds” as stemming from the long violent expropriation movement marked by moments in which “great masses of men are suddenly and forcibly torn from their means of subsistence, and hurled as free and 'unattached' proletarians on the labour-market”.<sup>14</sup> From expropriation to exploitation; there lies the pathway that historically led to class formation.

In referring to the working class in his critiques of political economy in which he explains the mechanisms of class exploitation in relation to the capital value process, Marx never limits the term to the industrial production workers only, not even by restrictive association to those submitted to real subsumption; nor does he limit the class to those associated to the production sector, which in turn was not defined as embracing industrial workers only. In some drafts of *Capital*, Marx defines formal subsumption and real subsumption of labour to capital. In associating the former to surplus value, Marx seeks to demonstrate that the process begins with direct subordination of the workers to the capitalists when the latter, in their condition of proprietors or owners of the means of production, begin to control the work time and the working conditions of those that have been reduced to the condition of proletarians. The next step, real subsumption, takes place as a result of the accumulation propitiated by the previous stage

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<sup>13</sup> In the *1844 Manuscripts*, criticizing the way in which the “national economy” (his term for characterizing what was up until then the classic political economy) Marx likened the worker to little birds insofar as they only receive enough food to enable them to survive and he defined the proletarian by the things he lacked, one who “being without capital and rent, lives purely by labour, and by a one-sided, abstract labour, is considered by political economy only as a *worker*.” Marx, Karl. *Manuscritos econômico-filosóficos*. São Paulo: Boitempo, 2004, p.30. (English version <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/wages.htm>)

<sup>14</sup> Marx, Karl. *O capital*, vol.1, Tomo II (capítulo XXIV). São Paulo: Abril Cultural, 1984, p. 263. (English version <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch26.htm>)

and is materialized “with labour on a large scale [and] the application of science and machinery to direct production”.<sup>15</sup>

In the same text, Marx makes a distinction between productive work (and workers) and unproductive work:

Since the direct purpose and the actual product of capitalist production is surplus value, only such labour is productive, and only such an exorter of labour capacity is a productive worker, as directly produces surplus value. Hence only such labour is productive as is consumed directly in the production process for the purpose of valorizing capital.<sup>16</sup>

Associating those two distinctions Marx goes on to state that with the development of real subsumption, “it is not the individual worker but rather a *socially combined labour capacity* that is more and more the *real executor* of the labour process as a whole”, so that it makes no sense to attempt to identify productive workers only among those that undertake direct manual labour.<sup>17</sup>

Taking that one step further, it is not the contents of the work being done nor the sector of the economy in which it takes place that will define whether the work and the worker are of a productive nature or not. In that regard Marx makes a point of exemplifying the productive work of individuals such as the artist or the teacher, although he does admit that in their case the subsumption to capital was still of the formal type:

A singer who sings like a bird is an unproductive worker. If she sells her singing for money, she is to that extent a wage labourer or a commodity dealer. But the same singer, when engaged by an entrepreneur who has her sing in order to make money, is a productive worker, for she directly *produces* capital. A schoolmaster who educates others is not a productive worker. But a schoolmaster who is engaged as a wage labourer in an institution along with others, in order through his labour to

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<sup>15</sup> Marx, Karl. *O capital*, Livro I, Capítulo VI (Capítulo inédito). São Paulo: Ciências Humanas, 1978, p. 66. (English version <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1864/economic/ch02a.htm#469a>)

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 70. (English version <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1864/economic/ch02b.htm>)

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p.71-72.

valorise the money of the entrepreneur of the *knowledge-mongering institution*, is a productive worker<sup>18</sup>.

If the productive nature of the work and the worker is not defined by the fact of employment in big industry (and, accordingly, not by real subsumption either), neither is the working class itself presented as being restricted to those undertaking productive work. On the contrary, it is the condition of wage-earning proletarian that defines it. In the same text, Marx points out that not all wage-earning workers are productive, but that even those engaged in professions that were formerly endowed with an aura of autonomy (such as doctors, lawyers and so on) were increasingly finding themselves reduced to wage or salary-earning situations and “from the prostitute’s to the king’s” were coming under the rules that govern the price of wage-earning work.<sup>19</sup>

Here I will have recourse to an analysis made by Bensaid who, commenting on the broad conception of class to be found in *Capital*, endeavored to show how, on the basis of a vision of the whole, of the general or amplified reproduction of capital as Marx defines it, there is no reason to restrict the definition of class to productive work alone. Putting it another way, there is no reason to seek to identify the working class only in the processes of capitalist production but rather, it should be understood that the formation of that class completes itself in the broader dimension of the general reproduction of capital in all spheres and spaces – in the work, in the conditions of reproduction of life itself, and in the broadest spaces of sociability in which the interests and visions of the world of the workers confront those of capital.

We do not thus see in Marx any reductive, normative or classificatory definition of classes, but a dynamic conception of their structural antagonism, at the level of production, circulation and reproduction of capital: classes are never defined only at the level of the production process (the faceoff between workers and employers in the enterprise), but determined by the reproduction of the whole when the struggle for wages, the division of labour, relations with the state apparatuses and the world market enter into play. From this it is clear that the productive character of labour that appears notably in Volume 2

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 76. Marx uses the same example of the schoolmaster to discuss productive work in *Capital* (addressing the issue of real and absolute surplus-value). Marx, Karl. *O capital*, Vol. 1, Tomo II, Op. Cit., p. 105-106.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 73.

of *Capital*, with respect to the circulation process, does not define the proletariat.<sup>20</sup>

If the question of classes is admittedly complex from the standpoint of economic relations, it becomes even more complex when we realize that in Marx it is not restricted to the economic dimension alone. In Marx and Engels' views, capitalism presented itself endowed with new potential because in it lay the possibility of a dominated, exploited class' assuming awareness of its exploitation. The theoretical elaboration of the two was a fruit of that phenomenon. Michael Lowy shows how the founding of historical materialism in the 1840s can be explained just as much by the relations the two thinkers established with workers' movements of the time such as the English Chartist movement, the revolts of Silesian workers, the clandestine communist cells in Paris as by their overcoming the philosophical bases of German idealism, the economic bases of classical political economics and those of the earlier socialism.<sup>21</sup> In other words, the question of class took on a political dimension with transformational potential. If all the social conflicts in the past had revealed the class struggle to be an essential dimension of the historical process, in the present, the class was acquiring class consciousness, something that could not be defined in purely economic terms alone, but rather in its political dimension, as Marx remarked in his correspondence with Bolte:

On the other hand, however, every movement in which the working class comes out as a class against the ruling classes and attempts to force them by pressure from without is a political movement. For instance, the attempt in a particular factory or even a particular industry to force a shorter working day out of the capitalists by strikes, etc., is a purely economic movement. On the other hand the movement to force an eight-hour day, etc., law is a political movement. And in this way, out of the separate economic movements of the workers there grows up everywhere a political movement, that is to say a movement of the class, with the object of achieving its interests in a general form, in a form possessing a general social force of compulsion. If these movements presuppose a certain degree of previous

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<sup>20</sup> Bensaïd, Daniel. Op. Cit., p. 35. (English version <http://www.marxists.org/archive/bensaïd/2004/12/resist.htm>). See also on this subject, Bensaïd, Daniel. *Marx o intempestivo: grandezas e misérias de uma aventura crítica (séculos XIX e XX)*. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1999, p. 158.

<sup>21</sup> Löwy, Michel. *A teoria da revolução no jovem Marx*. Petrópolis: Vozes, 2002.

organization, they are themselves equally a means of the development of this organization.<sup>22</sup>

Historical materialism's perception of the complexity of the class concept should mean that we should not content ourselves with adopting a single aspect of class as the means to understanding it because even its economic dimensions alone have a very broad outreach, embracing production, the circulation of goods, and the unequal division of the fruits of labour; that is to say, the expanded reproduction of capital, and Marx himself never restricted his definition of class to the economic dimension, quite the contrary, he placed much more value on its political role, which was something that it was only possible to define on the basis of the idea of a class consciousness whose development does not take place in isolation, but in the thick of class conflicts.

Bringing all those questions together, it is interesting to note how one of the best readers of Marx approached the task of delineating the formative process of both the working class and of its class consciousness over the period embracing the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the early decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, that is to say, at a period when formal subsumption was predominant. I refer to E.P. Thompson in his masterly study of the formation of the working class in England.<sup>23</sup> That is why Thompson, in my view completely basing himself on Marx, declares that:

class, in its heuristic usage, is inseparable from the notion of 'class-struggle'. In my view, far too much theoretical attention (much of it plainly a-historical) has been paid to 'class', and far too little to 'class-struggle'. Indeed, class-struggle is the prior, as well as the more universal, concept. To put it bluntly: classes do not exist as separate entities, look around, find an enemy class, and then start to struggle. On the contrary, people find themselves in a society structured in determined ways (crucially, but not exclusively, in productive relations), they experience exploitation (or the need to maintain power over those whom they exploit), they identify points of antagonistic interest, they commence to struggle around these issues and in the process of struggling they discover themselves as classes, they come to know this discovery as class-consciousness. Class and class-

<sup>22</sup> "Marx a Bolte, 23 de novembro de 1871". In Marx, K. e Engels, F. *Obras escolhidas*, vol. III. São Paulo: Alfa-Ômega, s.d., p. 266. (English version [http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/letters/71\\_11\\_23.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/letters/71_11_23.htm))

<sup>23</sup> Thompson, E.P. *A formação da classe operária inglesa*. Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1987-1988, 3 vols.



consciousness are always the last, not the first, stage in the real historical process.<sup>24</sup>

That is something that enables us to understand Marx and Engels' reflections from the 1840s on as being produced by, and, increasingly within, the movement of class formation and class consciousness itself, even though the class in formation at the time was highly differentiated, submitted to the most violent forms of exploitation, with no guarantees for its legal rights in regard to undertaking work and in the most degrading living conditions imaginable. So then, if the revolutionary potential of the class that Marx discovered at the time did not depend on the existence of great concentrations of wage-earning industrial workers, factory laborers, with formal labour contracts and guaranteed rights, why then should it do so now?

Before concluding this stage of the exposition I would like to recuperate another endeavour to capture the new configuration of class in the current state of capitalism made by Cuban philosopher Isabel Monal who made use of Gramsci's concept of subaltern classes/groups to propose a broadening of its scope that would enable it to capture groups/movements typified by their "disaggregation, the absence of mature political awareness, heterogeneity, multiplicity and so on".<sup>25</sup> In the same vein she states that "this expanded concept of the 'subaltern' would include exploited classes in general, the whole set of the oppressed and the marginalized that for the most part, play a role in social and civil society movements".<sup>26</sup> Monal feels that today the term "subaltern" is even more pertinent than in Gramsci's time, and its use would make it possible to go beyond the limits of the concept of class as defined by Marx, insofar as "the Gramscian category of 'subaltern' in that case would go beyond the social classes but at the same time include them, and would remedy the lack of such a concept in Marx".<sup>27</sup>

To my mind, Monal attributes to Marx a much more closed concept of the working class than he did in fact put forward and accordingly the

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<sup>24</sup> Thompson, E.P. "Eighteenth-Century English society: class struggle without class?", *Social History*, Vol. 3, No. 2, may-1978, p. 148. On the uses of this notion in historical studies on eighteenth-century England, Thompson's greatest work in scope is gathered in *Customs in common. Studies in traditional popular culture*. New York: The New Press, 1993.

<sup>25</sup> Monal, Isabel. "Gramsci, a sociedade civil e os grupos subalternos". In: Coutinho, C.N. and Teixeira, A.P. (eds.), *Ler Gramsci, entender a realidade*. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2003, p. 195

<sup>26</sup> Idem, p. 197.

<sup>27</sup> Idem, Ibidem, p. 197.

suggestions I have made so far have been much more closely aligned with Antune's propositions when he defends the analytic validity of Marx's concept today. I also feel that she makes too little distinction among the ways in which Gramsci addresses the question of the subaltern classes of his day (to him the term arose as an expression of the United Front to be formed by factory workers and peasants), and the way he applies the term as a category that facilitates an understanding of class configurations in pre-capitalist societies. In any event, Monal's suggestion that an effort should be made to understand the current phase as one of exacerbated class heterogeneity or even heterogeneity among classes, and doing so by having recourse to Gramsci's concept of subaltern classes/group is inspiring. Labour historians have been doing something very similar.

### **Historians and the expanded concept of working class**

The working class's configuration in recent times seems to have enhanced the sensitivity of historians' ways of viewing the past, stimulating debates which, based on different theoretical emphases or empirical studies, have converged on the need for current understanding to embrace the greater complexity of labour relations and the working class profile in the various different historical situations which led to capitalism's implanting itself on a global scale.

Jairus Banaji, for example, researching means of production and addressing not only ancient and modern Oriental precapitalist situations, but also European historical development up until contemporary times, proposes a broadening of current understandings in regard to relations of production that would enable them to perceive and embrace various other facets of social relations and not just the forms of labour exploitation.<sup>28</sup> With that he intends to show that if "the accumulation of capital, that is, *capitalist* relations of production, can be based on forms of exploitation that are typically *precapitalist*, then clearly there is not ostensibly unique configuration of capital but a series of *distinct configurations*, forms of accumulation, implying other combinations."<sup>29</sup>

On the outskirts of capitalism, that question has, to some extent, already made its presence felt in many historical studies, albeit the rigidity

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<sup>28</sup> Banaji, Jairus. *Theory as History: essays on modes of production and exploitation*. Leiden: Brill, 2010.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

of the more determinist Marxist referential generally adopted has led a good number of those historians to seek to situate southern hemisphere realities in the same evolutionary stages, namely ancient slave-based, feudal and then capitalist modes of production, that was supposed to be the key to understanding and explaining European history. In more recent approaches, understanding the ways in which forms of exploitation, tinged to some extent by mechanisms of compulsion, played a functional role in capital accumulation have obtained very positive results.<sup>30</sup> Such refinement in the researchers' approaches, however, have also produced interesting fruits from analysis focused on Europe and even on the very first industrial capitalist economy ever, in England. Alessandro Stanziani, for example has disseminated studies that demonstrate how the dominant idea of "free" labour in most of Europe up until the middle of the 19th century was one of service provision' regulated by civil and criminal law and that the idea of "free" and "not free" that we hold today in regard to labour relations only came to be established as dominant ideas in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>31</sup>

This has been one of the central discussions involving labour historians in various parts of the world and it has been generating a movement in recent years in favour of the construction of a Global Labour History. In the definition of one of the proposal's main elaborators, it would have the following features:

As regards methodology, an 'area of concern' is involved, rather than a well-defined theoretical paradigm to which everyone most closely adhere. (...) As regards themes, Global Labour History focuses on the transnational – and indeed the transcontinental – study of labour relations and workers' social movements in the broadest sense of the word.(...) The study of

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<sup>30</sup> See for example the studies on Indian *coolies* submitted to service provision contracts and legal sanctions for any breach of contract which virtually made them compulsory workers on the tea plantations of the 19th century and the early decades of the 20th century. Mohapatra, Prabhu. "Regulating informality". In Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, Sabyasachi & Lucassen, Jan. (eds.), *Workers in the informal sector: studies in labour history, 1800-2000*. Delhi: Macmillian, 2005. Behal, Rana. "Power structure, discipline and labour in Assam Tea Plantations under colonial rule". *International Review of Social History*, 51, Supplement, 2006. In the case of the southern states of the United States, Latin America and the Caribbean, see also Dale Tomich's interesting discussion of what he calls the "second slavery" in the context of industrial capitalism's global expansion which altered the productivity demands in American plantations. Tomich, Dale. *Through the prism of slavery: labour, capital and world economy*. Boulder: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004.

<sup>31</sup> Stanziani, Alessandro. "Introduction: Labour Institutions in a Global perspective, from the Seventeenth to the Twentieth Century". *International Review of Social History*, vol. 54, Part 3, December, 2009.

labour relations encompasses both free and unfree labour, both paid and unpaid. Workers' social movements involve both formal organizations and informal activities. The study of both labour relations and social movements further requires that equally serious attention is devoted to 'the other side' (employers, public authorities). Labour relations involve not only the individual worker, but also his or her family where applicable. Gender relations play an important part both within family, and in labour relations involving individual family members. As regards the historical period studied, Global labour History places no limits on temporal perspective, although in practice the emphasis is usually on the study of the labour relations and workers' social movements that emerged with the expansion of the world market from the fourteenth century<sup>32</sup>.

Within the movement, historians are making efforts to re-conceptualize class and in that they draw close to Monal's discussion on the contemporary period. To me the richest example has been given by Van der Linden himself in his monumental work *Workers of the World*. Realizing that in the historical situations that have been the object of empirical studies in various parts of the world (and especially in the "Global South") the boundaries among the different forms of labour – slave and free, under contract, self-employed or wage-earning, domestic or external, urban or rural – present themselves at once more fluid and more combined, Van der Linden seeks to redefine the working class. His perspective, like Banaji's, is based on the propensity of other forms of work and not just that of the typical wage-earner, to be subordinated to the imperatives of the capitalist market and that includes typically "free" workers, slaves and workers submitted to service provision contracts imbued with greater or lesser degrees of compulsion. In his definition:

Every carrier of labour power whose labour is sold (or hired out) to another person under economic (or non-economic) compulsion belongs to the class of subaltern workers, regardless of whether the carrier of labour power is him-or herself selling or hiring it out and, regardless of whether the carrier him-or herself owns means of production.<sup>33</sup>

Van der Linden warns that his definition is merely provisional and that each of its component elements requires further reflections on it, but

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<sup>32</sup> van der Linden, Marcel. *Workers of the world: essays toward a global labour history*. Leiden: Brill, 2008, pp. 6-7.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

nevertheless he does define what, to him, is the common class base of all the wide variety of subaltern workers: “the coerced commodification of their labour power”.<sup>34</sup>

In some of my research activities in recent years, sharing a complex problem with various other Brazilian historians<sup>35</sup>, I have studied historical situations where the frontiers separating slave labour from free labour seemed to be just as fluid as they are represented in Van der Linden’s definition. It was reading works like his that made me feel the need for a more consistent reflection on how to address, in conceptual terms, the process of working-class formation in the situation of the Latin American colonial periphery or up until a short time before, an entirely colonial situation as was the case with Brazil towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The first factor to take into consideration in this kind of situation is the way in which the forms of exploitation and capitalist and “precapitalist” production relations combine.

In a way, that question appeared to Marx to be essential when he encountered the real working class movements taking place in countries on the European periphery in the 1880s. Marx was very clear in explaining that it was impossible to take the case of working-class formation in England as a universally valid model insofar as he stated that the “historical fatalism” of the conversion of the peasants into proletarians by separating them from the means of production (particularly from the land) only found its full expression in Western Europe, because it involved “the transformation of one form of private property into another form of private property”.<sup>36</sup> Marx was placed face to face with the question of whether, in Russia, the theorized role of the proletarian revolutionary subject would be at all valid in view of the widespread predominance of the peasant. His answer took into account the specificity of the Russian situation based on a collective form of peasant agriculture, very different from the peasant who was entitled to his own patch, as was the case analysed in the *18 Brumaire*, and

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p.34.

<sup>35</sup> Some examples may be found in Loner, Beatriz Ana. *Construção de classe: operários de Pelotas e Rio Grande (1888-1930)*. Pelotas: Unitrabalho/EdUFPel; Cruz, Maria Cecília Velasco e. "Tradições negras na formação de um sindicato: sociedade de resistência dos trabalhadores em trapiche e café, Rio de Janeiro, 1905-1930." *Afro-Ásia*, no. 24. Salvador, 2000; Reis, João José. “The revolution of the *ganhadores*: urban labour, ethnicity and the African strike of 1857 in Bahia, Brazil”. *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 29, 1997. Mattos, Marcelo Badaró. *Escravidão e livres: experiências comuns na formação da classe trabalhadora carioca*. Rio de Janeiro: Bom Texto, 2008.

<sup>36</sup> “Marx to V. I. Zasulich in St. Petersburg (1881)”, in Marx, K. & Engels, F. *Selected correspondence*, 2a. ed. Moscow: Progress, 1965, p. 339-340.

furthermore, the Russian peasant was in contact with the first moments of socialist agitation in that country, connected to the International movement of the proletariat. In that context Marx and Engels envisioned the possibility that the Russian commune did, indeed, have revolutionary potential and in the preface of the Russian edition of the *Communist Manifesto* published in 1882 he commented that: “If the Russian Revolution becomes the signal for a proletarian revolution in the West, so that both complement each other, the present Russian common ownership of land may serve as the starting point for a communist development.”<sup>37</sup>

The classic figures of critical social thinking at the turn of the 19th to the 20<sup>th</sup> century also considered the question insofar as they identified how the uneven and combined nature of capitalist development in its global expansion phase, imperialism, led to the parallel existence of archaic and modern forms of production organization that acquired specific features in relation to the process of capitalist industrial development in the first nations that underwent it like England.<sup>38</sup>

Working with the dichotomy “backward countries – advanced countries” as a means of addressing the differences between the centre and the periphery of a capitalist system that had already embarked on its imperialist phase and using the idea of “laws” to define Lenin’s theoretical postulate and his own, Trotsky presented the question in these terms:

The laws of history have nothing in common with a pedantic schematism. Unevenness, the most general law of the historic process, reveals itself most sharply and complexly in the destiny of the backward countries. Under the whip of external necessity their backward culture is compelled to make leaps. From the universal law of unevenness thus derives another law which, for the lack of a better name, we may call the law of *combined development* – by which we mean a drawing together of the different stages of the journey, a combining of the separate steps, an amalgam of archaic with more contemporary forms<sup>39</sup>.

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<sup>37</sup> Marx, K. & Engels, F. "Prefácio à (segunda) edição russa de 1882". In: *Obras Escolhidas*, vol 1. Lisboa: Progresso/Avante, 1982, p. 98.(English version <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/preface.htm>)

<sup>38</sup> See in Lenin the idea of ‘uneven growth’, for example in *El imperialismo, fase superior del capitalismo*. Moscow: Editorial Progresso, 1982, p. 139.

<sup>39</sup> Trotsky, Leon. *História da revolução russa*. São Paulo: Sundermann, 2007, Tomo I, p. 21. (English version <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1930/hrr/ch01.htm>) For a recent discussion of the theory of uneven and combined development that includes considerations on its developments made by authors like Novak and Mandel, see van

It was that same interpretive line that enabled Peruvian Marxist José Carlos Mariátegui to perceive Latin American specificities and propose a political defense of the revolutionary potential of the indigenous element in the socialist struggles of the Andean countries in the 1920s. In Mariátegui's view, the indigenous claims would be doomed to remain isolated and manipulated by various forms of populism for as long as they insisted in manifesting themselves in a manner restricted to ethnic, cultural or educational aspects demanding political and economic expression by means of their association to the question of the land. Recognizing the potential that could stem from a change in the orientation of the movement so that it decisively embraced its "consanguinity" with international proletarian socialism, Mariátegui explained that:

Faith in the renaissance of the Indian is not pinned to the material process of 'Westernizing' the Quechua country. The soul of the Indian is not raised by the white man's civilization or alphabet but by the myth, the idea, of the Socialist revolution. The hope of the Indian is absolutely revolutionary. That same myth, that same idea, are the decisive agents in the awakening of other ancient peoples or races in ruin: the Hindus, the Chinese, et cetera. Universal history today tends as never before to chart its course with a common quadrant. Why should the Inca people, who constructed the most highly-developed and harmonious communistic system, be the only ones unmoved by this worldwide emotion? The consanguinity of the Indian movement with world revolutionary currents is too evident to need documentation. I have said already that I reached an understanding and appreciation of the Indian through socialism.<sup>40</sup>

Thus, considering that capitalism operates expropriations and exploitations in distinctly different ways according to the former realities it confronts, then both Marx's perspective regarding the Russian peasants, which inspired analysis that underscored the uneven and combined forms of peripheral capitalism and the valorisation of the indigenous element in Latin American social struggles present in Mariátegui's discourse, far from addressing the specificities of the situations deemed to be peripheral in relation to the European/occidental capitalism as if they revealed absolute peculiarities, instead, comprehend them in the context of a much broader

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der Linden, Marcel. "The 'Law' of Uneven and Combined Development: Some Underdeveloped Thoughts". *Historical Materialism*, 15, 2007, p. 145–165.

<sup>40</sup> Mariátegui, José Carlos. *Seven Interpretative Essays on Peruvian Reality*. 1928. (<http://www.marxists.org/archive/mariategui/works/1928/essay02.htm>)

whole of the contradictory movement of history itself. This enables Matíategui at one and the same time, to reject the Eurocentrism of the “civilizational” process and proclaim the universality of the emancipatory socialist project.

Also in relation to Latin America, it was with the so-called “dependency theory” in its earliest version in the 1960s that the study of the specific, but subordinated pathway of capitalist development in such peripheral spaces began to free itself more incisively from the temptation of reproducing the European model for the evolution of the modes of production. The best representative of that perspective was Ruy Mauro Marini.<sup>41</sup> In regard to the history of labour, Marini’s main suggestion, presented here in a highly synthetic form, was that the capitalist economies in the peripheral zones were submitted to a situation of unequal exchange regimes that obliged them to generate ever greater surplus values because most of it would be appropriated externally by the transnational companies and the centers of capitalism. That meant that labour inevitably had to be submitted to a situation of super-exploitation. The category was not thought up specifically to address each specific situation of labour exploitation, but instead sought to explain the combination of a variety of forms of exploitation in the overall set of capitalist social relations. According to him:

the problem posed by unequal exchange for Latin America is not exactly that of taking a stance against the transfer of value which it implies, but instead, to compensate for the losses of surplus value, and so, being incapable of preventing them in the market relations sphere, the reaction of the dependent economy is to compensate for them in the internal production sphere.<sup>42</sup>

Faced with this problem stemming from dependency, the solutions found by the peripheral economies of Latin America were to combine three forms of expanding the extraction of surplus value all commented on by Marx: increasing the intensity of work, extending the length of the working day and reducing the consumption capacity of the workers to levels below the standard necessary for the adequate reproduction of their labour power.

Thus in a capitalism-forming movement in the dependent periphery that would begin in the circulation to impose a production standard, Marini

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<sup>41</sup> Mauro Marini, Ruy. “Dialética da dependência” (1973). In Traspadini, Roberta e Stedile, João Pedro (eds.), *Ruy Mauro Marini: vida e obra*. São Paulo: Expressão Popular, 2005.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 154.



manages to situate both slavery and hybrid systems of labour exploitation (something between wage-earning and servitude, as in the case of the Brazilian version of the “company store” indentured system known as *Sistema de Barracão* adopted in rural areas) in agriculture producing for exportation, as being “one of the pathways by which Latin America arrives at capitalism”.<sup>43</sup>

It is fundamental to take these aspects into account if we are to think about the transition to capitalism in the Brazil of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century where agriculture dedicated to producing for exportation still based on slave labour, existed alongside the first steps of the industrialization process in urban environments where the tonic was the presence of enslaved workers and so-called ‘free’ workers all lumped together. I am not in a position in this work to go into the whole debate developing around the transition in Brazil and its two different faces. I will limit myself to thinking through the situation from the standpoint of the formation of the working class in the urban environment.

In a study concluded some years ago, I endeavoured to achieve an analysis of the formative process of the working class in the city of Rio de Janeiro, the largest urban centre at the time targeted by the study, capital of the country and the first place where any manufacturing development took place in Brazil, embracing the period 1850 to 1910. The guiding hypothesis for this study was:

Taking into account that enslaved and “free workers” shared common urban work environments; that collective protests from both groups coexisted in time and space, each group's demands sometimes being closer, sometimes farther from the others in form and content; that associative forms were often shared and that identity discourses came up from comparisons between enslaved and “free” work, we worked with the hypothesis that: in the process of working-class formation in Rio de Janeiro – a period that stems from the second half of the nineteenth century to the first decades of the twentieth century – the existence of slavery and of slave struggles for freedom and the means by which the local ruling classes attempted to control their slaves and conduct the process of unslaving without further disturbances to their domination were decisive factors in shaping the new class of wage-workers<sup>44</sup>.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 160.

<sup>44</sup> Badaró Mattos, Marcelo. *Escravidados e livres*, Op.Cit. p. 21.

I believe that the respective book presents various elements that corroborate that hypothesis but in the light of the present debate I would like to raise some other questions of a broader conceptual and analytical nature which were not central concerns in this former work.

Clearly the formation of a working class in Brazil cannot be explained by completely endogenous factors. The emergence of the “labour question” as it was referred to by contemporaries, that is, how to solve the problem of having a regular supply of cheap of labour for export-orientated agriculture in expansion after the end of the African slave trade, had its origins in the ban on trafficking in slaves imposed by the English (which the relatively fragile local dominant landlord class managed to avoid for three decades). The arrival of European workers already expropriated by the expansion of capitalism in the rural areas of their countries of origin was the latest solution adopted at the time by the coffee growing plantations in their most dynamic region (namely the state of São Paulo).

It must be underscored that this solution was not arrived at immediately as a first option, nor did the emigration of European proletarians mean that in Brazil they formed a large mass of rural wage earners. In the years 1850-1860, there was heated discussion and some actual attempts in the direction of importing Chinese coolies in a simple substitution operation such as took place on Cuban plantations during the same period. It was the external conditions that made this latter alternative unfeasible. Local conditions of the class struggle (the slaves’ fight for freedom combined with the defense of abolitionism on the part of other social sectors) had a decisive influence on the option for immigration financed by the São Paulo coffee growers. In other regions, however, transitions that implied maintaining former slaves working in agriculture as before, by means of various forms of “service provision contracts” were implanted that ensured that they were not entirely “free” after all. Furthermore, the labour relations of the immigrants brought in for work in the coffee plantations were not predominantly of the wage-earner type as José de Souza Martins pointed out decades ago in his classic work on the settlers.<sup>45</sup> In regard to labour relations, the archaic and the modern were indeed combined in that peripheral transition process as we have seen from the beginning.

What I really want to emphasize, however, is that there was also an endogenous base of proletarianization. In Rio de Janeiro in the second half

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<sup>45</sup> Souza Martins, José de. *O cativo da terra*. 9ª ed., São Paulo: Contexto, 2010.

of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the number of slaves went steadily down but in 1849, slaves and freedmen still made up 40% of the population of 266 thousand inhabitants. According to the available research reports, in the city's factories, at a time when the predominant system was still based on simple piece work and the big companies (with over 600 employees) were merely combinations of a set of smaller workshops, slaves were working side by side with supposedly "free" individuals. In the streets, there was another widely disseminated situation also found in other cities; a kind of slave-hire scheme known as "*escravidão de ganho*" whereby the slaves sold their labour force in the urban labour market and paid a fixed daily or weekly amount to their owners with many of them living entirely on their own account, that is, they met all the costs of their own reproduction as a labour force including food and, in many cases, even lodging.

What did it all signify? First, the enslaved workers had already been previously expropriated so their conversion to the condition of proletarians did not call for any new "coercion of the state" that would guarantee the existence of the "imperatives of the market" as Ellen Wood's thinking on Thompson's work identified in the case of England.<sup>46</sup> The coercion of the state, in the case of Brazil, was to come into play afterwards, to guarantee that those ex-slaves, already expropriated as they were, should remain available as proletarians even if it were only in the condition of unemployed or to engage in the worst paid forms of work. Corroborating this interpretation, the turn of the century from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> is clearly marked by the intense repression of supposed "idleness".

Given that slaves and "free" workers laboured side by side in the factories and that survival was subordinated to "market imperatives" in the case of slaves-for-hire, what we have then is a situation in which "capital appropriated surplus labour from workers still engaged in traditional forms of production",<sup>47</sup> even when such workers were still enslaved. As such, we can state that what we have is a case of slave labour formally subsumed to capital even if those subsumed were not entirely as "free as birds".<sup>48</sup>

Thus, in the perspective adopted in the discussion up to this point, the process of formation of the working class in 19<sup>th</sup> century Brazil would

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<sup>46</sup> Wood, Ellen. *The origin of capitalism: a longer view*. London: Verso, 2002, p. 65.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.* p. 67.

<sup>48</sup> It should be realized that Marx's expression was heavy with irony because the proletarians were only "free" from any means of survival operated outside the confines of the market and in fact compelled to transform their labour power into a marketable item to sell in that same market.

be completely explained in the sphere of Van der Linden's broad notion of "subaltern workers". From the moment the sale of labour power is subjected to and obeys the imperatives of capital (it makes no difference whether slaves are sold in person along with the labour power they possess, or if it is free workers that sell it, or those in hybrid situations like the slaves-for hire) we are in the presence of the very same class of workers. However, as we have seen, the working class as proposed by Marx goes beyond the strictly economic aspect and involves a political aspect as well.

If then we include that political aspect, we can examine the following question: if enslaved workers were already (in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century) living in situations marked to some extent by formal subsumption to capital and even in some cases to market imperatives, would it not be possible that they had developed class consciousness analogous to that of the English workers at the time of the industrial revolution?

The issue becomes increasingly complex because, after all, in my research and that of others we have found a series of indications that enslaved workers not only shared their experience of urban work and sociability with the so called "free" workers in Rio de Janeiro in the second half of the 19th century, but they also shared forms of organization, setting up "mutual" associations for example and even engaging in forms of struggle such as strikes.

Taking up the "uneven and combined" reference once more, it must be underscored that the crack of the "whip" constituted by material necessities that obliges the peripheral economies to "make leaps" combining archaic forms with modern ones, also brings with it the relative "privilege" of skipping certain stages and incorporating certain modern features without having necessarily passed through all the difficulties that preceded them. We should also remember that Trotsky's concern in addressing this same issue was to explain how it was possible to form such an advanced proletariat capable of pioneering action in carrying the socialist revolution forward in a country like Russia, that was comparatively one of the most backward in the whole of Europe. What is meant by this, and here I quote Claudio Batalha, is that:

The universalizing of capitalism as the mode of production and the relations that it engenders also propitiated the universalizing of the structuring forms of the workers movement. While it is true that national and regional contexts varied considerably and, consequently, so did the way in which the workers movement responded to those contexts, it cannot be said that the

organizational forms took on any particularly specific characters in the local regional or national scales.<sup>49</sup>

That means that the struggles of enslaved workers for their freedom during the second half of the 19th century when they found themselves associated to other social sectors, especially “free” workers, were marked by their sharing forms of organization and combat strategies typical of the working class that had “already formed” in Europe, leading us to think about a process of class consciousness formation also in course. The difference remains however, that the slaves’ struggle at the time is for freedom, in the sense of overcoming and putting an end to the legal statute that maintained slavery. The working class’s project of social emancipation is different because it not only questions a given historical form of labour exploitation and social division, but also questions the existence of any society divided into classes and marked by the practices of exploiting labour. This was present as much in the perception of the continuities as in the affirmation of the novel nature of the emancipatory project associated to the first elaborations of the working class during the process of its formation in Brazil.<sup>50</sup>

So where do I want to get to with all of the above? In my view it is of fundamental importance that in addressing a peripheral situation of transition to capitalism such as Brazil’s, we should take into account the fact that the processes that are the base and presuppositions for its constitution such as expropriation/proletarianization, which in turn are the basis and presuppositions for the formation of the working class, have their own specificities. Among those specificities is the aspect of the previous form of exploitation, which means that the values and traditions that undergo a re-reading in the light of the newly acquired class consciousness are also different. In the Brazilian case for example, if we try to identify the equivalent of the key idea of the “freeborn Englishman” that Thompson refers to as being one of the pillars on which the new consciousness was raised, we will encounter great difficulty.

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<sup>49</sup> Batalha, Claudio H. M. ”O movimento operário brasileiro e a inspiração internacional (1870-1920) ”. Comunicação apresentada ao I Seminário Internacional de História do Trabalho/V Jornada Nacional de História do Trabalho, Florianópolis, 2010, p. 2. Available at: [www.labhstc.ufsc.br/sulglobal.htm](http://www.labhstc.ufsc.br/sulglobal.htm)

<sup>50</sup> I made a closer analysis of the discourse of Brazilian workers’ leaders at the turn of the century from the 19th to the 20th century when they affirmed victory over “slavery in fact” but underscored the specificity of the struggle to put an end to the “slavery of the freemen”. Mattos, Marcelo Badaró. *Escravidados e livres*. Op.Cit., especially Chap.4.

Furthermore, in a very special sense, slaves engaged in a struggle for freedom are “the subjects of their own history”,<sup>51</sup> and they, just as much as their struggle for freedom (this last being effectively an example of a value subjected to a re-reading and incorporated by the new class consciousness which was to form in the decades that followed) were to be fundamental actors in the process of forming the working class. However, the working class as a “social subject” is distinct from that, particularly because it has a distinct awareness of “class” as such.

### Some final suggestions

I will conclude by summarily pointing out a conceptual possibility that respects the distinctions, in the plane of collective consciousness, and accordingly, of its social projects, among different groups of workers subordinated to capital, because they are compulsorily submitted to the transformation of their labour power into the equivalent of marketable goods. The starting point is Van der Linden’s definition of subaltern workers. The “subaltern” category appears in his proposal associated to a double, combined reference. On the one hand, more recently, the term has been used by the so-called Subaltern Studies that emerged as an initiative of the Indian historian Ranajit Guha to define any population that is subordinated in terms of class, cast, age, sex, or occupation or in any other way.<sup>52</sup>

In turn, Subaltern Studies scholars, especially in their early days, adopted this category from the works of Antonio Gramsci. In the first part of this text, I showed the way that Isabel Monal makes use of Gramsci’s concept of “subaltern classes” in her endeavour to address the current extent of heterogeneity among the social groups submitted to capitalist exploitation. I also remarked on the fact that in my view it is precisely because she starts off from a more restricted concept of the working class in capitalism than Marx’s concept that Monal feels the need to go beyond it in order to be able to define the groups submitted to capitalism today, some of

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<sup>51</sup> The expression “subjects of their own history” has been widely used in recent Brazilian historiography of slavery in an endeavor to emphasize the individual and collective actions of slaves in their process of adaptation/confrontation of slavery and their quest for freedom. See for example Chalhoub, Sidney. *Visões da liberdade: uma história das últimas décadas da escravidão na Corte*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1990.

<sup>52</sup> Sen, Asok. “Subaltern Studies: class, capital and community”. In: Guha, Ranajit (ed.), *Subaltern Studies V. Writings on South Asian History and Society*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987

which Marx had, in fact, already suggested were part of the working class itself.

I also drew attention to the fact that the concept of subaltern classes in Gramsci can be applicable in more than one perspective. On the one hand, in referring to the subaltern classes in a context where he is addressing the subject of the complex capitalist societies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Gramsci seems to be presenting it as the objective base which gave support to the proposal for a United Front of workers and peasants, considered essential for a revolution to occur in countries like Italy (as it was in Russia). It is a category that in this case, in his contemporary context, allows Gramsci, with far greater precision than would be permitted by employing the term “the masses”, to discuss the process whereby class consciousness is raised from its basis in common sense and in which a messianic vision of the world fed by determinist readings of Marx are surpassed by the philosophy of praxis in its most elaborate manifestation.<sup>53</sup>

The concept of subaltern classes also serves Gramsci well in discussing the “spontaneous” and organized’ facets of the movements conducted by those classes. Starting from an example in his personal experience during the revolutionary strikes in Turin at the end of the 1910s and beginning of the 1920s, Gramsci endeavors to demonstrate how the organization that emerges as the most conscious sector of the subaltern classes should depart from the spontaneous elements of its demonstration of revolt and follow a program of “intellectual and moral reform” (in this case a process of revolutionary consciousness enhancement) avoiding any repudiation of “spontaneity” but at the same time not allowing it to enable the struggles’ innate tendency to fragmentation to triumph.<sup>54</sup>

It is precisely this discussion of the tendency of the subaltern classes to spontaneity and fragmentation, allied to the debate on forms of consciousness, which enables us to understand the broader dimension in regard to its historicity, that Gramsci attributes to the concept of subaltern classes, using it for example when referring to the Roman slaves and the medieval peasant submitted to the landlords. In that historical dimension, what Gramsci proposes is a methodological pathway for analytic purposes, sometimes in the form of a study plan that seeks to salvage the “fragmented and episodic” history of those groups, attempting to identify any “tendency to unification” in them that is “continually interrupted by the activity of the

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<sup>53</sup> Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the prison notebooks*. London: The Electric Book, 1999, p. 623 and ss.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 131 and ss.

ruling groups; it therefore can only be demonstrated when an historical cycle is completed and this cycle culminates in a success.”<sup>55</sup>

Taking up once more the central theme of the discussion that I proposed to develop at the outset, I made use of Gramsci to highlight the fact that both in the analysis he made of his own present, intimately bound up with the revolutionary social project he proposed, and more especially in his methodological notes for studies of the past, his ways of using the concept of subaltern classes can be highly pertinent for historical studies being conducted today. Mentioning once more the examples I gave earlier, by means of the subaltern classes concept it may well be possible to adequately address the class aspect of the process of the formal subsumption of labour, (wage-earning, but also, unfree and self-employed) to capital in peripheral situations (or even eventually in central ones) where various forms of labour exploitation prevail. At the same time, it is important not to lose sight of the complex pathways for defining the collective subjectivity of social classes, that is, including the diversity of social projects that may be generated by all those different forms of exploitation with strong attention to their tendency to unification, which can only actually be completed in historical movements in which the aspects of spontaneity and organization successfully complement one another. In other words, in certain historical situations such as those experienced by enslaved and “free” workers alike in certain areas of Latin America in the second half of the 19th century, we are not in the presence of a single class of subaltern workers but rather of subaltern classes that share in common their subordination to capital, but distinguish themselves from one another in their distinct forms of social consciousness whose tendency to unification may show itself at certain specific moments of social struggle, like the pro-abolition movements, and which may subsequently become fundamental references in the process of working-class formation. That aspect, however, opens the doorway to another discussion regarding the historical subject, but we lack the space to embark on it at this point.

Thus I have ended with more suggestions and provisional indications than ready-made conceptual responses, and it could not really have been otherwise, because what is involved is a set of questions that we are still in the process of formulating, ranging from the current fragmentation of the working class to the consciousness associated to the various pathways historically experienced in its formative processes.

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 206-07.



## Nurse militancy and strike action

*Linda Briskin*

“It’s always stuck with me that nurses were like sleeping giants; sometimes we don’t recognize the potential and the power that we could have,” commented Marilyn Quinn, the president of the New Brunswick (Canada) Nurses’ Union.<sup>1</sup> The widespread militancy recounted in this article suggests that nurses increasingly recognize their power, and are mobilizing collectively to defend the public interest.<sup>2</sup>

This article is part of an extensive research project on nurses’ strikes which explores nurse militancy with reference to professionalism and the commitment to service; patriarchal practices and gendered subordination; and proletarianization. These deeply-entangled trajectories have had a

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Kealey, L. ‘A bitter pill to swallow’: New Brunswick nurses, professional identity and collective bargaining, 1991-92. In: *Making up the State: Atlantic Canadian Women in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, eds. J. Guildford and S. Morton. Fredericton, New Brunswick: Acadiensis Press, 2010, p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> There are numerous references to nurses as “sleeping giants” although it is not possible to ascertain the original use. Koff seeks to understand why the profession has remained a “sleeping giant”. Koff, S. *Nurse Educators and Politics*. Albany: State University of New York, 2004. *Nursing Times.net* (Vol. 97, No. 18, 3 May 2001) calls on nurses to make their voices heard in the UK election, under the banner of “It’s time to wake the sleeping giant”. <http://www.nursingtimes.net/nursing-practice-clinical-research/its-time-to-wake-the-sleeping-giant/200970.article>

significant impact on the work, consciousness and militancy of nurses, and have shaped occupation-specific forms of resistance. They have produced a pattern of overlapping solidarities – occupational solidarity, gendered alliances, and coalitions around health care restructuring – which have encouraged militancy among nurses, despite the multiple forces arrayed against them.

I have also examined nurse militancy and union renewal.<sup>3</sup> Renewal strategies have focused largely on increasing rank-and-file participation, democratizing unions, cross-border solidarity, political campaigns, labour law improvements, and organizing initiatives.<sup>4</sup> However, less attention has been paid to collective workplace activism as a vehicle for union revitalisation. I argue that workplace militancy, and particularly the militancy of nurses speaks to many of the strategic threads in the union renewal project, in particular, women's militancy, rank-and-file militancy, coalition-building and community outreach, and professionals in the labour movement.

Drawing on nurses' strikes in many countries, this article situates nurse militancy within the context of health care restructuring and neo-liberalism, the gendered construction of nursing work, the feminization of union density and of strikes, and gendered militancy. It explores the emergence of a militant discourse among nurses focussed on the public interest, what I call the politicisation of caring, which has supported a new approach to the ethics of striking. This discourse emphasizes patient care, and calls for the re-valuing of both the expertise and caring involved in nurses' work. The politicization of caring has created the conditions for widespread public support for nurses' strikes and offers a paradigm which supports the expansion rather than the narrowing of the collective bargaining agenda.

### **Nurses' strikes**

In the context of the general decline of strike activity in many Western countries, nurses have continued to take militant and successful

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<sup>3</sup> Briskin, L. The militancy of nurses and union renewal. *Transfer: European Review of Labour and Research*, Vol. 17, No. 4, 2011, pp. 485-499.

<sup>4</sup> Kumar, P. and Schenk, C. eds. *Paths to Union Renewal: Canadian Experiences*. Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, Garamond and Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2006.

action in many countries. For example, in Canada in the late twentieth century, there were three “waves” of nurses’ strikes, some of which were illegal, and most of which garnered widespread popular support: 17 strikes between 1980 and 1982; 43 disputes between 1985 and 1991, and 14 strikes between 1998 and 1999. From 1960 to 2009, 163,872 Canadian nurses were on strike.<sup>5</sup> Although in the first two periods, the data suggest that nurses’ strikes were coincident with strikes in other industries, in 1998 and 1999, strikes involving nurses’ unions occurred independently of a strike wave and dominated the public space.

In the last three decades, nurses have gone on strike in many countries including the UK, the US, Australia, Japan, New Zealand, Israel, Ireland, Denmark, Sweden, Poland, Portugal, Kenya, Fiji, India and South Africa. “Managed care” has triggered numerous strikes in the US. In 2002 alone, there were eighteen nurses’ strikes, one of which was the strike for a first contract in Petoskey, Michigan which lasted for two years.<sup>6</sup> From 2010-2012, California nurses have gone on strike more than eight times.

Although this article focuses largely on strikes, both legal and illegal, strikes are not the only form of nurse militancy. Like other workers, nurses have engaged in multiple forms of resistance over many decades. Given lack of access to collective bargaining rights, bans on nurses’ strikes in many jurisdictions, and essential and emergency service requirements, nurses have often been forced to seek alternative forms of resistance and militancy. Perhaps of most interest is what might be seen as an occupation-specific tactic: mass resignations. This tactic has been used in many countries – often with great success – to circumvent bans on striking.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps the most successful recent use of mass resignations was in the Finnish nurses’ mobilization in 2007. Requirements for a minimum level of staffing had previously undermined the ability of health care workers, and nurses in particular, to make inroads on pay and working conditions through strikes. On 19 November 2007, the date on which the first round of 16,000 resignations would have gone into effect, a new collective agreement was settled which gave the nurses a 22-28% increase over the four-year period

<sup>5</sup> The author has negotiated full access to the records for Canadian stoppages from 1946-2009 from the Workplace Information Directorate of Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC).

<sup>6</sup> Hayes, L. Nurses on strike. In: *The Encyclopedia of Strikes in American History*, eds. A. Brenner, B. Day, and I.I Ness, Armonk, NY, M.E. Sharpe, 2009, p. 712.

<sup>7</sup> See for example, on the US, Ketter J. Nurses and strikes: A perspective from the United States. *Nursing Ethics*, Vol. 4, No. 4, 1997, pp. 323-329; on Australia, Strachan G. Not just a labour of love: Industrial action by nurses in Australia. *Nursing Ethics*, vol. 4, no. 4, 1997, pp. 294-302.

of the agreement.<sup>8</sup> This successful negotiation became a flashpoint for the Danish and Swedish nurses' strikes in 2008.

The most illuminating studies of nurse militancy may be in-depth accounts of particular struggles, for example, Bessant and Gauran on the 1985 and 1986 strikes in Victoria (Australia); Hayward and Fee on the British nurses' strike of 1988; Katsuragi on the 1989-1992 movement of nurses in Japan called the "Nurse Wave"; Tabak and Wagner on the 1996 strike in Israel; Clarke and O'Neill and Brown *et al.* on the Irish nurses' strike of 1999; Cristovam on the 1999 rotating strikes by Portuguese nurses, and Lutua on the 2007 Fiji nurses' strike.<sup>9</sup> These studies capture what Johnston calls the "messy multidimensionality" of strikes.<sup>10</sup> However, he also concludes that, given that "no case is typical": "[W]e can only generalize from these cases at the level of theory – through the conceptual tools used to grasp their histories, rather than through those histories themselves".<sup>11</sup> This project on nurses' strikes draws on examples from many countries and embraces a level of generalities in order to map the militancies of nurses. Undoubtedly certain risks attend such generalizations; however, the rich picture of nursing militancy which emerges, in my view, justifies the crossing of context.

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<sup>8</sup> Henttonen, E., LaPointe, K., Pesonen, S., and Vanhala, S. A stain on the white uniform: The discursive construction of nurses' industrial action in the media. *Gender, Work and Organization*. (doi:10.1111/j.1468-0432.2011.00556.x) document the reactions to this strike in opinion pieces in the Finnish media.

<sup>9</sup> Bessant J. Good women and good nurses: Conflicting identities in the Victorian nurses' strikes 1985-6. *Labour History*, vol. 63, 1992, pp. 155-173; McGauran, A. The results of nurses' industrial action in Ireland and Australia: A feminist interpretation. *Proceedings of the 1999 Conference of the Australasian Political Studies Association*, 1999, pp. 537-546; Hayward, S. and Fee, E. More in sorrow than in anger: The British nurses' strike of 1988. *International Journal of Health Services*, vol. 22, no. 3, 1992, pp. 397-415; Katsuragi, S. Better working conditions won by 'nurse wave' action: Japanese nurses' experience of getting a new law by their militant campaign. *Nursing Ethics*, vol. 4, no. 4, 1997, pp. 313-322; Tabak, N. and Wagner, N. Professional solidarity versus responsibility for the health of the public: Is a nurses' strike morally defensible? *Nursing Ethics*, vol. 4, no. 4, 1997, pp. 283-293; Clarke, J. and O'Neill, C. An analysis of how the Irish times portrayed Irish nursing during the 1999 strike. *Nursing Ethics*, vol. 8, no. 4, 2001, pp. 350-359; Brown, G., Greaney, A., Kelly-Fitzgibbon, M., and McCarthy, J. The 1999 Irish nurses' strike: Nursing versions of the strike and self-identity in a general hospital. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, vol. 56, no. 2, 2006, pp. 200-208; Cristovam, M. Nurses strike for career path restructuring. The European Industrial Relations Observatory EIRO Online, 28 Feb 1999. <<http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/eiro/1999/02/inbrief/pt9902131n.htm>>; Lutua, K. The Fiji nurses' strike. In: *The 2006 Military Takeover in Fiji: A Coup to End All Coups?* eds. J. Fraenkel, S. Firth and B. Lal. Australia: Epress-Australian National University, 2009. <http://epress.anu.edu.au?p=7451>

<sup>10</sup> Johnston, P. *Success While Others Fail: Social Movement Unionism and the Public Workplace*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994, p. 216.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 213.

In order to develop a layered presentation of nursing militancy, this paper uses a trans-disciplinary methodology, qualitative material in the form of strike narratives constructed from newspaper archives,<sup>12</sup> quantitative work stoppages data (particularly for Canada), and reference to the popular and scholarly literature on nursing militancy.

### **Health care restructuring, feminization and the gendered construction of nursing work**

The following sections situate nurse militancy within the context of health care restructuring and neoliberalism, the gendered construction of nursing work, the feminization of union density and of strikes, and gendered patterns of militancy.

#### *Health care restructuring and neoliberal policy: a Canadian example*

In the 1960s and 1970s, Canadian public sector workers gained collective bargaining rights, and nurses organized unions separate from their professional associations. However, by the late 1970s, like many other public sectors, health care began to face government cutbacks in funding, wage freezes, reduction in services/downsizing, intensification, rationalization and fragmentation of work, labour shortages, privatization and public-private partnerships (P3), contracting out of cleaning and food services, and the transformation of a large proportion of work from relatively-secure full-time employment to part-time, casual, temporary, and often precarious employment.

Nurses' work settings are now characterized by intensification of patient care, acceleration of change in technology and treatment regimes, shortages of nurses, rationalization of work, and severe cost-cutting measures. Moreover, nurses frequently experience feelings of powerlessness in the system, lack of respect, verbal and physical abuse [and] unsatisfactory management practices.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Briskin, L. Beyond the average and the aggregate: Researching strikes in Canada. In: *Striking Numbers: New Ways in Strike Research*, eds. S. van der Velden. Amsterdam: The International Institute of Social History, Research Paper 50, 2012, pp. 137-163. This research has also made extensive use of the Seachange website which keeps track of some newspaper coverage of nurses' strikes. <http://seachange.wbumpus.com/>

<sup>13</sup> Hibberd, Op. Cit., p. 588.

In Canada, health care is a provincial responsibility, and provincial governments spend around 35 percent of total expenditures on health care.<sup>14</sup> Compensation represented 60 percent of total hospital budgets in 2006.<sup>15</sup> Since healthcare jobs are less susceptible to outsourcing – some have called them landlocked – pressures to reduce labour costs have been relentless.<sup>16</sup> Although doctors’ salaries represent a disproportionate amount of these expenditures, nursing work has faced particularly acute reorganization and restructuring.

Nursing work, then, faces the austerity measures and the private sector managerial approaches forced on all public sector arenas. In fact, nursing offers a snapshot of such work reorganization, especially the move from full-time to part-time and contract work that is so characteristic of neoliberal economies. In 2009, only 58.6 percent of Canadian registered nurses (RN) worked full time, 30.6 percent worked part time and 10.7 percent worked casual, and often precarious hours.<sup>17</sup> Two-thirds juggled multiple jobs. Perhaps uniquely, the employment relations in nursing work are compounded by the dual pressures of nurse shortages, and pressures to do often-unpaid overtime.

Like other arenas of just-in-time production, casual nurses are called in only when needed, and are cheaper because they receive no benefits. In *Negotiations '99: Stand Up for Nursing*, the Saskatchewan Union of Nurses [SUN, Canada] stressed that the nursing shortage is “forcing nurses to work mandatory overtime. Nurses are suffering extreme stress, leading to many more nurses suffering work-related injuries and chronic illness.” At the same time, “increasing ‘casualization’ of the nursing workforce” means that “instead of staffing properly with full-time and regular part-time nurses, management uses casual nurses to staff for heavy shifts, or ‘peak hours’, just like fast food outlets. For the remainder of the shift, patient care [is] at risk”.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> National Health Expenditure Trends data Tables, Table B.4.5, Canadian Institute of Health Information <https://secure.cihi.ca/estore/productFamily.htm?locale=en&pf=PFC1671>

<sup>15</sup> Mackenzie, H. and Michael R. *The Sustainability of Medicare*. Ottawa: The Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions, 2010. [http://www.nursesunions.ca/sites/default/files/Sustainability.web\\_e.pdf](http://www.nursesunions.ca/sites/default/files/Sustainability.web_e.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> Clark, P. and Clark, D. Union strategies for improving patient care: The key to nurse unionism. *Labor Studies Journal*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2006, p. 51.

<sup>17</sup> Canadian Institute of Health Information: Data Table B RN1, 2009. [http://www.cihi.ca/cihi-ext-portal/internet/en/document/spending+and+health+workforce/workforce/nurses/stats\\_nursing\\_2009](http://www.cihi.ca/cihi-ext-portal/internet/en/document/spending+and+health+workforce/workforce/nurses/stats_nursing_2009)

<sup>18</sup> [http://www.sun-nurses.sk.ca/History/neg\\_99\\_pamphlet.pdf](http://www.sun-nurses.sk.ca/History/neg_99_pamphlet.pdf)

Research commissioned by the Canadian Nurses Association (CAN)<sup>19</sup> shows that 20 per cent of new nurses walk away because of poor working conditions, low wages and a shortage of full-time work caused by downsizing and cost-cutting.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, earnings for nursing graduates are actually declining.<sup>21</sup> As a result, there is a growing shortage of nurses. The 2011 shortfall of 22,000 nurses “is masked only by delayed retirements and heavy workloads” and the Canadian Federation of Nursing Unions (CFNU) predicts a shortfall of 60,000 full-time equivalent nurses by 2022. Such shortages have translated into a dramatic pattern of overtime work. “Public sector nurses worked 20,627,800 hours of overtime in 2010, the equivalent of 11,400 jobs; almost 15 per cent of nurses did not get paid for their overtime hours.”<sup>22</sup> The number of overtime hours is also increasing. “In 1987, RNs worked 144,600 overtime hours per week, while in 2008, RNs worked 412,200 hours per week.”<sup>23</sup>

Undoubtedly, the changes in nursing work reflect neoliberal rationalization and work restructuring. The shifts have been described as de-skilling or proletarianization<sup>24</sup> or “de-professionalization” characterized by “a diminution of independence, increasing stratification and division of labour, and growing revolt against assembly-line conditions.”<sup>25</sup> In a cogent example, more than 700 female nurses who work in the Canadian federal public service won a \$150 million pay settlement in 2012. At the core of the successful human rights complaint was the fact that the “nurses were listed as administrative and clerical staff while working for the federal public service, instead of being classified as health professionals.”<sup>26</sup>

There is no doubt that the three waves of nursing strikes in Canada are coincident with health care restructuring and cutbacks, the introduction

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<sup>19</sup> <http://www.cna-aiic.ca/en/about-cna/>

<sup>20</sup> *Globe and Mail*, 13 July 1999 and 10 February 2000.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> [http://www.nursesunions.ca/sites/default/files/2012.backgrounder.nursing\\_workforce.e\\_0.pdf](http://www.nursesunions.ca/sites/default/files/2012.backgrounder.nursing_workforce.e_0.pdf)

<sup>23</sup> Valiani, S. *Valuing the Invaluable: Rethinking and respecting caring work in Canada*. Ontario Nurses' Association Research Series, Research Paper No. 1, 2011, p. 7. [http://www.ona.org/documents/File/pdf/ONAResearchSeries\\_ValuethetheInvaluable\\_05052011.pdf](http://www.ona.org/documents/File/pdf/ONAResearchSeries_ValuethetheInvaluable_05052011.pdf)

<sup>24</sup> McPherson, K. *Bedside Matters: The Transformation of Canadian Nursing, 1900-1990*. Toronto: Oxford, 1996.

<sup>25</sup> Stinson and Wagner, quoted in Mansell, D. and Dodd, D. (2005). “Professionalism and Canadian nursing.” In: *On All Frontiers. Four Centuries of Canadian Nursing*, eds. C. Bates, D. Dodd and N. Rousseau. Canada: University of Ottawa Press, 2005, p. 198.

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/story/2012/07/03/ottawa-nurses-in-public-service-win-150-million-dollar-settlement.html>

of neoliberal health policy and government interventions into the collective bargaining process. Certainly in the 1980s, many strikes were in response to egregious government interventions in wage setting.<sup>27</sup> Later strikes focussed not only on wages but increasingly on work restructuring and its impact on stress, working conditions, and the ability of nurses to deliver quality care. The pattern described here for Canada is paralleled in many countries.

*The gendered construction of nursing work*

Although most countries report that the vast majority of RNs (over 90 percent) are women, the fact that the work of nurses is constructed as gender-specific is significant to patterns of militancy. As a system of social power, gender structures social organization, and produces and reproduces hierarchies and inequalities, and men's privilege. Via institutions, policies, laws, ideologies and everyday practices, it structures work (as does class relations). Theories of gender as a social process problematize essentialist assumptions and argue that gender is "something one does rather than one is."<sup>28</sup> Thus gender is a social relation, and not the property of a person, and approaches to gender need to "go beyond 'counting bodies'".<sup>29</sup>

Since "gender plays a critical role in both the visibility and value of skills,"<sup>30</sup> it has profoundly affected the work and remuneration of nurses. "Care work is gendered work, and work done by women is less likely to be seen as skilled or rewarded as skilled."<sup>31</sup> As a result, claims for professional status by nurses have come up against gendered hierarchies, discourses, and practices. Certainly, the discursive construction of caring as an innate female quality to be insistently distinguished from the educated practices of curing by medical doctors have created barriers to professional status. The dominant discourses which signify nurses as maternal and essentially feminine, buttress, indeed, exacerbate, these gendered power dynamics, contribute to the devaluing of nurses' expertise, and help to explain their low wages. Central to many nurses' strikes has been resistance to this gendered devaluation, and the demand for both the re-valuing of nursing

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<sup>27</sup> Palmer, B. *Working Class Experience: Rethinking the History of Canadian Labour, 1800-1991* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed). Toronto: McLelland and Stewart, 1992, p. 359-60.

<sup>28</sup> Kelan, E. and Nentwich, J. The value of seeing gender as a 'doing'. In: *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion at Work. A Research Companion*, ed. M. Ozbilgin. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2009, pp. 138 and 141.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Armstrong, P., Armstrong, H. and Scott-Dixon, K. *Critical To Care: The Invisible Women in Health Services*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008, p. 93.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 95.



work and salary improvements. Undoubtedly the construction of nursing work as gendered “helped to solidify relations among nurses”.<sup>32</sup>

Second wave feminisms have offered frames for re-interpreting taken-for-granted patriarchal norms in health care delivery, and legitimized demands for the re-valuation of the skills and expertise of nurses. Based on a survey of registered nurses engaged in direct patient care at a large teaching hospital in an urban community in Florida, Gray concluded that the increase in militancy and unionism among nurses was associated with women’s perceptions of their role in society.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, Canadian scholar Hibberd contended that “the rise in militancy among nurses’ unions is a symptom and an integral part of the rise in feminist consciousness in society at large”.<sup>34</sup> In her study of the 1988 Alberta nurses’ strike, Coulter (1993, 57) concluded that “striking nurses benefited from the gains of the women’s movement ... [P]ublic discussion which focused on how women’s caring and nurturing work was devalued and on critiques of the organizational and power structure of hospitals were based in feminist analysis and on the gender-specificity of nursing work.” McPherson notes that “the renewed emphasis on the value of personal patient care was also linked to feminist calls for equal pay for work of equal value.”<sup>35</sup>

Demands for the re-valuation of nursing work and salary increases have been central in many strikes by nurses. In New Jersey in 1980, a ninety-eight-day strike at Englewood Hospital “brought a 28 percent increase in wages over the three years of the contract, bringing the hourly wage up to \$12.00 an hour.”<sup>36</sup> Hayes notes dozens of strikes or near strikes by American nurses centered around pay issues between 1974 and the mid-1990s.<sup>37</sup> In the fifty-day strike in Victoria (Australia) in 1986, nurses “could no longer accept that they should as a predominantly female profession be accorded such esteem for their caring role but be denied wage and career justice.”<sup>38</sup> In the spring of 2008 in Denmark, an eight-week strike of about 100,000 workers occurred, with 70,000 nurses, members of the Danish Nurses’ Organisation (Dansk Sygeplejeråd, DSR) “spearheading the action”.<sup>39</sup> The strike was primarily about wages, organized around a demand

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<sup>32</sup> McPherson, Op. Cit., p. 246.

<sup>33</sup> Gray, D. Militancy, unionism, and gender ideology: A study of hospital nurses. *Work and Occupations*, vol. 16, no. 2, 1989, pp. 137-152.

<sup>34</sup> Hibberd, Op. Cit., p. 587.

<sup>35</sup> McPherson, Op. Cit., p. 255.

<sup>36</sup> Hayes, Op. Cit., 708.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> McCoppin and Gardner, quoted in McGauran, Op. Cit., p. 538.

<sup>39</sup> Danish nurses’ strike enters second week. *Agence France-Presse*, 23 April 2008.

for a 15 percent wage increase. Explicit attention was drawn to the issue of women's lower pay, with a demand for "men's wages for women's occupations".<sup>40</sup> In 2012, nurses in India created a new union with 400 branches in just two months. They went on an "indefinite strike" for an 80 percent wage increase. It lasted for 117 days.<sup>41</sup>

### *Feminization*

Statistical data on the Canadian labour market reveal a significant trend toward feminization. Feminization speaks to demographic profiles: the feminization of work (more part-time, low paid and often precarious jobs, employment patterns associated with women's work), the feminization of the workforce (increasing numbers of women workers), the feminization of union density (higher percentage of unionized women), and the concomitant feminization of union membership (a greater proportion of union members who are women).

Unlike density declines experienced in countries like the US and the UK, union density in Canada has remained relatively stable. However, since 2004, the unionization rate for women has been slightly higher than for men. In 2011, the rate was 31 percent for women and 28 percent for men; 52 percent of union members were women and 60 percent of union members work in the public sector. In the public sector where women are clustered, 75 percent of workers have union coverage compared to only 17.5 percent in the private sector.<sup>42</sup> Somewhat similar patterns can be found in many other countries.<sup>43</sup>

These demographic transformations in work, the workforce, union density and union membership set the stage for the feminization of strikes, that is, those involved in strikes are more likely to be women. Although statistics are not available that demonstrate the exact proportion of women and men involved in any particular strike, the growth and increasing

<sup>40</sup> Jørgensen, C. Longest strike in public sector ends with pay settlement. The European Industrial Relations Observatory EIRO Online, 29 September 2008. <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/eiro/2008/04/articles/DK0804029I.htm>

<sup>41</sup> Indian nurses start 'indefinite' strike. Posted 2 Feb 2012. <http://libcom.org/blog/indian-nurses-start-%E2%80%98indefinite%E2%80%99-strike-02022012>

<sup>42</sup> Uppal, S. "Unionization". *Perspectives on Labour and Income*. Ottawa: Statistics Canada [Catalogue no. 75-001-x], 2011.

<sup>43</sup> See for example on the EU, <<http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/eiro/studies/tn0904019s/tn0904019s.htm#hd2>>; on the UK, <<http://www.worker-participation.eu/National-Industrial-Relations/Countries/United-Kingdom/Trade-Unions>> and on the US, <<http://www.bls.gov/news.release/union2.nr0.htm>>.

feminization of the public sector, especially in health and education, the importance of public sector workers to union density, and the significance of strikes in this sector support the general claim for the feminization of strikes.<sup>44</sup> Certainly an analysis of the Canadian stoppages data suggests a shift toward public-sector militancy. Even though many public-sector workers are deemed essential, denied the right to strike, and often legislated back to work, between 2000-2009, 27 per cent of all stoppages (592) were in the public sector (the highest percentage in the last five decades). These stoppages involved more than 69 per cent of all workers on strike.<sup>45</sup> Sustained attacks on the public sector which have included wage freezes and rollbacks, downsizing, contracting out and privatization, and assaults on public sector bargaining rights have elicited a militant response.<sup>46</sup>

How do nurses fit into these patterns? In Canada, health care is one of the most highly unionized sectors of the economy, and the majority of nurses work in the public sector. Despite the historic resistance of nurses to unionization, nurses are more likely to be in unions than almost any other occupational group, in part, because Canadian nurses' unions represent full-time, part-time and casual nurses. In 2010, 87 per cent of nurses are unionized, higher than union density rates for the public sector over all.<sup>47</sup> Only teachers have a higher union coverage at 89 per cent.<sup>48</sup> The Canadian Federation of Nurses' Unions is the eighth largest affiliate in the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC). Although union density in the United States is very much lower than Canada, in 2006, union density rates for nurses were over 20 per cent,<sup>49</sup> considerably higher than the overall rate of 11.9 per cent.<sup>50</sup> In both US and Canada over 90 per cent of RNs are women.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Briskin, L. Public sector militancy, feminization, and employer aggression: Trends in strikes, lockouts, and wildcats in Canada from 1960 to 2004. In: *Strikes Around the World*, eds. H. Dribbusch, D. Lyddon, K. Vandaele and S. van der Velden. Amsterdam: Aksant, 2007.

<sup>45</sup> HRSDC, Op. Cit. Note 5.

<sup>46</sup> Panitch, L. and Swartz, D. *From Consent to Coercion: The Assault on Trade Union Freedoms*. Aurora, Ontario: Garamond Press, 2003.

<sup>47</sup> [http://www.nursesunions.ca/sites/default/files/overtime\\_and\\_absenteeism\\_quick\\_facts.pdf](http://www.nursesunions.ca/sites/default/files/overtime_and_absenteeism_quick_facts.pdf)

<sup>48</sup> Uppal, Op. Cit.

<sup>49</sup> Spetz, J. "Nurses and unionization". Presentation at the University of California at San Francisco, 2010. <http://www.csom.umn.edu/medical-industry-leadership-institute/documents/spetz-presentation.pdf>

<sup>50</sup> <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/union2.nr0.htm>

<sup>51</sup> On US nurses, see <<http://www.dol.gov/wb/factsheets/Qf-nursing-08.htm>>; for Canada, see <<http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hcs-sss/pubs/nurs-infirm/2005-nurse-infirm/index-eng.php>>.

### *Gendering militancy*

The feminization of strikes raises questions about gender-specific strike tactics. Little research addresses this issue and the tapestry of gender, sector and industry would require considerable untangling.<sup>52</sup> Such an examination also needs to be grounded in a materialist social construction approach which recognizes that such strategies emerge from women's lived experiences at work, in households and as part of communities rather than from any narrow biological, essentialist or 'natural' imperatives.<sup>53</sup> Narratives on nurses' strikes do offer a suggestive framework for exploring the gender-specific character of militancy. First, strike issues often take specific account of gendered realities. For example, the Danish nurses' strike of 2008 drew explicit attention to women's lower pay, with a demand for "men's wages for women's occupations".<sup>54</sup> Second, nurses use tactics which reflect gendered realities. In that same strike, the nurses in Holstebro handed out "a recipe for baking home-made bread, with a lump of yeast and talked to members of the public face to face. 'We need a rise in our pay in the same way that yeast rises bread, to the level of men's wages so we can afford to eat bread, and care for and look after your elderly, children and chronically ill family, relatives and friends.'"<sup>55</sup>

Third, attention is inevitably drawn to the fact that the strikers are women. In her narrative of the fifty-day strike by nurses in Victoria (Australia), Bessant points to the significance accorded to gender in this struggle. "In Australian labour history it would be hard to find an equivalent event where a large group of women challenged a male-dominated government, a male-dominated industrial relations system, a male-dominated trade union establishment ... It became a conflict dominated by the gender of participants."<sup>56</sup>

Finally, women's strikes, and certainly strikes by nurses challenge commonsense views that women workers are passive, and unwilling to take

<sup>52</sup> McDermott's study of the six-month strike in 1984-5 at Eaton's (a Canadian department store) which involved largely part-time low paid female workers in the private service sector concluded that women in retail strike differently than workers in manufacturing. McDermott, P. The Eaton's strike: We wouldn't have missed it for the world! In: *Women Challenging Unions: Feminism, Democracy and Militancy*, eds. L. Briskin and P. McDermott. University of Toronto Press, 1993.

<sup>53</sup> Briskin, L. Victimization and agency: The social construction of union women's leadership. *Industrial Relations Journal*, Vol. 37, No. 4, 2006, pp. 359-378.

<sup>54</sup> Jørgensen, Op. Cit.

<sup>55</sup> Laggan, C. Danish nurses' strike. *New Worker Features*, 3 May 2008. <http://newworkerfeatures.blogspot.com/2008/05/danish-nurses-strike.html>

<sup>56</sup> Bessant, Op. Cit., p. 168.

strike action. The example of the Fiji nurses is a case in point. The Fiji Nurses Association (FNA) went on strike in 2000 and 2005, seeking promised and deserved salary increases of up to 27 percent, and improvements in working conditions. In 2007, the year following a military coup, Fijian nurses went on a sixteen-day strike with an 89 percent strike mandate. Despite its lack of success, it offers an extraordinary example of persistence and militancy. Kuini Lutua, the general secretary of the FNA and a key leader in the strike noted: “Because many of our members were married to members of the security forces, they might face severe pressure to back down; but the word from many of them was ‘they became nurses first and got married later.’” In talking to the media, she pointed to “the vast imbalance between the work we did and the amount we were paid.” The Fiji Human Rights Commission director Shaista Shameem replied that “the right to life of patients, sick people and the elderly was more important than the right to strike” to which Lutua replied “the right to life was the responsibility of the government, not of the nurses.”<sup>57</sup>

This fearlessness is reminiscent of earlier strikes by women workers. The 1911 comment of Helen Marot of the Women’s Trade Union League in New York City about the 1909 strike of shirtwaist makers is resonant with this rich tradition:

The feature of the [shirtwaist makers] strike which was as noteworthy as the response of thirty thousand unorganized workers, was the yielding and uncompromising temper of the strikers. This was due not to the influence of nationality, but to the dominant sex... [W]e have now a trade-union truism that ‘women make the best strikers’ ... The shirt-waist makers’ strike ... was marked by complete self-surrender to a cause, emotional endurance, fearlessness and willingness to face danger and suffering.<sup>58</sup>

In fact, the defiance of the Fijian nurses prompted 10,000 government workers from other public sector unions who also faced pay cuts following the coup to join them: “The Fijian Teachers Association (FTA), the Fiji Public Employees Union, and the Viti National Union of Taukei Workers – walked off the job on 2 August, though without the same

<sup>57</sup> Lutua, Op. Cit., p. 262-3.

<sup>58</sup> Marot H.. A woman's strike - An appreciation of the shirtwaist makers of New York. In: *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science in the City of New York*, 1910-11, ed. H. Mussey, pp. 124 and 128.

solidarity or unity of purpose as the nurses; the teachers called off their strike within a day and other workers held out for only a week.”<sup>59</sup>

The labour militancy of women not only challenges misconceptions about women workers, but also masculinist assumptions still deeply-embedded in union culture. In focusing on the militancy of *women*, the associations of militancy with men, masculinity and manliness are problematized.<sup>60</sup> Such associations weaken the ability of unions to organize the unorganized in sectors where women work, and to address the concerns of the increasing proportions of union members who are women.<sup>61</sup> Strikes of mostly women also gender the public imagination by contesting the commonsense connection of labour militancy to blue collar men.

### **The public interest and the politicization of caring**

[N]urses are ... protesting about the system and the inefficiency and ineffectiveness of the system ... It's patient care that's in jeopardy, and that's why nurses are on strike. But I know the media will say it's about money ... but I don't believe for one minute it's all about money ... [Y]ou're fighting for the care of patients all the time. Irish nurse on strike in 1999.<sup>62</sup>

Following strikes in 1988 and 1991, Saskatchewan nurses defied back-to-work legislation for ten days in 1999. Nurse Nancy Syles spoke to the convention of the Canadian Labour Congress:

There were nurses on the picket line who told me, ‘I’ve never even had a speeding ticket.’ But you know they never flinched. They were willing to stay on that picket line and maybe even be sent to jail ... All we want to do as nurses is to deliver safe,

<sup>59</sup> Fraenkel, J., Firth, S. and Lal, B. eds. *The 2006 Military Takeover in Fiji: A Coup to End All Coups?* Australia: Epress-Australian National University, 2009, p. 253. <http://epress.anu.edu.au?p=7451>

<sup>60</sup> Briskin, L. Gendering Labour Militancies. Paper presented at the *Gender, Work and Organization* Conference, Keele University, UK, 2007b.

<sup>61</sup> Ledwith, S. Gender politics in trade unions: The representation of women between exclusion and inclusion.” *Transfer: European Review of Labour and Research*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2012, pp. 185-199; Rooks, D. The cowboy mentality: Organizers and occupational commitment in the new labor movement. *Labor Studies Journal*, Vol. 23, No. 3, 2003, pp. 33-62; Whitefield, P., Alvarez, S. and Emrani, Y. 2009. Is there a women’s way of organizing? Genders, unions, and effective organizing. *Research Studies and Reports. Cornell University ILR School Paper 26*, 2009. <http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/reports/26>

<sup>62</sup> Quoted in Brown *et al.*, Op. Cit., p. 205.

excellent nursing care ... We cannot do this in the working conditions we have now.<sup>63</sup>

Laurie Swift, a nurse in Regina, wrote in a letter to the Editor of the *Regina Leader-Post*, “This issue is really about the nursing shortage which ... has led to horrific and unsafe working conditions and compromised patient care ... We are taking a stand for the people of Saskatchewan: you, me, our families, our communities, as the caregivers and patient advocates that we are”.<sup>64</sup>

Undoubtedly the fact that nurses do caring work is significant to nurses’ consciousness, their tactics and strategy, the political discourses they employ, and the impact of their strikes. Historically, many women who serve client groups directly have been ambivalent about making demands around wages and working conditions, and engaging in public protest. In fact, women’s responsibility for caring work has been actively mobilised to deter women from striking: “Women are trained to feel responsible for the people they care for, whether at home or on the job. Consequently, they can easily be made to feel guilty if they refuse to take care ... And when they do strike, the media may depict them as ‘heartless and unfeeling.’”<sup>65</sup> All international accounts of strike activity by nurses allude to the conflict between striking and caring.<sup>66</sup> And for many nurses “the decision to strike meant they had to overcome their socialisation both as nurses and women. It only came as the result of extreme frustration and anger”.<sup>67</sup>

For nurses who have consistently defended good patient care, neoliberal policies that attacked unions and cut social programmes (including health care funding) and deregulated, decentralized, and privatized the economy not only threatened nurses’ conditions of work, but they also threatened patient care.<sup>68</sup>

This research suggests that increasingly nurses’ dedication to caring work may encourage rather than prevent them from going on strike. The question has become “not whether that action is ethical but whether it is

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<sup>63</sup> *Globe and Mail*, 13 July 1999.

<sup>64</sup> 7 May 1999.

<sup>65</sup> Darcy, J. and Lauzon, C. 1983, The right to strike. In: *Union Sisters*, eds. L. Briskin and L. Yanz. Toronto, The Women's Press, 1983, p. 175.

<sup>66</sup> Brown *et al.* Op. Cit., p. 206.

<sup>67</sup> Bessant, Op. Cit., p.166.

<sup>68</sup> Kealey, Op. Cit., p. 227.

unethical not to take action”.<sup>69</sup> In addressing this problematic, McKeown, Stowell-Smith and Foley note that “the understanding of industrial action [has moved] into the discursive domain of compassion and care, stressing the symbiosis of industrial action with concern for patient welfare: declaring militancy as professionally desirable.”<sup>70</sup> In their study of the 1999 Irish nurses’ strike, Brown et al. confirmed that “the act of striking itself is an act of advocacy”.<sup>71</sup>

Nurses have confronted health care restructuring, nursing shortages, intensification of work, precarious employment and gendered hierarchies with a militant discourse around the public interest, and a reconstitution and reclamation of caring. I call this discourse *the politicisation of caring*, that is, a recognition of the collective responsibility for caring, and the impact of deteriorating conditions of nursing work on quality care; the rejection of essentialist claims that women are responsible for caring work by virtue of being women; the demand that the skills involved in caring work be recognized and rewarded; and the willingness to mobilize collectively to these ends.

Speaking about the National Health Service in the UK, Thornley commented: “The public understand ... that poor pay and conditions impact directly on the quality of patient care. In defending their own interests through industrial action and strike action, history has shown nurses are also safeguarding the public interest.”<sup>72</sup> In reference to the illegal nurses’ strike in 1988, Edmonton Working Women (Canada) observed,

The country's attention was captured by the courage, strength and unity of the members of the United Nurses of Alberta who went on an illegal strike. They defied the law to defend their own democratic rights, and to oppose the erosion of workers' rights on all fronts ... [and to] fight for the patients' rights to quality, publicly funded health care.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>69</sup> Jennings, K. and Western, G. A right to strike? *Nursing Ethics*, vol. 4, no. 4, 1997, p. 281.

<sup>70</sup> McKeown, M., Stowell-Smith, M. and Foley, B. Passivity vs. militancy: A Q methodological study of nurses' industrial relations on Merseyside (England). *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, vol. 30, no. 1, 1999, p. 146.

<sup>71</sup> Brown et al. Op. Cit., p. 205.

<sup>72</sup> Quoted in Jennings and Western, Op. Cit., p. 281.

<sup>73</sup> Coulter, R. Alberta nurses and the “illegal” strike of 1988. In: *Women Challenging Unions: Feminism, Democracy and Militancy*, eds. L. Briskin and P. McDermott. Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1993, p. 56.

Although not specifically about nurses, research on the 1981 illegal strike of hospital workers (housekeepers, lab technicians, dietary workers, nursing assistants, and



On 14 November 2002, what would be the longest nurses' strike in the United States – over two years – began at the Northern Michigan Hospital in Petoskey, Michigan. The nurses

wanted a voice in how patient care was delivered and in issues related to patient safety ... The fact that the nurses remained on strike for so long in spite of the offer of higher wages is a strong indication that having a voice in patient care is more important than money. The nurses have become crusaders, fighting for patient safety and for the future of the nursing profession.<sup>74</sup>

On 10 June 2010, 12,000 Minnesota nurses went on a co-ordinated twenty-four hour strike across fourteen hospitals to demand strict nurse-patient ratios. A spokesperson for the nurses pointed to the one goal: “To walk for patients”.<sup>75</sup> Following the day of action, 84 percent of nurses voted to go on strike.<sup>76</sup>

#### *Public sector nursing strikes*

Nurses work in both public and private sector contexts. In his study of public sector unionism in the United States, Johnston makes a sustained argument that sector makes a significant difference not only to the nature of the work, but also to patterns of militancy: “Sectorial differences appear to explain differences in union organization and collective action by female workers and by clerical workers as well.”<sup>77</sup>

Public sector strikes regularly adopt a discursive frame focused on the public interest: “Public workers' movements are constrained to frame their claims as ‘public needs’ ... turning bargaining into a political debate

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maintenance workers) in Ontario (Canada), over 75 per cent of whom were women, is revealing. “The bond to care-giving work, loyalty to patients, and service orientation created a pressure to strike. The need to protect standards impelled women *to strike*. Women interviewees were asked if they were concerned about the level of care patients would receive during the strike. The most common response involved a defense of the strike *in maintaining health standards*. Typically the hospital worker commented: ‘It’s them that’s wrecked it for people, not us. I can’t take care of anyone the way it’s set up. That’s what I want—to get things back’ (RNA, General)” (emphasis in original). White, J. *Hospital Strike: Women, Unions and Public Sector Conflict*. Toronto: Thompson Publishers, 1990. p. 70.

<sup>74</sup> Hayes, Op. Cit., p. 712-3.

<sup>75</sup> Mador, J. After the nurses strike, what's next? *Minnesota Public Radio*, 11 June 2010. <http://minnesota.publicradio.org/display/web/2010/06/11/nurses-nextsteps/>

<sup>76</sup> Lee, T. Minnesota nurses officially ratify new three year contract with hospitals. *MedCity News*, 7 July 2010. <http://medcitynews.com/2010/07/minnesota-nurses-officially-ratify-new-three-year-contract-with-hospitals/>

<sup>77</sup> Johnston, Op. Cit., p. 20-21.

over public policy.”<sup>78</sup> The struggles of nurses certainly support this argument. In fact, nurses, their employers and the state (which funds health care) all have a vested interest in mobilizing the discourse of the public interest. Haiven points out that in seeking legitimation, the state attempts to exercise “a monopoly in defining and protecting the ... ‘public interest’.” He speaks of the “wrestling match over possession of stewardship of the public interest” and notes that “in every nurses’ strike to date, the question of ownership of the ‘public interest’ has been hotly contested.”<sup>79</sup> In fact, Gindin and Hurley point to the ways that government traps, marginalizes and isolates public sector workers by “cynically set[ting] itself up as the defender of services ... [I]f workers demand improved compensation, this would only prove that they didn’t care about the public.”<sup>80</sup>

At the same time, in its promotion of individual rather than community responsibility, neoliberal radical individualism has undermined the discourse of the public good. Some governments have responded to nurse militancy by invoking women’s responsibility to care, rather than the state’s ownership of the public interest. For example, in the 2008 Danish nurses’ strike, claims about family and particularly women’s responsibility for caring was one response of the government to the nurses. Karen Jespersen, then Social Minister in the Danish government, argued:

In the future, families and particularly women need to take greater responsibility in caring for sick members of their family, and the care and nursing of older family members ... I am not trying to save money; I am trying to make those with responsibility, namely the closest relatives, take away this burden from society and take responsibility for the society they live in.<sup>81</sup>

This invocation of individualism highlights the discursive and ideological shift from state to family and individual, exposes the essentialist assumptions about women’s apparently natural responsibility for caring which continue to underpin nursing work, and has fuelled nurse resistance.

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid. See also Bach, S. and Givan, R. Public service unionism in a restructured public sector. In: *Union Organization and Activity*, eds. J. Kelly and P. William. New York: Routledge, 2004.

<sup>79</sup> Haiven, L. The State and Nursing Industrial Relations: The Case of Four Western Canadian Nurses’ Strikes. Unpublished paper, 1991, p. 8.

<sup>80</sup> Gindin, S. and Hurley, M. The public sector: Searching for a focus. *Socialist Project • E-Bulletin No. 354*, 15 May 2010, p. 2. <http://www.socialistproject.ca/bullet/354.php>

<sup>81</sup> Quoted in Laggan, Op. Cit.

Evidence also suggests that government austerity measures have gender-specific intent and impact given their consistent and heavy-handed attacks on the public sector, and the rights of workers to strike. As Darcy and Lauzon point out, “The right to strike is a women's issue [given] the fact that organized working women are heavily concentrated in the public sector, where anti-strike legislation is directed.”<sup>82</sup> Armstrong also drew this link: “Attacks on unions in the public sector are attacks on women who make up the majority of unionized workers there.”<sup>83</sup> For example, Debra McPherson, the secretary-treasurer of the National Federation of Nurses' Unions was interviewed in *The Star Phoenix* about the 1999 Saskatchewan nurses' strike:

The government [has] failed to take into account that most nurses are middle-aged women who have plenty of life experience and aren't easily cowed ... If Mr. Romanow [premier of Saskatchewan's New Democratic Government (NDP) government] thinks these 8,000 women are going to back down, he had just better take his testosterone hissy fit and stuff it.<sup>84</sup>

In her view, the resentment stemmed from the fact that governments everywhere have shown no reluctance to cut or freeze the wages of public sector employees, most of whom are women. “The public sector is constantly the brunt of wage restraint ... But if they think they can keep women working for less, they are going to have to think again. We're past that.”

*Private sector nursing strikes: the example of California*

As a result of managed and privatized health care in the United States, the vast majority of RNs work in the private sector: of the more than 2.7 million RNs, only 18 percent work in the public sector.<sup>85</sup> And yet private sector nurses in the United States have also systematically and successfully invoked the public interest. The ongoing strikes of the California nurses, members of the California Nurses Association (CNA) are illustrative. In December 2010, nurses in West Hill went on a five-day strike around patient care issues. In March 2011, 1000 nurses struck in Los Angeles. RN Lisa Gella, one of the CNA negotiators said: “Today we're

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<sup>82</sup> Darcy and Lauzon, Op. Cit., pp. 172-3.

<sup>83</sup> Armstrong, P. Canadian health care: Privatization and gendered labour. *The Bullet: Socialist Project* E-Bulletin No. 595, 6 February 2012, p. 8. <http://www.socialistproject.ca/bullet/595.php>

<sup>84</sup> 15 April 1999.

<sup>85</sup> [http://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2011/ted\\_20110613.htm](http://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2011/ted_20110613.htm)

really out here about patient safety, our patient staffing ratio and being able to deliver the best possible care that we can for patients and their families.”<sup>86</sup> The strike also focused on the troubling practice of “floating nurses to different units that demand medical expertise they do not have.” In May 2011, 1100 Los Angeles nurse staged a one-day action to protest inadequate staffing ratios.<sup>87</sup>

In Sept 2011, 17,000 nurses went on a co-ordinated one-day strike at 34 hospitals in Northern California, the largest strike in nursing history.<sup>88</sup> Many were on sympathy strikes with the National Union of Healthcare Workers (NUHW). The health care hospital chains, Kaiser and Sutter, demanded benefit cuts for health care staff, despite making substantial profits (for example, Kaiser netted \$2 billion in 2010). Ann Gaebler, a neonatal intensive care nurse at Sutter’s Alta Bates Summit Medical Center in Berkeley, said: “Eliminating paid sick leave is akin to forcing nurses to work while sick—a dangerous prospect in the nursing world.”<sup>89</sup> Bay Area Sutter nurses were also protesting “the company’s attempts to close hospitals in low-income areas, while shifting profitable services to more affluent neighborhoods.” Their picket signs read, “Community Care, Not Corporate Profits,” and “Some Cuts Don't Heal.” Vicki Theocharis, a nurse in the hospital's oncology unit said: “We're not just here for money. We want to take care of the patients, and it almost feels like we're being penalized for doing it.”<sup>90</sup> Oakland Children’s Hospital RN Martha Kuhl commented, “Nurses will never be silenced in standing up for our patients and our communities.”<sup>91</sup>

In December 2011, 6000 nurses staged a one-day strike at seven hospitals to protest the “erosion of quality of care and cuts to patient

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<sup>86</sup> Over 1,000 nurses strike at Kaiser L.A. Medical Center. *Ktla News*, 2 March 2011.

<http://www.ktla.com/news/landing/ktla-nurses-strike,0,7869089.story>

<sup>87</sup> Kaiser Permanente nurses stage one-day walkout over working conditions. *LA Times*, 18 May 2011.

[http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/money\\_co/2011/05/kaiser-permanente-nurses-stage-one-day-walkout-over-working-conditions-1.html](http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/money_co/2011/05/kaiser-permanente-nurses-stage-one-day-walkout-over-working-conditions-1.html)

<sup>88</sup> Traywick, C. and Konstantinovskiy, M. Oakland nurses march and strike in protest of benefit cuts. *Oakland North*,

23 September 2011. <http://oaklandnorth.net/2011/09/23/oakland-nurses-march-and-strike-in-protest-of-benefit-cuts/>

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Sudhin Thanawal, S. and Chea, T. Nurses at dozens of California hospitals strike. *Common Dreams*, 22 September 2011. <https://www.commondreams.org/headline/2011/09/22-7>

<sup>91</sup> Winslow, C. CNA Joins NUHW In biggest healthcare strike ever. *Beyondchron*, 26 September 2011. <http://www.beyondchron.org/news/index.php?itemid=9548>

protections”.<sup>92</sup> RN leader Margie Keenan said “We are finding it harder to give quality care ... when our employer, like insurance companies, is only focused on the bottom line ... Patients are more important than the bottom line.”<sup>93</sup> Picket lines and rallies saw “beefed up security”, what one nurse referred to as the “criminalisation of nursing.”<sup>94</sup> In May of 2012, more than 4000 Sutter nurses walked off the job. In June of 2012, 4400 RNs went on a one-day strike in the Bay Area. Mills-Peninsula RN Sharon Tobin told a rally that “nurses are going to keep fighting Sutter, pointing out every service they cut”: “We are going to keep it up ... because this is our community and these are our patients. We will never give up on our patients’ rights.”<sup>95</sup> In July 2012, Sutter nurses held another one-day strike. Although many of these strikes lasted only one day, Sutter nurses were consistently locked out for four additional days.<sup>96</sup>

Commentators have recognized the significance of nurse militancy.

It is difficult to exaggerate the significance of these strikes. In the face of a deafening chorus preaching austerity, of the near universal demand – from corporations to politicians – for concessions, these workers have said no. ... these workers are resisting cuts in staffing, and the implicit demand that they abandon their role as patients’ advocates.<sup>97</sup>

In fact, some attribute Meg Whitman’s landslide loss of the 2010 California gubernatorial race to Democratic Jerry Brown to the interventions and organizing of the CNA.

It [CNA] mounted 50 events to target Whitman, after she pledged to slash the ranks of public employees by 40,000 and cut the state budget by \$15 billion. Union members, charging that Whitman’s moves would result in devastating cuts to health care and social services, dogged her around the state – even

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<sup>92</sup> Martinez, M. and Weisfeldt, S. 6,000 nurses strike in California. *CNN U.S.*, 22 December 2011. [http://articles.cnn.com/2011-12-22/us/us\\_california-nurses-strike\\_1\\_charles-idelson-national-nurses-united-california-nurses-association?\\_s=PM:US](http://articles.cnn.com/2011-12-22/us/us_california-nurses-strike_1_charles-idelson-national-nurses-united-california-nurses-association?_s=PM:US)

<sup>93</sup> Connell, T. 6,000 Bay area nurses on one-day strike. *AFL-CIO NOW*, 22 December 2011. <http://www.aflcio.org/Blog/Organizing-Bargaining/6-000-Bay-Area-Nurses-on-One-Day-Strike>

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> National Nurses Movement. Nurses fight back against corporate greed. *Daily Kos*, 13 June 2012 <http://www.dailykos.com/story/2012/06/13/1099845/-Nurses-Fight-Back-Against-Corporate-Greed>

<sup>96</sup> Quan, H. More than 4,000 Bay Area nurses go on strike. *CBS San Francisco*, 13 June 2012. <http://sanfrancisco.cbslocal.com/2012/06/13/more-than-4000-bay-area-nurses-go-on-strike/>

<sup>97</sup> Winslow, Op. Cit.

outside her Atherton home – with a busload of costumed characters led by a fictional “Queen Meg”.<sup>98</sup>

O’Connor found their tactics “unquestionably successful”: “Maybe it’s because they’re mostly women ... (but) they’re better at adapting and fighting; they do it in hospitals every day.”<sup>99</sup>

This latest wave of nurse’s strikes in California focused largely on patient care, built effective coalitions with other health care workers and the community, and challenged privatized health care, profit and corporate greed. Noteworthy was the resistance to austerity initiatives, calls for the expansion of the collective bargaining agenda to take more account of working conditions, and the capacity of the nurses to organize co-ordinated action across many different workplaces.

### *Gag orders*

An emerging employer response to the politicisation of caring and nurse militancy is what Philadelphia nurses called “a gag order” during their month-long strike at Temple University Hospital in Philadelphia in 2010. The strike began on 31 March 2010 after the 1000 nurses and 500 other allied-health workers represented by the Pennsylvania Association of Staff Nurses and Allied Professionals (PASNAP) voted 1,051 to 7 to reject the hospital’s offer. Although familiar issues were critical in this strike – wages, benefits, staffing ratios, attacks on union rights – “the non-disparagement clause” which came to be known as the “gag clause” was central: “The Association, its officers, agents, representatives and members shall not publicly criticize, ridicule or make any statement which disparages Temple, or any of its affiliates or any of their respective management officers or medical staff members.”<sup>100</sup> Put on the bargaining table by the hospital

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<sup>98</sup> Marinucci, C. Nurses union becomes potent political force. *San Francisco Chronicle*, 24 Nov 2010 <http://www.sfgate.com/politics/article/Nurses-union-becomes-potent-political-force-3244804.php>

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Mannix M. Until the “gag” clause is removed, the Temple nursing strike IS about patient safety. *Philadelphia Public Health Examiner*, 3 April 2010. <http://www.examiner.com/public-health-in-philadelphia/until-the-gag-clause-is-removed-the-temple-nursing-strike-is-about-patient-safety>

administration, it would have allowed management to discipline or fire workers who publicly criticized the hospital.<sup>101</sup>

Undoubtedly this clause was an attempt to stifle nurses' voices and prevent patient advocacy and reports of unsafe care. Patty Eakin, an emergency department RN who has worked at Temple for two decades pointed out: "How can I talk about [the dangers of low nurse-to-patient ratios] if I can't in some way reference my own workplace? They want to stifle our ability to advocate."<sup>102</sup>

The struggle to prevent the implementation of the clause made visible nurses' role as advocates for patient care and their readiness to mobilise to this end, that is, *the politicisation of caring*. Union president Maureen May said: "I'm a patient advocate. I want to be able to speak out for my patients."<sup>103</sup>

We work in the poorest section of the city, with the highest morbidity and mortality in Philadelphia. This community deserves people who will stand up for them and the care they deserve, because often they are not taken into account when politicians and hospital administrators make decisions about healthcare. We are the voice for those who have none.<sup>104</sup>

On 28 April 2010, after a month-long strike, the strikers ratified an agreement. They were successful in preventing the implementation of the gag clause.

Employer attempts to institute such codes of conduct are also happening in other nursing jurisdictions. For example, in 2009, Alberta (Canada) Health Services instituted a code of conduct of its nurses: "If your personal conduct could reasonably result in valid allegations or criticism from our fellow Albertans, then the conduct is questionable and may be improper." Nurses could face disciplinary action, dismissal or termination. Harrigan from the United Nurses of Alberta (UNA) recognized that the government was attempting to muzzle nurses and prohibit them from being involved in public debate.<sup>105</sup> Ann Gaebler, on strike in the September 2011

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<sup>101</sup> Piette B. Striking Temple University nurses say: 'We won't back down!' *Workers World*, 31 March 2010. [http://www.workers.org/2010/us/temple\\_0804/](http://www.workers.org/2010/us/temple_0804/)

<sup>102</sup> Quoted in *nationalnursesmovement*, 2010.

<sup>103</sup> Quoted in Piette, Op. Cit.

<sup>104</sup> Quoted in *nationalnursesmovement*, 2010.

<sup>105</sup> Thomson, G. Nurses feel chill of "conduct" code: Union sees McCarthyism, attempt to muzzle health-care workers. *Edmonton Journal*, 14 July 2009. David Harrigan, the director of labour relations for UNA commented: "If the government, or Alberta Health

California nurses' strike, pointed to "demands to eliminate committees where nurses and managers examine patterns of care and investigate problems. 'They're also trying to limit our voice.'"<sup>106</sup> The widespread mobilization of nurses and the discourses which frame this militancy support a claim for the politicization of caring.

### *The public trust*

As part of the adoption of a discursive frame focused on the public interest, striking public sector workers frequently try to mobilize community and coalitional support. In fact, Peirce makes the point that "public sector unionism is inherently political, with efforts directed towards winning and maintaining public support both for public sector unions' specific rights and for the government spending that under girds the services public sector workers provide."<sup>107</sup>

Many Canadian nurses' strikes have been characterized by strong popular support, and by active involvement of other unions, the community, the public, women's organizations and other progressive movements. In many countries where nurses have gone on strike, heightened attention has been paid to the event, and opinion polls have tracked public response. And despite the inconvenience such strikes cause, support for nurses and trust ratings have been surprisingly strong. In Canada, despite fourteen high-profile nurses' strikes in 1998 and 1999, a 2000 poll gave nurses the highest trust rating of any profession.<sup>108</sup> In a 2007 survey on trustworthy professions, nurses ranked at 87 percent (second after firefighters at 93 percent) despite the fact that trade unions ranked at only 19 percent.<sup>109</sup> A

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Services, announces that they are going to close a facility or they are going to close some operating theatres, should nurses not be allowed to speak out about that?" 13 July 2009. <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/story/2009/07/13/calgary-nurses-code-conduct-alberta-health.html>

<sup>106</sup> <http://labornotes.org/2011/09/23000-strike-giant-california-hospital-chains>

<sup>107</sup> Peirce, J. 2003. *Canadian Industrial Relations* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed). Toronto: Prentice Hall, 2003, p. 273. About German nurses, Benn-Rohloff (1997: 340) comments: "Compared with the industrial sector, it is almost impossible to hurt the employers financially, because most hospitals are directly or indirectly owned by the Government. Therefore, to win a strike it is necessary to have public opinion on one's side and involve the public in raising the pressure." Benn-Rohloff, N. Strikes - an appropriate action for health care employees? A personal perspective. *Nursing Ethics*, vol. 4, no. 4, 1997, p. 340.

<sup>108</sup> O'Brien, T. Targeting Tories: How the Nova Scotia nurses won. *Our Times*, vol. 21, no. 3, 2002, p. 28.

<sup>109</sup> The poll was conducted for Sympatico / MSN by Ipsos Reid. <http://www.marketwire.com/press-release/Canada-Speaks-When-it-Comes-to-Professions-Whom-do-we-Trust-631793.htm>



2009 poll found that three out of four Canadians would choose increasing the number of nurses over a tax cut. The majority also opposed government increasing the number of patients nurses must care for.<sup>110</sup>

The convergence of professionalism, concerns about the public interest and broad-based campaigns by and for nurses, have created the conditions for strong public support of nurses when they go on strike. For example, during the 1988 UK nurses' strike, in a national public opinion poll, 85 percent supported a substantial pay increase for nurses, and a majority supported nurses striking for more pay. "Encouraged by the 'strength of feeling' and 'tremendous public support' ... the health service unions planned ... a national day of demonstrations ... Between 43,000 and 100,000 people marched together in London, with 50,000 in Glasgow, and large numbers elsewhere."<sup>111</sup> During the 2007 Fiji nurses' strike, the Fiji Women's Rights Movement asked "the country to support its striking nurses ... nurses provide an invaluable service for Fiji's people, but are underpaid and undervalued."<sup>112</sup>

Perhaps the longest sustained struggle of nurses occurred in Japan – an intensive campaign by Japan Federation of Medical Workers Unions (Nihon Iroren) called the "Nurse Wave". It began in 1989 and lasted for three years. The nurses' demands included an increase in "the numbers of nursing staff, the regulation of night shifts, the implementation of a five-day working week everywhere, a fair appraisal of nurses' work, and better vocational training." The campaign "combined the movement for better working conditions and status of nurses, and the public movement for better health care, [and] gained increasing popular support and spread nationwide."

During the first year of the struggle, street demonstrations and rallies by nurses dressed in white were staged ... In the third year ... the movement shifted its focus to the demand for ... a national policy for increasing the numbers of nursing personnel ... Within 10 months, 5,400,000 signatures were gathered within the country. After three years of campaigning, they won the

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<sup>110</sup> Canadians want government to address nursing shortage, health care, in these tough economic times, new poll finds. *Reuters*, 8 June 2009. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2009/06/08/idUS68607+08-Jun-2009+MW20090608>

<sup>111</sup> Hayward and Fee, *Op. Cit.*, p. 404.

<sup>112</sup> Fiji women's rights movement supports striking nurses. *Radio New Zealand International*, July 25, 2007  
<http://seachange.wbumpus.com/node/11583>

enactment of a law for securing sufficient numbers of nursing personnel.<sup>113</sup>

And even when nurses went on strike illegally or broke the law in other ways, public support has remained resilient, and sometimes even passionate. The lengthy illegal strike by Québec nurses in 1999 garnered massive support from the public, 72 percent of whom thought the nurses' wage demands reasonable.<sup>114</sup> "Unable to bring the nurses to heel with the existing legislation, the Parti Québécois government ... removed the right to strike entirely and upped the penalties. But union members continued their walkout, to an outpouring of public sympathy, including polls showing majority public support and 120,000 signatures on a petition."<sup>115</sup> In the 2001 Nova Scotia protest, "Two hundred nurses were defying the government and breaking the law. They were sitting in the middle of the busiest Halifax intersection. Traffic was backed up for blocks. The bus driver at the head of the jam wasn't moving: 'I'm in a union too,' he said. No passengers complained. The folks on the sidewalks cheered. The cops just stood back and watched."<sup>116</sup>

In 2007, Poland witnessed a major social protest in healthcare, involving both doctors and nurses, the latter of whom were demanding a substantial pay rise. Following a refusal by the Prime Minister to meet with nurses' representatives, four nurses launched an eight day sit-in protest. Outside, a large number of nurses camped out for four weeks in what came to be known as the "white village" protest which "attracted widespread media and public attention."<sup>117</sup> One poll found 75 percent of the population supported the demands of the nurses and doctors. "Nurses at the protest camp reported complete strangers coming to bring them food and beverages. When the police moved in to forcibly break up a protest by nurses,

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<sup>113</sup> Katsuragi, Op. Cit., p. 316-17.

<sup>114</sup> *Globe and Mail*, 28 June 1999.

<sup>115</sup> Haiven, L. and Haiven, J. The right to strike and the provision of emergency services in Canadian health care. Report from Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. Ottawa, 2002, p. 7. <http://www.policyalternatives.ca/publications/reports/right-strike-and-provision-emergency-services-canadian-health-care>

<sup>116</sup> Hambling, S. Hearts and minds: A response to Tom O'Brien's "Targeting Tories" article. *Our Times*, vol. 21, no. 4, 2002, p. 12.

<sup>117</sup> Czarzasty, J. Pay disputes in public health sector escalate. 20 August 2007. The European Industrial Relations Observatory EIRO Online. <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/eiro/2007/07/articles/pl0707019i.htm>

thousands of miners and railway workers spontaneously traveled to Warsaw to protect the nurses against police brutality.”<sup>118</sup>

Punitive measures by governments have often increased public support for nurses. For example, in 1988 when more than 11,000 staff nurses in Alberta went on illegal strike for 19 days, public support for nurses increased concomitantly with punitive measures against the nurses.<sup>119</sup> And many strike narratives specifically point to the strength of public support as critical to the success of the strike. For example, the 1988 strike in Saskatchewan received extensive public support, and speculation suggested that this support prevented government intervention.<sup>120</sup> A study of media and public opinion on the Finnish nurses’ struggle in 2007 (based on the mass resignation of 16,000 number of nurses) concluded:

In taking extreme industrial action to fight for their working conditions, nurses are positioned as going over and beyond their duties by risking their own employment for the development of the healthcare sector at large... [N]urses are positioned as heroic reformers serving the interests of citizens.<sup>121</sup>

Furthermore, unlike the widespread attacks on public sector wages, public support for paying nurses a fair wage is significant. During the 2001 Nova Scotia nurses’ struggle, Ipsos-Reid, the pollster for the *Globe and Mail* found that “78 percent of Nova Scotians said that the nurses were being more fair and reasonable than the government. 86 percent opposed forced overtime. 73 percent said nurses were not paid enough ... More than six in ten said that they would rather boost nurses’ pay and benefits than have the government’s promised tax cut.”<sup>122</sup>

Undoubtedly nurses have been noteworthy, perhaps even remarkable, in their capacity to mobilize public support, and to build coalitions across unions, sectors, with the community and progressive movements. In the discursive struggle over the advocacy of the public interest, evidence of public support for and public trust in nurses suggests that they have been quite successful advocates.

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<sup>118</sup> Heuser, M. The way forward in the Polish doctors and nurses strike. *World Socialist Web Site*, 19 July 2007. <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2007/jul2007/pola-j19.shtml>

<sup>119</sup> Haiven, 1991, Op. Cit., p. 14. see also Coulter, Op. Cit.

<sup>120</sup> Haiven, 1991, Op. Cit., p. 17.

<sup>121</sup> Henttonen, et. al, Op. Cit., p. 13.

<sup>122</sup> O’Brien, Op. Cit., p. 25.

Not only have nurses used strikes as vehicle for defending patient care but also broad-based and on-going campaigns which may well help to explain public support for nurses when they do go on strike. For example, National Nurses United (NNU), the largest union of registered nurses in the United States has been instrumental in the campaign for a financial transaction tax (FTT), sometimes called the Robin Hood Tax. They were part of a four-continent contingent of nurses which joined marchers protesting G-20 austerity measures in France in November 2011. RoseAnn DeMoro, NNU executive director commented: "I'm incredibly proud of the nurses internationally for their global advocacy for their patients and society. The nurses don't ever give up on people and we won't give up on this cause." This action was a follow-up to a 60-city protest by US nurses in September 2011. In May 2012, nurses continued their rally for the Robin Hood Tax in Chicago as part of the protest at the Nato Security Alliance. This campaign is part of what the NNU calls "a main street contract for the American people" which seeks to counter the corporate agenda with union and community demands for job creation, guaranteed health care, secure retirements, and decent education.<sup>123</sup> "We see a better world is possible, and we know how to pay for it. Our way as patient advocates, as engaged community members, as global citizens is clear: organize, organize, organize."<sup>124</sup>

### Conclusion

This article has situated nurse militancy within the context of health care restructuring and neoliberalism, the gendered construction of nursing work, the feminization of union density and of strikes, and gendered militancy. The widespread mobilization of nurses and the discourses which frame this militancy support a claim for the politicization of caring, that is, a recognition of the collective responsibility for caring, and the impact of deteriorating conditions of nursing work on quality care; the rejection of essentialist claims that women are responsible for caring work by virtue of being women; the demand that the skills involved in caring work be recognized and rewarded; and the willingness to mobilise collectively to these ends.

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<sup>123</sup> Gaus, M. Nurses join international push for bank trade tax. *Labornotes*, 22 June 2011. <http://labornotes.org/2011/06/nurses-join-international-push-bank-trade-tax>

<sup>124</sup> <http://www.nationalnursesunited.org/pages/ncha>

Striking nurses have resisted austerity initiatives, called for the expansion of the collective bargaining agenda to take more account of patient care and safety, and organized co-ordinated action across many different workplaces. Gindin and Hurley point to government attempts to narrow the scope of collective bargaining, often by removing “wages and benefit improvements from negotiations”. They call for unions to respond by “expanding collective bargaining”: “What if public sector unions refused to settle collective agreements unless the settlements address the level, quality and administration of the services being provided?”<sup>125</sup> This article points to the fact that nurse militancy, in both private and public sectors, has taken this direction.

In his analysis of the struggle of Minnesota nurses, Rachleff pointed out: “In a pattern repeated again and again, unions have not sought to make substantial mutual relationships with the people who depend on the products and services that their members provide. This has, of course, made it easy for management, politicians and the media to depict union behavior as on a spectrum from ‘self-interested’ to ‘greedy’.”<sup>126</sup> However, he noted the way that the MNA [Minnesota Nurses Association] has challenged management prerogatives.

MNA's prioritization of patient/staffing and resistance to management's demand for the right to assign individual nurses to ‘float’--that is, to move from their specialty and job assignment into some other department--is an explicit challenge to ‘management prerogatives’. Nurses are claiming the right to a voice in how their labor is used, and they are seeking clear numbers and explicit contract language to protect that voice ... MNA ... has pursued this agenda in order to put patients before profits, thereby improving the quality of care. In doing so, they have sought to connect the nurses with the very people--patients, prospective patients, the families of patients--who are dependent upon the quality of that service, that professional care.<sup>127</sup>

Nurse militancy is part of a long tradition of union women's organizing and resistance, and evidence in this article suggests it offers potential to defend public services and protect workers' rights. This is not an insignificant contribution in the current austerity conjuncture in which public sector workers are targeted and communities under considerable

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<sup>125</sup> Gindin and Hurley, Op. Cit., p. 5-6.

<sup>126</sup> Rachleff, P. Minnesota nurses' Rx for Union Revival. *Socialistworker.org*, 2010. <http://socialistworker.org/print/2010/06/17/nurses-rx-for-union-revival>

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

attack from privatization and public-private partnerships, deep cuts to social services and health care, and the invocation of individual responsibility and the concomitant muting, if not elimination, of the concept of “the public good”.<sup>128</sup> Nurse militancy also challenges the marginalization and increasing criminalization of protest. In its capacity to build public support, nursing militancy helps to mainstream and legitimize militancy itself.

I would like to thank Rachel Hurst for her work in the newspaper archives, and Kristine Klement whose work on the HRSDC data has been invaluable. This research was partly funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) and the Faculty of Arts at York University.

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<sup>128</sup> Martinez, E. and García, A. What is "Neo-liberalism? A brief definition. 26 February 2000. <http://www.globalexchange.org/campaigns/econ101/neoliberalDefined.html>

## **Energy workers against Thatcherite neoliberalism. Scottish coalminers and North Sea offshore workers: revisiting the class struggle in the UK in the 1980s**

*Terry Brotherstone*

**I** This essay revisits two important British workers' struggles that took place in the decade of the neoliberal Conservative governments of Margaret Thatcher: the coalminers' strike of 1984-5 and the offshore oil workers' industrial actions of 1989-90. Both involved energy workers, and – in the particular cases I examine – were based in Scotland. And both, in their different ways, still resonate today. This is particularly true, I argue, if the study of these events is understood as part of a critical discourse about the UK's neoliberal project and the collapse of its triumphalist phase in the global financial crisis that began in 2007-8; and if it is inspired by the need to recover, through critique rather than uncritical celebration, the sense of practical relevance and political optimism that underpinned the development of British labour history in the 1960s.

My linking of these two episodes in the class struggles during Britain in the socially divided 1980s is in part influenced by personal experience.<sup>1</sup> The offshore workers' onshore strike headquarters was in Aberdeen – Scotland's most remote major city, situated on the North Sea littoral – where I was lecturing in history at the UK's fifth oldest university. I knew a number of the strikers personally and was in contact with them regularly

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<sup>1</sup> My interest in labour history began with research on the early twentieth-century labour militancy in Scotland ("Red Clydeside"). My experience in the labour movement includes a lay leadership role in the University and College Union Scotland (UCUS) and a brief spell on the General Council of the Scottish Trades Union Congress.

during their industrial action, contributing reports to a workers' newspaper. Several years earlier, as an occasional correspondent for a different paper,<sup>2</sup> I had reported when possible from the Scottish coalfield during the long and heroic miners' strike and gained the confidence of a number of rank-and-file militants. I have maintained contact with workers from both struggles and remain struck by the miners' conviction that the version of their strike that has entered the mainstream historical narrative corresponds only tangentially to their memory of what they did and why they did it, and provides an inadequate basis for others to learn the lessons of their defeat; and by the offshore workers' perception that the virtual absence of their action (which also failed to achieve its main objective) from the history that has since been being written is, likewise, damaging to a politically intelligent analysis of the Thatcher years.

My argument about the miners' strike against pit closures – that, although the headlines of the story are well-known, it is overdue for re-interpretation and that the story of the strike in the often overlooked Scottish coalfield provides an important starting-point – is less challenging now that when Simon Pirani and I advanced it at the time of the twentieth anniversary.<sup>3</sup> I refer below to a timely article by Jim Phillips opening up a new phase in research on the strike in Scotland, now followed by his monograph, *Collieries, Communities and the Miners' Strike in Scotland ...* – which however appeared too late to be fully considered in this essay. Phillips shows the value of incorporating careful empirical work on the Scottish coalfield into analysis of the strike as a whole. While he remains unconvinced by the Brotherstone-Pirani critique of the leadership of the Communist Party of the strike in Scotland, his is an important contribution, which deserves – along with his earlier book about the 1970s<sup>4</sup> – to inspire a

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<sup>2</sup> The papers were *NewsLine* and then *Workers Press* (which ran from 1985 to 1996).

<sup>3</sup> Brotherstone, T. and Pirani, S. "Were There Alternatives?: movements from below in the Scottish coalfield, 1981-1985". *Critique*, nos. 36-37, Glasgow, 2005. For recent work on the miners' strike, see references in Phillips, J. "Collieries and Communities: the miners' strike in Scotland, 1984-1985", *Scottish Labour History*, vol. 45 (2010) and more recently in his *Collieries, Communities and the Miners' Strike in Scotland, 1984-85*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012. Taylor, A. *The NUM and British Politics, Vol. II, 1969-1995*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005 offers a narrative stressing regional diversity, but its focus is on the high politics of the NUM and its relations with the state. The most recent general account, although it is not without some new material, sticks to the conventional thesis criticised below: see Beckett, F. and Hencke, M. *Marching to the Fault Line: the 1984 miners' strike and the death of industrial Britain*. London: Constable, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Phillips, J. *The Industrial Politics of Devolution*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007.



new discourse about class struggle in Scotland's recent history.<sup>5</sup> And the miners' strike, decisive though it was, was not the endpoint it sometimes appears as in the literature. Such a discourse needs to encompass, amongst other lesser known struggles, the later offshore oil workers' campaign for trade-union recognition and enforceable safety standards – drawing it out from the specialist literature and locating it within the mainstream of historical interpretation.<sup>6</sup>

## II

That “the Thatcher years” were a key period in the contemporary history of Britain is uncontroversial. A form of social-democratic “consensus” had underpinned national politics since the establishment of the welfare state in the latter 1940s and provided the logic for Labour governments to return to office in 1964, 1966 and again (twice) in 1974 – after, from 1970 to 1974, a highly problematic Conservative interlude under Edward Heath, whose attempts to bring the trade unions under greater legislative control ended with defeat in a general election the prime minister called in an unsuccessful attempt to mobilise public support in his government's battle against striking mineworkers. The ensuing Labour governments, first under Harold Wilson and then (from 1976) James Callaghan, temporarily stabilised relations with the trade unions through a series of agreements with their major leaders. But the government's acceptance, late in 1976, of an International Monetary Fund loan conditional on public-spending cuts led to a resurgence of the labour militancy that had played a major part in defeating Heath, and, in effect, marked the end of the post-war, welfarist consensus.

The discovery of oil in the North Sea in 1969 and the encouragement to produce it rapidly engendered by the world oil-price crisis of 1973

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<sup>5</sup> Interest in contemporary Scottish history is currently substantially inspired by the politics of parliamentary devolution (a Scottish parliament and government with authority over most domestic policies was established in 1999) and independence from the UK (a question to be decided by a referendum in 2014). There tends to be an interpretative overemphasis on re-emergent “national identity”, to which Phillips' class-focused approach provides a useful, less inward-looking counterpoint.

<sup>6</sup> For offshore actions in the North Sea, see particularly Woolfson, C., Foster, J. and Beck, M. *Paying for the Piper: capital and labour in Britain's offshore oil industry*. London: Mansell, 1996 and Gourlay, D. *Industrial Relations in the Offshore Oil and Gas Industry 1965-1995*. Unpublished PhD thesis, the Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen, 1998. I am grateful to Dr. Gourlay for the loan of his thesis and other papers and encouragement to quote from his work.

seemed to offer the possibility of revenues that could finance social-democratic renewal; but in the event, the oil came substantially on stream only after the 1979 election that brought Thatcher to office. Rather than being devoted to industrial and social renewal, the oil revenues helped to sustain the first Thatcher government as it felt its way towards the implementation of a full-blown neoliberal agenda as its prescription for reversing national “decline”. From being a model of a capitalist society sustained by welfarist social democracy, Britain became the western European pioneer of aggressive neoliberalism.

The oil revenues, I have argued elsewhere, played a key part in this process.<sup>7</sup> Without this “windfall”,<sup>8</sup> the Thatcher governments’ programme of “liberalisation” of the financial sector, industrial closures, privatisation, and attacks on trade unions – involving mass unemployment, the destruction of working-class communities and declining relative (and for many absolute) living standards – would have been very much harder to proceed with even than it was. In the early 1980s, oil revenues were almost exactly commensurate with the burgeoning social security bill.<sup>9</sup> Yet the importance of North Sea oil – while it of course features in specialist economic histories – remains largely absent from the narrative of contemporary British history currently being established. In Jackson and Saunders’ recent, and much-praised essay-collection, *Making Thatcher’s Britain*,<sup>10</sup> “North Sea Oil” is indexed only three times, the most substantial reference, ironically, being to the observation that “as Andrew Marr has noted, [Thatcher] barely mentioned North Sea oil in her memoirs”!<sup>11</sup> Jackson and Saunders (and their fellow-authors) are far from alone amongst historians of contemporary Britain in following Thatcher’s example and passing over in virtual silence this key element in the story of Thatcherism’s origins and thereby drawing attention away from the stories of the workers who, inadvertently, helped

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<sup>7</sup> Brotherstone, T. “A Contribution to the Critique of Post-Imperial British History: North Sea oil, Scottish nationalism and Thatcherite neoliberalism”. In: McNeish, J-A. and Logan, O. eds., *Flammable Societies: studies on the socio-economics of oil and gas*. London: Pluto Press, 2012, p. 70-97.

<sup>8</sup> “Wasted Windfall” was the title of a British Channel 4 TV series about UK North Sea oil in 1994, with an accompanying book also with a disillusioned title: Harvie, C. *Fool’s Gold: the history of North Sea oil*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1994.

<sup>9</sup> Brotherstone. ‘A Contribution ...’, Op.Cit., p. 82.

<sup>10</sup> Jackson, B. and Saunders, R. *Making Thatcher’s Britain*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40; Marr, A. *A History of Modern Britain*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2008, p. 435. On p. 210 of the former there is a brief reference to Henry Kissinger’s view that North Sea oil was all that stood between the UK and terminal stagnation; but it is not followed up.

made her project viable – and then had to fight a bitter struggle against the anti-union outlook that was fundamental to it.

All this leads me to think that there is a more-than-usually sharp contradiction between how rank-and-file participants understand their involvement in the miners' strike and the offshore workers' action and the way historians are now interpreting them; and this idea also underpins the decision to look at them in tandem, and within a Scottish frame. For me, it is an important opportunity to revisit recent history, not just to ensure that the workers' story is told, but also to assess the part their perceptions can play in critiquing what is becoming the received version of recent history. The Establishment narrative of such events is often an apparently authoritatively documented, top-down account. It provides an important part of the story, but tends to rationalise what happened and close it off from the challenge of memory, which is often raw and imperfect but which is also indispensable if the object is to draw political lessons from those who fought for a different outcome. Thatcher's notorious slogan, "There is no alternative" (to neoliberalism) – even when it is criticised as underpinning harsh and socially destructive policies – has, in essence, been widely accepted by historians who see their task as to explain developments from the standpoint of when they occurred rather than to produce a theoretically-informed critique with the benefit of hindsight. But hindsight – with due respect to the often-expressed opinion of archive-bound historians – *is* a benefit; and the history of 1980s Britain and the triumph of Thatcherite dogma looks very (and importantly) different in the aftermath of the explosion of the financial crisis at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Some of the evidence in what follows, particularly with regard to the offshore workers' actions, derives from my involvement in a major exercise in oral history, the Aberdeen University's *Lives in the [UK North Sea] Oil Industry* archival project.<sup>12</sup> The theoretical discourse that has in recent years taken oral history from a documentary focus on "filling in the gaps" that conventional evidence-gathering leaves, to one of interrogating the role of memory in penetrating more acutely into the *significance* of "what actually

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<sup>12</sup> For the Aberdeen University research project to which this essay is in part a small contribution, see Brotherstone, T. and Manson, H. "North Sea Oil, its Narratives and its History: an archive of oral documentation and the making of contemporary Britain", *Northern Scotland*, vol. 27 (2007), p. 15-44. This describes the *Lives in the Oil Industry* oral-history archive, available in Aberdeen and at the British Library in London, which contains many interviews of relevance to the history of labour in UK offshore oil and gas.

happened” convinces me that the time is ripe for a critical revisiting of 1960s “history from below”.

In its origins, in the 1970s, modern oral history was closely associated with the boom in labour history that had begun a decade or so earlier, but, as the political certainties of that period dissolved in the 1980s and later, the two disciplines increasingly separated – the latter in decline, the former (quantitatively at least) on the upsurge. In the 1960s and 1970s, the central subject of British labour history seemed obvious – the documentation of the evolution, and struggles, of an industrial working class which was the force holding the socialist future in its grasp and which had to be made conscious of its power. Oral documentation could assist in creating a class history to contribute to that consciousness. Since the deindustrialisation, and defeats, of the Thatcher years, however, it has become clear that history, and historical theory, have to engage not simply with the working class as it had come to be in the third quarter of the twentieth century but with how, in its external character at least, it has changed. If it remains – as the Marxist political philosopher István Mészáros (to whose work I return briefly in conclusion) argues – the structural antagonist of capital and the essential agent of transformational social transition “beyond capital”, the task confronting socialist historians must be to grapple with this change.<sup>13</sup> A remarriage of labour and oral history should play its part in furnishing the method through which the struggles of the past generation or two can be re-analysed in a way that the participants in them can tell their stories usefully in the greatly changed – and changing – circumstances of today.

This argument is not made in a vacuum. There is a demand for new thinking about history from a class standpoint – certainly from outside, or the fringes of, the Academy. In Britain the campaigners Iles and Roberts have called for the critical re-examination and revival of the “history from below” that achieved much in the 1960s and 1970s before arguably running into the academic sands. They conclude their *All Knees and Elbows of*

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<sup>13</sup> Particularly relevant to a theoretically informed rethinking of contemporary history is Mészáros, I. “The Rise and Fall of Historical Temporality”. In: Brotherstone, T. and Pilling, G. (eds.), *History, Economic History and the Future of Marxism: essays in memory of Tom Kemp (1921-1993)*. London: Porcupine Press, 1996, p. 251-92, recontextualised in his *Social Structure and Forms of Consciousness* (2 vols.) New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010, 2011), vol. I, chap. 5. For the totality of Mészáros’s project in the refoundation of Marxism – including historical materialism – see his series of major works that begins with *The Power of Ideology*. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989 and *Beyond Capital: towards a theory of transition*. London: Merlin Press, 1995.

*Susceptibility and Refusal*, a stimulating critique of some of historiographical issues addressed by past exponents of this approach with the observation that:

To submerge oneself in historical material is to raise the prospect of one's own confrontation with the forces of the present, and work through its contradictions beyond the limited scope of a book. History from below cannot rest peacefully on its achievements, but must be disinterred, exposed to new perspectives and pored over again and again, finding new readers and new forms of activation according to the demands of the present and future. Re-reading the past opens previous struggles to contingency, and this in turn animates the forms of contingency available to the present.<sup>14</sup>

And the journalist Paul Mason's *Live Working or Die Fighting*, I have suggested elsewhere,<sup>15</sup> also foreshadows a resurgent, globally engaged, labour history, concerned to rethink the continuities that make the working class an international class and in analysing what is new about the class now in the much-changed global economy. Mason argues that, in Europe's Welfare-State period, consciousness of the labour history that made welfarist "socialism" possible has been all but eliminated. Since that welfare-based social settlement now faces brutal destruction, this surely implies that the generation of a new mass, historically-literate, socialist consciousness, not simply to defend past gains, but to assist in actualising humanity's immanent historical need for radical social transformation, is urgently required.

Mason's comments on the school of labour history inspired by "the British Marxist Historians", particularly E. P. Thompson, and their social-democrat colleagues like Asa Briggs, are provocatively relevant to a discussion between academic labour historians and labour-movement activists. The "'official' labour history" in place at the end of World War II, he writes, was essentially "devoted to rationalising the deal made in 1945 between employers and workers on both sides of the Iron Curtain".

Only at the edges did academics begin chipping away at the monolith. Edward Thompson's *Making of the English Working*

<sup>14</sup> Iles, A. and Roberts, T. *All Knees and Elbows of Susceptibility and Refusal: reading history from below*. Glasgow: The Strickland Distribution with Transmission Gallery and Mute, 2012.

<sup>15</sup> Brotherstone, T. "Labour History Resurgent?". *Variant* (Glasgow), no. 33, Winter, 2008, pp. 6-7.

*Class* initiated a school of labour history based on the micro-story, not the macro-narrative. Much of the insight we now have into the Bund, French syndicalism and Chinese workers in the 1920s [all subjects visited by Mason in his own book from the standpoint of their relevance today] comes from work by scholars following Thompson's approach. But in this 'new' labour history what gets lost is often story and significance. In reaction to the narratives superimposed on facts by Moscow, modern academics tend to avoid 'big truths' within the life stories of those they have rescued from oblivion.<sup>16</sup>

Academic historians in the UK interested in labour movements – though often politically committed – usually write as though they see their role *as historians* simply to describe, explain and analyse what is done to workers and what they do, while the workers' part is to do and be done to. But the new crisis of the twenty-first century calls for a labour history, still based on the conviction that class struggle remains central to social progress, but recognising that the working class has changed profoundly as a consequence of capitalist globalisation. Much that once seemed comprehensible (and of practical political value) when studied within a national framework, now requires to be understood as part of an international process, as part of the making of an international class. It is a transition neatly symbolised within British labour history by the way in which, in the 1980s, the methods of class struggle traditionally located within the quintessentially nineteenth-century energy industry – coal – were passed on to those producing the global fuel of the twentieth – oil.

### III

The miners' strike is conventionally described as a titanic struggle between the neoliberal Thatcher and her socialist antagonist, NUM President Arthur Scargill. This approach can make Scargill's self-centred obduracy the main question, drawing attention away from the bigger story of the part played by the defeat of the miners' union in the onward march of neoliberalism and in the conversion of the leadership of the Labour Party to the neoliberal cause (a process culminating, from 1997 to 2010, in Tony Blair's and Gordon Brown's "New Labour" governments). Serious socialist historians, on the other hand, can only despair at the failure of the

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<sup>16</sup> Mason, *Live Working ...*, Op.Cit. p. 297.

undoubtedly courageous (and at the time hero-worshipped) miners' leader subsequently to reflect critically on one of the most momentous struggles in British labour history. His reiterated complaints of unfair and illegal attacks by the state and betrayal by other labour leaders, however justified, were to become increasingly barren. But other less prominent figures have been forced to rethink the lessons of the defeat not simply as an abstract question, but within the context of the very concrete reality of their changed lives.

Study of the reality of the strike from a rank-and-file point of view – in this case one taking the Scottish coalfield as its empirical base – can help shift the focus of historical discourse.<sup>17</sup> And going on to look at the later industrial action by UK offshore workers allows us to see a very different labour force – also in energy but in the globalised, twentieth-century, oil industry – wrestling in new ways with essentially similar problems born of the new, but still only dimly perceived, period capitalism had entered. In the offshore case there were limited gains; but little progress towards the main aim, which was to break the culture of anti-unionism in an industry that it was thought could have funded national socio-economic revival.

Phillips' work, now fleshed out and developed in *Collieries, Communities and the Miners' Strike in Scotland ...*, argues for a focus “on the manner in which [the strike] originated in pit-level tensions and [on] the different pattern of colliery and community factors that produced variable degrees of strike commitment across the Scottish coalfield”.<sup>18</sup> The study of the (relatively small) Scottish coalfield, giving full weight to a rank-and-file perspective, he shows, can afford a counterpoint to the high-politics, UK, view of the strike. This tends to view the strike primarily as a heroic battle lost by the NUM because the government's ruthless use of state power and propaganda, though it often alienated middle opinion, ultimately prevailed over Scargill's flawed tactics, which allowed the action to be portrayed as undemocratic and too political.<sup>19</sup>

As Phillips writes, such an approach can obscure the “course and character of the actual events”.<sup>20</sup> Viewed from Scotland, it can be argued that the miners' strike did not begin in Yorkshire in March 1984 – as conventional accounts have it – but as early as Christmas 1982 when there

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<sup>17</sup> For my earlier thoughts on this and the relevance of Scottish-based offshore workers to it, see my “Neither Parochial nor Soothing: Aberdeen and the future of labour history”. In: Brotherstone, T. and Withrington, D.J. eds., *The City and Its Worlds: aspects of Aberdeen's history since 1792*. Glasgow: Crithne, 1996.

<sup>18</sup> Phillips, ‘Collieries and Communities ...’, Op.Cit. p. 31.

<sup>19</sup> e.g. Beckett and Hencke, *Marching ...*Op.Cit.

<sup>20</sup> Phillips, ‘Collieries and Communities ...’, Op.Cit. p. 20.

was a seven-day sit-in at Kinneil colliery, a few miles west of Edinburgh on the Forth estuary. In July 1983, came a lock-out, unprecedented since World War II, at Polmaise, a mid-Scotland, Stirlingshire pit (then, on the edge of the small community of Fallin, the only remaining village pit) against the Coal Board's breach of an agreement concerning the transfer of miners from another pit resisting closure – with ongoing action against the victimisation of union officials. In September, a seven-week strike against management harassment at Monktonhall, a modernised colliery on the outskirts of Edinburgh, began. In December, the announced closure of Polmaise met with resistance, endorsed by the NUM Scottish Executive on January 23, 1984. The flooding of Bogside (West Fife), despite NUM offers to provide safety cover during a national overtime ban, heightened tension between the Scottish miners' leadership and the threatened members, who feared that their fight against closure would be downplayed as they believed had happened at Kinneil. At a pit delegates' conference in Edinburgh on February 13, the Polmaise and Bogside branches (the latter now represented by a Communist Party member opposing his own party's bigwigs in the Scottish NUM leadership) moved for a Scotland-wide strike. The conference broke up in disorder when the best-known and most respected of all the CP leaders, Scottish NUM President Mick McGahey, tried to limit the demand to a one-day protest.<sup>21</sup>

There are at least two reasons for looking on at least some of these events as part of the national industrial action rather than simply background to it. First, the Communist-Party-led Scottish NUM leadership was under constant pressure from miners' branches to call Scotland-wide action and campaign for a UK strike against closures, but, no doubt fearing they might be unable to mobilise sufficient support, thought it expedient to try to hold such action back until the lead came from a major coalfield south of the border, probably Yorkshire.<sup>22</sup> And, second, that by early 1984, clashes between industrial militants and aggressive local managers meant that, when the national strike proper began with the NUM Executive's endorsement of area actions in March, more than half of the 14,000 miners in Scotland were already on strike, or in disputes additional to their participation in a UK-wide overtime ban. This calls into question the approach of historians who

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<sup>21</sup> For further documentation for this section, see Brotherstone and Pirani, 'Were there alternatives? ...' Op.Cit.

<sup>22</sup> Phillips, who interviewed a number of former Communist Party members for his book, does not follow the critique implied here and made in Brotherstone and Pirani, "Were there alternatives ...?" Op.Cit. There is scope for more work on this issue if understanding of the political insights to be gained from the defeat of the miners is to be further enhanced.



suggest that Scargill himself called the strike, wilfully refusing a national ballot. There is ample anecdotal evidence – and Phillips deals with this in some scholarly detail – that a ballot would have been seen as a betrayal of those already acting over issues that had been building up over two years, and not only in Scotland: there was also widespread anxiety in threatened coalfields that those in areas that believed their pits secure (wrongly as it was to turn out in the medium term) might be allowed to “ballot” others out of a job without a struggle.<sup>23</sup>

Starting from a rank-and-file standpoint leads to a narrative in which the national strike and its conduct were products of pent-up pressure to which Scargill and his co-thinkers were struggling to respond, rather than of ill-considered and politically inspired leadership militancy. Of course Scargill’s response was conditioned by his belief that militant leadership (especially his own) could inspire British workers to bring down a Conservative government as they had in 1974, when a miners’ strike – during which Scargill first came to national attention – helped provoke the general election Heath failed to win. But the leadership of the British trade-union movement (including those influenced by the now-divided Communist Party: Scargill was close to the pro-Moscow wing, while McGahey was a leader of the “Euros”) remained immersed in welfare-statist social democracy and was ill-equipped theoretically to understand the profoundly destructive change in capitalist political economy taking place.

In 1974 the global neoliberal wave had yet to gather force, making the election of a Labour government – albeit one lacking anything like the programme of its 1945 or even 1964 predecessors – a credible social-democratic alternative, which, with the support of trade-union leaders, could paper over cracks in social control. By the mid-1980s, with social democracy deeply divided and its dominant wing hesitatingly resetting its compass in the neoliberal direction, that had changed. The miners’ action, which Scargill wanted but did not originate, put on the agenda the need for new theoretical thought, which neither he nor other social democratic and “Communist” labour leaders were equipped to initiate. In their defeat, despite the heroic determination of their struggle, the miners placed on those revisiting the story of the strike, the obligation, not to indulge in what-might-have-beens, but to dig much deeper into what these events meant for understanding the period of history in which they took place.

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<sup>23</sup> Phillips, *Collieries, communities ...*, Op.Cit. pp. 3-6, 9, 62, 73-4, 83-4, 103, 144-5, 154, 172-3.

#### IV

The action of UK offshore workers in 1989-90 following the Piper Alpha disaster of 1988 in the North Sea, in which 167 men died – has, as I have argued, yet to enter the general historical narrative of the Thatcher years.<sup>24</sup> At the centre of the story is the establishment of a new organisation, the Offshore Industry Liaison Committee (OILC).<sup>25</sup> Its origins lay in a perceived imperative to create a body that would mount more effective opposition to anti-union employers than the official trade unions, and its focus was on the need for action on the safety regime.

The most decisive impact of North Sea oil on the British economy had come in the early 1980s when its revenues, it is widely accepted (though not by most Thatcherite politicians) made a vital contribution to funding the Thatcher governments' early economic reforms – on the basis of which their neoliberal programme was launched.<sup>26</sup> Previously, the 1970-74 Conservative government (particularly in the wake of the 1973 oil-price crisis) had encouraged rapid exploitation of the resource, which, in the light of the state of British industry, meant the granting of licences to multinational corporations with “American” attitudes to industrial relations. Only minor social-democratic adjustments to this trajectory were made by the Labour governments of the later 1970s, even when (from 1975) the leftwing Tony Benn was Energy Secretary and aspiring to a greater degree of state control.<sup>27</sup> Anti-union attitudes prevailed, dovetailing with (and encouraged by) the prejudices of the Thatcher government elected after the 1978-79 trade-union actions referred to as “the winter of discontent”.<sup>28</sup> Safety – to which legally-secure trade-union representation could have contributed substantially – was a secondary consideration.

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<sup>24</sup> This section of the essay draws on Woolfson, Foster and Beck, *Paying for the Piper*, Op.Cit. and Gourlay, “Industrial Relations ...”, Op.Cit. There is now also a two-volume history – by an economist – of the UK North Sea oil and gas industry: see Kemp, A. *The Official History of UK North Sea Oil and Gas*. London: Routledge, 2011.

<sup>25</sup> Gourlay shows that the name originated from the initial relationship between the official unions and the rank-and-file movement, and reflected the fact that the union officials thought they could make use of such an arms-length ‘liaison committee’. But in so far as OILC was the creation of the official unions it was soon to turn, for them, into something of a Frankenstein’s monster.

<sup>26</sup> See Brotherstone and Manson, ‘North Sea oil ...’, Op.Cit. esp. section 3.

<sup>27</sup> Information from participants in the author’s files.

<sup>28</sup> For the “Winter of Discontent” refers to the spate of public service strikes in 1978-9, vilified in the popular press, which played a major part in the rhetoric of 1979 Conservative election campaign.

At the first landing ceremony for UK oil in mid-1975, Caroline Benn, the Energy Secretary's wife, clashed with the owner of the Texas-based company responsible, Frederic Hamilton, because he would not even discuss her anxiety about the lives lost in the achievement: celebrating the economic benefits oil offered; Hamilton was at a loss to understand what, to him, seemed a relatively trivial concern. And when Armand Hammer, owner of Occidental Oil, sensed the tremors on his Piper Alpha platform in the mid-1980s, he cheerfully interpreted them, not as danger signals, but as the rumbling of "those dollars flowing underneath": a few short years later the rig exploded in much the worst of many North Sea disasters.<sup>29</sup>

The various unions trying to organise offshore workers in difficult circumstances made worse by inter-union rivalries in a period of declining membership were, by the mid-1980s, threatening industrial action. The aim was to secure "post-construction" agreements for ongoing collective bargaining over the whole industry – with safety representatives free from the fear of being "NRB-ed" ("not required back", or sacked). But the employers, encouraged by the Thatcher governments' ongoing anti-union legislation, and strengthened by the decline in employment opportunities during a slump in 1986-87, remained intransigent. Trade-union successes in securing agreements of any sort were sporadic at best.

The Piper Alpha tragedy changed the terms of the discussion, not least between the workers and their official union leaders. Safety in the North Sea was for a while headline news. The unions had to increase the fight for meaningful agreements.<sup>30</sup> The employers' organisations continued to treat the union leaders as impotent, but underestimated the angry and aggressive fear gripping much of the workforce. This left open the door for the Offshore Industry Liaison Committee (OILC). Led initially by a militant with a facility for handling the media, Ronnie McDonald, it was at first privately encouraged by union officials trying to find a way round Thatcher's anti-union laws.<sup>31</sup> After Piper Alpha, a mass meeting on one installation where there were elected shop stewards pressed the unions to

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<sup>29</sup> See Brotherstone and Manson, 'North Sea Oil ...', Op.Cit. esp. pp. 34-6 and Brotherstone, "A Contribution to the Critique ..." Op.Cit.

<sup>30</sup> The collection of funds for the Piper Alpha bereaved highlighted further the demand for equality: shop stewards queried giving money to the Aberdeen Lord Provost's [mayor's] Disaster Fund, because it was dispersed regardless of whether or not families were entitled to death-in-service benefits.

<sup>31</sup> Earlier in the 1980s McDonald and others had been helped to form local groups, in Aberdeen and Glasgow, to facilitate union recruitment. A short-lived publication, "*Bear*" *Facts* was distributed to construction workers. See too the interview with McDonald in the *LOI* archive.

reject further short-term “hook-up” agreements that did not involve full recognition, and OILC – formed in February 1989 – was publicly launched on the first anniversary of the disaster, July 5 1989.

It supported several offshore “sit-ins” and held many onshore meetings leading to a “summer of discontent”, with action on many platforms and some rigs. The disparity in wages and conditions for the indirectly employed remained a major grievance. Some wage-and-conditions gains came, but in the form of “bribes” (as McDonald said) to head off trade unionism rather than steps to establishing it. One participant remembers workers “being aware that the oil companies were desperately trying to do what they could to avoid the strike” with offers of increased pay, improved pensions and even private healthcare.<sup>32</sup> But promises to facilitate platform ballots on union representation proved hollow. Marathon Oil UK resorted to legal action against the sit-ins, arguing that OILC (itself constituted to avoid anti-union legislation) was effectively acting as a proxy for the engineering union.

OILC’s aim was to transcend inter-union rivalry. It asserted its role as an organising body and, when industrial action petered out in late 1989, began to prepare for the following year. Its organisation was extended geographically. It established an HQ in Aberdeen, financed by voluntary contributions which also supported *Blowout*, a vigorous journal that echoed earlier militant workers’ newspapers rather than the staid trade-union magazines by then the norm.<sup>33</sup> A *One Union Discussion Document* stressed the need for unified action across the industry.

The main OILC-led action was in 1990. It is a reflection on the effect of the anti-union culture and difficulties of organising in the industry without a measure of employer and government support that this was the one year since the oil had come fully on stream that the oil companies in the UK sector of the North Sea faced concerted industrial unrest.<sup>34</sup> Rank-and-file pressure meant that the unions held back from concluding another unsatisfactory agreement, producing a hostile reaction from the employers, who cut off all consultation and almost certainly took steps to infiltrate OILC, now seen as the real voice of offshore workers.<sup>35</sup> Shell and BP,

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<sup>32</sup> Information from participants in the author’s files.

<sup>33</sup> See in particular the interview with Neil Rothnie, founding editor of *Blowout* in the *LOI* archive.

<sup>34</sup> This observation created an amazed reaction from some colleagues at the 2011 Lisbon conference. There have of course been other industrial actions, notably in the early years of the industry, but nothing comparable to the systematic campaign of 1989-90.

<sup>35</sup> See Gourlay’s thesis for this probability.

aware that Lord Cullen's enquiry into Piper Alpha, soon to be published,<sup>36</sup> would shine a light on the whole industry, including its industrial-relations culture, tried to head off action with wage increases and improved conditions for *all* offshore workers – forcing others to follow suit. The unions formed a National Offshore Committee (NOC) to work with OILC – a rare moment when there appeared to be the possibility of united action. A Continental Shelf agreement, not more money, was the issue. “Working to contract”, building towards strikes hitting the autumn maintenance programmes, was called for by OILC, with some thirty installations responding by June.

The success was limited. Some workers, lacking a tradition of solidarity, still feared reprisals or resented the loss of the earnings that had attracted them to the industry and to some extent blunted their opposition to unreasonable working conditions. Memories of the previous major action in the early days of the UK North Sea in 1978-9, which had resulted in considerable victimisations, weighed heavily in the calculations of some older workers: there was, participants remember, a perceptible generational split in levels of enthusiasm for action.<sup>37</sup> Employers delayed maintenance programmes – their moments of maximum vulnerability. Inter-union rivalry persisted. Militants wanted strikes rather than an overtime ban, especially when further fatal accidents, and the sacking of trade unionists for highlighting platform safety, drew attention again to the regime. The NOC's registration campaign with a view to official industrial action was met again with implacable employer opposition. OILC came under rank-and-file pressure to act; and the first twenty-four hour action was called, some argued prematurely, for August 2. Taken to court, OILC argued that the employers' case fell as it was based on a charge of trespass, a concept foreign to Scots law; and that the occupiers were in any case involved in an industrial dispute not a violation of property rights. The judgement was a compromise leading workers to claim a moral victory but also to the calling off of the sit-ins.

The intention here is not to retell the full story of the action, only to draw attention to the value of studying it, and thereby giving it a proper place in contemporary history. In the short term, the offshore workers' movement petered out; the Cullen Report on the Piper Alpha disaster led to some changes in the safety regime, soon perceived by many (especially in the light of the 1990s “Cost Reduction in the North Sea” programme) as

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<sup>36</sup> Lord [Douglas] Cullen, *The Public Inquiry into the Piper Alpha Disaster* (1990).

<sup>37</sup> Information from participants in the author's files.

more cosmetic than real;<sup>38</sup> and the trade union leaders cut OILC adrift, fearful that the tactic of using industrial action to pressurise the employers would backfire and that all negotiation might be terminated. Their leaders – notably the Communist Party former hero of the famous Upper Clyde Shipbuilders “work-in” of the early 1970s, Jimmy Airlie – now denounced OILC as a doomed challenge to “the official movement”.<sup>39</sup>

OILC survived, first as an independent, “unofficial” but legally registered organisation, and now as a section of the Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers Union (RMT). However one assesses that outcome (and it remained a subject of controversy amongst workers themselves) OILC created an important historical legacy through the surviving records of its early struggles and its debates about their lessons – notably in two publications, *Striking Out: New Directions for Offshore Workers and their Unions* (1991) and *The Crisis in Offshore Trade Unionism* (1992), in which McDonald and his colleagues assessed the lessons of the industrial action and set out to build a new union, and, even more interestingly, in the uninhibitedly democratic correspondence columns of the early issues of *Blowout*, put together by a very independently minded, politically aware editor.

## V

In conclusion, the twin narratives of strikes and conflict in this essay rest on three essential arguments. First, the Thatcher years are overdue for reinterpretation from the point of view of those who were on the receiving end of the social consequences of neoliberalism. The purpose is not simply to do retrospective justice to the defeated oppositions to Thatcher and Thatcherism, but to contribute to a more profound theoretical understanding of the period transcending the idea that – however brutal the policy may have been – “there [was] no alternative”. Nor is this relevant for a revived, politically conscious, historical agenda in Britain alone, since – as Naomi Klein has argued – it was the Thatcher project in the UK that made

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<sup>38</sup> See for example, Woolfson, C. “The Continuing Price of North Sea Oil: business organisation and risk transfer mechanisms in the North Sea petroleum industry”. In: Brannigan, A. and Pavlich, G. (eds.), *Governance and Regulation in Social Life: essays in honour of W. G. Carson*. Abingdon: Routledge-Cavendish, 2007.

<sup>39</sup> A biography of Jimmy Airlie (1936-97), co-leader of the 1971-2 Upper Clyde Shipbuilders work-in with the better known Jimmy Reid (1932-2010), would provide a fascinating case study of the role of Communist Party politics in the Scottish trade union movement in the second half of the twentieth century.

neoliberalism a practical proposition for Western democracies.<sup>40</sup> It was crucial to the new period of the globalisation of capital. Second is the need to respond to demands – most particularly from outside the Academy (including the surviving participants in the struggles of the 1980s) or writing on its fringes (for example Iles and Roberts, and Mason) – for a revival of “history from below” and for a twenty-first-century labour history not frozen in the assumptions of the 1960s. And finally, historical work of the sort I am arguing for has to re-engage both with a developing consciousness within the forces of potential transformational change today and with theoretical ideas that can most practically inform such consciousness.

The miners’ strike was not simply a catastrophic defeat marking the end of an era. The offshore workers were only one of a number of sections of the working class for whom militant struggle against the effects of Thatcherism continued. The immanent lessons of these events remain to be brought fully into daylight and into the consciousness of those grappling with the seemingly intransigent political problems of radical resistance to neoliberalism in the twenty-first century. If the miners’ strike foreshadowed the end of an era of traditional industrial struggle, it lives on in communal memory, most notably in NE England, where the annual Durham Miners’ Gala – in an area where there are now no miners – grows in popularity as a focus for working-class assertion. The neoliberal economy has been unable to replace the communal culture of a region of community pits; and it was the strike itself – sustained for a year by a social solidarity based on mutual support rather than commodity-exchange and money – that gave a small pointer to a real alternative future. Revisiting the strike as it was actually experienced by the rank-and-file opens up the possibility of contributing to new thinking about what is needed politically, not simply to resist capitalist destruction but to begin to contribute to a practical vision of a radically transformed future.

Some of those I knew during the offshore workers’ action thought that they had the opportunity to succeed where the miners, a few years earlier, had failed: coal, they thought, was a declining industry capitalist society could survive without, certainly in Britain, whereas oil was indispensable, giving oil-workers greater power. But they found that – while North Sea oil had indeed been essential in the early 1980s to the Thatcher project – the anti-union culture Thatcherism had assisted the offshore

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<sup>40</sup> Klein, N. *The Shock Doctrine: the rise of disaster capitalism*. London: Allen Lane, 2007. For a critical argument about the relevance of Klein’s chapter on the UK, see Brotherstone, “A Contribution to the Critique ...”, Op.Cit. p. 70-1, 83.

employers in the UK to embed could not be overcome by the old methods. There was a global industry, and while they were able to point to better-served countries, especially nearby Norway, and while they did secure some wage concessions, they could not achieve the more radical change in control over the industry and its safety culture that – especially after Piper Alpha – they demanded. As their action is rescued from the condescension (or deliberate Thatcherite ignorance) of posterity, the question needs to be asked: does the failure, at least in its strategic aim, of their struggle demonstrate that what was required was not more trade-union actions of the old type (though of course they will continue), but rather a rethinking of the nature of working-class action and organisation?

Both the miners' strike and the offshore workers' action involved more than the traditional, limited trade-union demands for improvements in wages and conditions.<sup>41</sup> They were, in their different ways, about the conditions of human life itself, the life of communities in the former case and of individuals at work in the latter. They faced a new phase in the history of capital and its socio-political hegemony, one at the time only dimly perceived, far less understood. They fought – courageously – as their traditions directed them to fight. But in failing they created the challenge, in a way no abstract theorising could do in itself, to rethink the point in history that had been arrived at, and how social opposition can be reconstructed in this new period in a way in which it can pass from, at best, temporarily successful defensive actions into an offensive that can point the way to radical social transformation.

The challenge facing trade unions today is now the subject of a growing literature, inspired by work such as Moody's *Workers in a Lean World* – a book productively read together with Mason's labour-history essays and Mészáros's historically-conscious political philosophy.<sup>42</sup> For Mészáros, the late 1960s and early 1970s mark the point at which the capitalist system entered a historic, structural crisis, qualitatively different

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<sup>41</sup> Carson pointed out that nineteenth-century factory legislation tended to take health and safety issues "out of the fraught ... arena of industrial conflict" into one of supposedly class-neutral state regulation; Woolfson et al. suggest that Piper Alpha was the moment at which, 'in the mass consciousness of the workforce, this artificial and ideologically-sustained separation evaporated ... The unofficial movement which was formed, partly in response to the tragedy, returned to elemental industrial demands which questioned the totality of the established workplace regime rather than seeking incremental gains.' Woolfson, Foster and Beck, *Paying for the Piper ...*, Op.Cit., Conclusion; Carson, W.G. *The Other Price of North Sea Oil: safety and control in the North Sea*. London: Robertson, 1981.

<sup>42</sup> Moody, Kim. *Workers in a Lean World: unions in the international economy*. London: Verso, 1997.



from the cyclical upturns and downturns capitalism had experienced before. This concept cannot be discussed in detail here, but it is, at the very least, particularly in the light of the post-2007/08 global crisis, a hypothesis historians who align themselves with Brecht in seeking to show that “what happens all the time is not natural” should regard as a challenge. And, facing up to the reality that this new period (however theorised) has given the lie to simplistic ideas about inexorable working-class progress from formation through trade-union consciousness to socialism, Moody both reasserts the importance of struggles such as those discussed in this essay and points towards trade unionism’s future.

The ups and downs of trade-union organization and conflict [he writes], along with other kinds of social struggle, are an important part of the history and development of any working class. In times and places where there is no mass socialist movement, these rudimentary forms of struggle are those that shape the thought of the most organized and active elements of the working class.<sup>43</sup>

But what is needed now are “social” or “community” unions, organised on the basis of human need defined beyond as well as within the workplace. And such ideas are even acquiring traction in practical trade-union discussion.<sup>44</sup>

Revisiting the problems of trade unionists in struggle during the years of neoliberal advance and trade-union decline is important for the development of this discourse. Trade unions – if they are not to be simply overtaken by different forms of working-class, and cross-class organisations – have, through struggle, to become vehicles for the development of mass socialist consciousness, without which the radical social transformation essential for humanity’s future cannot take place. I hope that a new labour history, focused on strikes and social conflicts, can make its contribution in a way that the labour history which inspired many scholars in the 1960s ultimately failed to do. I have tried to show that there are also important experiences in the recent British working class, which, studied critically

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 303.

<sup>44</sup> For the literature, see for example Tattersall, A. *Power in Coalition*. Ithica: Cornell University Press, 2010 and McBride, J. and Greenwood, I. (eds.), *Community Unions*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. Even from the conservative circles of the British TUC there has emerged Wright, Chris. *Swords of Justice and Civic Pillars: the case for greater engagement between British trade unions and community organisations*. London: Trades Union Congress, 2010. The major UNITE union has recently begun to recruit beyond the workplace.

from the point of view of those involved on the front line, not only fill gaps in the record, but also provide inspiration for rethinking what labour history is and what its aspiration should be.

**“Las ansias de participación”: the offensive of urban social movements in the process of political change in Spain (1975-77). A view from Barcelona's metropolitan area**

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The historiographical debate about urban social movements in Spain in the 1970s has produced countless books, articles and papers, both from academic and purely journalistic points of view. From different perspectives, the prominent role of the collective actions and experiences of the movements has either been denied or highlighted. Various interpretations have highlighted the role of the Francoist political elites or the importance of the socioeconomic modernization process of the last stage of the dictatorship compared to other visions that stress the impact of socio-political mobilization and conflict in the collapse of the dictatorship. This article is allied to the latter interpretation, aiming to propose a model for analyzing the process of political change from a study of social movements, such as the urban social movements, that have traditionally been at the margins of the historical narrative.

This study attempts to highlight the maximum social and political impact of the urban social movements in Barcelona and its metropolitan area. The opening and closing moments of the triennium 1975-77, which frames the analysis, were two key moments of this process: the period began with the death of the dictator Franco and ended with the first democratic elections and was the period in which social movements fought the ultimate battle against Franco's regime, preventing its continuity and advocating its demise. The aim of this article is to outline the process of political change

from the perspective of the urban social movements, focusing on the struggle that it waged with the local powers of the Francoist regime. The intention is to bring out the major role of the urban social movements in the process of the delegitimation and disintegration of the Francoist authorities. Similarly, it will pay attention to the discourse and the collective actions and practices that were developed which showed a strong desire to rupture with the dictatorship, construct an urban project and propose an alternative political articulation of democracy that involved the effective participation of citizens.

In the mid-1970s, when one of the last great urban battles against the General Metropolitan Plan of Barcelona was taking place, the urban social movements had reached a clear organizational and discursive maturity, after already organizing powerful struggles beginning in the late 1960s. Some of them involved great conflicts against various partial urban plans that had tried to drive out and expropriate large numbers of people throughout the metropolitan area or in campaigns for repairs and maintenance of public and private housing; others, in the early seventies, involved struggles against landfills in *Montjuïc* (Barcelona) and *Cinco Rosas* (Sant Boi de Llobregat), for a hospital in Santa Coloma de Gramenet or for the final canalization of the river in Cornellà de Llobregat after the severe floods of 1971, in addition to thousands of other struggles for traffic lights, schools, public transport, public health or parks in the neighborhoods.<sup>1</sup>

Urban social movements had also established stable organizational structures – open, horizontal and based on democratic assemblies – through Neighborhood Associations (*Asociaciones de Vecinos*). These entities were formidable instruments of mobilization and also provided certain leisure, recreational and cultural services, serving as a significant site of meetings, socialization and politicization for the popular classes and a place where the political groups and parties found a space to exercise the struggle against Franco, overcoming the limits imposed by underground activities.<sup>2</sup> This

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<sup>1</sup> On the origins and evolution of the Catalan neighborhood association movement, see Molinero, Carme and Ysas, Pere, eds. *La construcció de la ciutat democràtica. El moviment veïnal durant el tardofranquisme i la transició*. Barcelona: Icaria, 2010. I recently wrote my PhD thesis on Spanish urban social movements from their origins to the triennium 1975-77. Bordetas, Ivan. *Nosotros somos los que hemos hecho esta ciudad. Autoorganización y movilización vecinal durante el tardofranquismo y el proceso de cambio político*. Cerdanyola del Vallès: Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 2012. It can be consulted at <https://www.educacion.gob.es/teseo/imprimirFicheroTesis.do?fichero=33320>

<sup>2</sup>The relationships between political parties and neighborhood associations is analyzed in Martí, Josep. *Relació entre Associacions de Veïns i partits polítics. Barcelona 1970-1980*. PhD thesis. Barcelona: ICESB, 1981.

presence and this political nature did not escape the notice of officials of the dictatorship, as is shown in a 1974 police report on the Federation of Neighborhood Associations of Barcelona (*Federación de Asociaciones de Vecinos de Barcelona*, FAVB): of the ninety-five member associations that formed part of this umbrella group, sixty-five were marked as *blue* – supporters of the regime – and twenty as *red* – “anti-establishment and making demands”.<sup>3</sup> Different police reports on the Barcelona district of Nou Barris adduced that “some time ago [...] communist penetration has been detected in the ranks of the Neighborhood Association”, identifying various political parties that “have found in the legal existence of the Neighborhood Associations a fertile ground to carry out tasks of agitation, proselytizing and recruiting new militants.”<sup>4</sup>

These *red* Neighbourhood Associations, such as in Nou Barris, were the organizations that truly composed the urban social movements as they are understood here, representing the popular neighborhoods, hosting a greater number of partners and comprised of those who ultimately staged the urban and anti-Francoist struggle based on a combination of complaints against shortages in the neighborhoods and demands for freedom and political and social rights. These movements centered on discourses and practices that were both implicitly and explicitly anti-Francoist, to a certain degree anti-capitalist and therefore against the current of the dictatorial order. They demonstrated this through the assumption of open conflict and *the struggle for the street*, democratic forms of assembly, the development of proposals that went beyond complaints or opposition to a given situation, the advance of their own projects of co-management or self-management, and the construction of collective identities with a strong working-class component based on what was considered the social debt to those who had built the city.

Other evidence highlights the ties of solidarity between the Neighborhood Associations and other social movements that fought against the dictatorship. This was emphasized in a police report that noted that the

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<sup>3</sup>Archivo Histórico del Gobierno Civil de Barcelona (hereafter AHGCB), “Informe sobre la Federación de Asociaciones de Vecinos de Barcelona y sobre el «enfoque correcto de la F.A.V.B.»”, April 27, 1975. Fondo Gobernadores Civiles. Caja 52. Ayuntamiento de Barcelona. Años 1974-1975. Most *blue* associations were, in fact, *street associations*, called *light bulb associations*, which grouped mainly traders of certain streets and whose only activity was managing public subsidies for the adornment of streets with colored lights during the holidays.

<sup>4</sup>AHGCB, “Semblanza político-social sobre la «Asociación de Vecinos del sector Vallbona-Torre Baró-Trinidad» («9 Barrios»)”, Police Report, August 11, 1974. Fondo Gobernadores Civiles. Caja 52. Ayuntamiento de Barcelona. Años 1974-1975.

president of one section of the Neighborhood Association of Nou Barris was suspected of being "connected to the Workers' Commissions" [*Comisiones Obreras*].<sup>5</sup> Such relationships would only strengthen in this period through the public positioning of Neighborhood Organizations in support of workers in conflict, either through support for the amnesty of imprisoned trade unionists, the right to strike or the need for free and representative trade unions as is demonstrated by the following resolutions of Neighborhood Associations:

The signatories of the neighbourhood associations see the need to support the requests of the SEAT workers [in the Volkswagen auto factory] (...) Given these new facts once again the need arises for creating adequate channels of participation for the free exercise of human rights of assembly, association and expression.<sup>6</sup>

This committee has decided in a meeting to provide full support to the struggle for demands developed by the Motor Ibérica workers [...]. It fully agrees and identifies with the workers regarding the three points raised: the overturning of disciplinary actions and sanctions [...], the reemployment of all those dismissed, and a linear increase of 4,000 pesetas for all.<sup>7</sup>

In the same way, the neighbourhood organizations of Terrasa were considered in police reports in the following manner:

They usually integrate people of the political opposition or against the Regime or sympathizers with the progressive or anti-establishment clergy [...]. Through collective action, these so-called Neighbourhood *Juntas* aim to capture of the maximum possible number of elements and establish intercommunication

<sup>5</sup> AHGCB, «Dos votos en contra adhesión S.M. el Rey de España por parte Corporación Municipal esta localidad», Police Report, November 27, 1975. Fondo Gobernadores Civiles. Caja 105, Ayuntamiento de Tarrasa, 1974-1975.

<sup>6</sup> Archivo Nacional de Catalunya (hereafter ANC), Letter from the Neighbourhood Associations to the Provincial Delegate of Official Trade Unions, November 12, 1974. Fondo PSUC. 2352. Barcelona: Crides i manifestos unitaris. 1973-1974. The document also appeared in the mainstream press and in *Nuestra Voz* [organ of the Neighbourhood Association of *Turó de la Peira / Vila Piscina / Ramon Albó*], 2 (1974). The document was signed by eighteen Barcelona Neighbourhood Associations.

<sup>7</sup> ANC, «Precisiones respecto a los trabajadores de Motor Ibérica en huelga», Committee of Labour Commissions of Neighbourhood Associations of Barcelona (*Coordinadora de Vocalías Laborales de las Asociaciones de Vecinos de Barcelona*), September 6, 1976. Fondo PSUC. 2353. Barcelona: Federació d'Associacions de Veïns de Barcelona (FAVB). 1973-1980. This Committee published several numbers of a specific journal about workers' issues called *Correo Laboral*.

with one another, in search of a mass solidarity to confront problems affecting a particular neighbourhood.<sup>8</sup>

A detailed police report on urban social movement activities in the suburban city of Santa Coloma de Gramenet in 1975 pointed out the real danger for the Francoist authorities: “the gravity of this situation is that it is a true unity of Marxist political formation, which extends its activities to the factories where they work”. Thus, it warned of the involvement of various priests in working-class districts, certain journalists and certain “cells of the Communist Party and the Workers’ Commissions [*Comisiones Obreras*]” which, side by side with Neighborhood Associations, caused a “constant social unrest, with riots and public demonstrations”.<sup>9</sup>

But not only by the presence of political party activists could the movement be considered anti-Francoist or political in its actions and not only in its demands, since its very configuration, against the current of the organizational forms of the dictatorship, gave it a political nature in practice. This political condition was also given by the relationship that the Franco regime established with the movements, moving from purely repressive responses since any expression of dissent and conflict was considered anti-regime, to negotiations or concessions unwillingly granted to the powerful neighborhood mobilizations. Thus, the local authorities, formed in the fascist political culture of the dictatorship, were forced, in many cases, to give in to or negotiate popular demands. In some cases, this obtained, as this letter from a city councilor to the governor shows, because “the situation of the city councilors who are in charge of the districts, is very delicate and fragile in relation to the Neighborhood Association of the *Distrito Quinto*, which considers itself the representative across the district [...] [and which] is echoed in some newspapers of our city”.<sup>10</sup> In others, it was directly due to fear of the escalation of the conflict as this appeal by a local mayor to the sub-governor of Barcelona demonstrates:

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<sup>8</sup>AHGCB, «Asociaciones de Cabezas de Familia y Juntas de Vecinos», Police Report, March 4, 1975. Fondo Gobernadores Civiles. Caja 105, Ayuntamiento de Tarrasa, 1974-1975.

<sup>9</sup>AHGCB, «SANTA COLOMA DE GRAMANET.- Informe socio-político», enero de 1975. Fondo Gobernadores Civiles. Caja 205. Ayuntamiento de Santa Coloma de Gramenet 1974-1975. This is one of three documents that compose the report prepared by the Provincial Leadership of the *Movimiento* and was sent to the Civil Governor Rodolfo Martín Villa in January 1975.

<sup>10</sup>AHGCB, Letter from Juan Abellán Hernández, city councilor of Barcelona, to Rodolfo Martín Villa, Civil Governor of Barcelona, September 16, 1974. Fondo Gobernadores Civiles. Caja 52. Ayuntamiento de Barcelona. Años 1974-1975.

In view of the street demonstrations in recent days [...] we appeal to you to consider the alarming situation we face in regard to social and political issues and we have to make you know that without immediate help [...] an overflow can occur in all areas that we would be unable to contain.<sup>11</sup>

In April 1975, the Mayor of Santa Coloma de Gramenet pleaded with the civil governor for the acceleration of efforts around school shortages and public transport that "are now the most urgent and more political dangerous" in view of the escalation of local pressure which resulted in massive collections of signatures, press campaigns, constant demonstrations and mass meetings or bus boycotts.<sup>12</sup> A year later, the mayor kept insisting on "The serious school situation of the municipality and the extremely serious incidents that lately have been raised because of this problem. [...] The situation is unsustainable for next year as all members of the Corporation have received serious threats and are willing to resign if it is not given an immediate solution".<sup>13</sup>

These protests, which were gradually closing in on the dictatorial authorities, were based on a wide repertoire of collective actions that both directly bordered on or transgressed the law and that, progressively, were acquiring explicitly anti-Francoist tones with public assumption of the struggle for political and social rights, for amnesty for political and trade unionist prisoners, with expressions of solidarity with industrial disputes and demands for democratization. There are numerous examples of the public positions of the neighborhood associations in campaigns against the death penalty or for amnesty for political prisoners and the Federation of Neighborhood Associations of Barcelona (FAVB) also prominently promoted the mass demonstration for amnesty in February 1976.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup>AHGCB. Letter from José M<sup>a</sup> Ferrer, Mayor of Cornellà de Llobregat, to José Donadeu, civil subgovernor of Barcelona, September 26, 1977. Fondo Gobernadores Civiles. Caja 616. José M<sup>a</sup> Ferrer Panadés. Caja n<sup>o</sup> 29 [Subgobernadores]. Carpeta Asuntos Varios 1980.

<sup>12</sup>All documentation on the conflict and the letters exchanged between the authorities may be found in the AHGCB. Fondo Gobernadores Civiles. Caja 205. Ayuntamiento de Santa Coloma de Gramenet 1974-1975.

<sup>13</sup>AHGCB. Letter from the Mayor of Santa Coloma to the Civil Governor, July, 1976. Fondo Gobernadores Civiles. Caja 398. CG: 126. I Delegación provincial Ministerio de Educación y Ciencia. Sánchez Terán Ortiz Sánchez. 1976-2977.

<sup>14</sup>"Amnistía. Nota sobre la campaña de 'Justicia y Paz'", *Nuestra Voz* 2 (1974) o "Poble Sec per la Amnistia!", *Poble Sec*, 3 (septiembre de 1974). About the demonstration see "1 de febrer, Barcelona per l'Amnistia. Grandiosa manifestació", *Treball*, 434 (2 de febrer de 1976). Researchers may consult the document of convocation and the relation between the diverse signatories in the ANC, "Relación de firmantes del escrito presentado al Gobierno Civil, el 19 de enero, solicitando autorización para realizar una manifestación ciudadana por la Amnistía". Fondo PSUC. 2350. Activitat de diverses entitats i moviments ciutadans



Increasingly, urban and political struggle was constituted as a indiscernible part of a larger united fight back because, for example, a conflict by healthcare workers not only showed the need for a united front and solidarity, but demonstrated the necessity of the “unavoidable and urgent reform of the healthcare structure that takes into account the needs of all people (workers, unemployed and residents in general), which can be carried out with the democratization of the entire healthcare section and with the participation of the entire population”.<sup>15</sup>

By the same token, but putting forward concrete alternative proposals, the Committee of Healthcare Commissions of the Neighborhood Association of *Nou Barris* demanded “healthcare control in all matters” with the establishment of “Control Commissions of Healthcare workers, neighbors and doctors”.<sup>16</sup> As was expressed in a contemporary study of urban social movements in Barcelona:

The demand for participation – at the neighbourhood and city level but also at the trade union, professional and general level – , usually projected onto the neighbourhood, in close relationship with urban problems, a number of issues [...]. Amnesty, the abolition of the death penalty, the promotion of the Catalan language and culture and industrial disputes do not arise at assemblies or in declarations simply because neighbourhood associations play a subsidiary role in politics. In popular neighbourhoods there are dismissed workers, the unemployed, political prisoners ... It is difficult to be aware of urban problems – and to verify that the mayor or the city councillors do not represent the interests of the population – without bringing to the table political freedoms, the right to culture, free trade unions or assembly, to demonstrate and to express themselves without preconditions.<sup>17</sup>

This evolution of the discourses, the objectives and the actions of the urban social movements, which was linked to a wider politicization, was the

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reivindicatius. 1970-1979. News of the action may be found in “Manifestaciones callejeras para pedir la amnistía”, *La Vanguardia Española*, 3 de febrero de 1976. Ballester, Véase David and Risques, Manel. *Temps d'amnistia. Les manifestacions de l'1 i el 8 de febrer de 1976 a Barcelona*. Barcelona: Edicions 62, 2001.

<sup>15</sup>ANC. «Informació sobre el problema sanitari», elaborado por la Asociación de Vecinos «Joan Maragall». Fondo PSUC. Barcelona: barrio del Guinardó, 1975-1976. Original in Catalan. In the same direction was the proposal by the Committee of Health Commissions of the *Nou Barris* Neighbourhood Association.

<sup>16</sup>The whole proposals in “Sanidad”, *9 Barrios* (December, 1976).

<sup>17</sup>Alibés, Josep Maria; Miguélez, Faustino; Pardo, José María *et al.*, “La lucha de los barrios de Barcelona, 1969-75”, *CAU*, 34, November-December, 1975, p. 114.

cause of increasing repressive pressure on these collectives: the authorities denied permission for and prevented neighborhood meetings, exhibitions and other activities, suspended and fined public entities for their political positions, delayed indefinitely or shelved new laws, arrested activists as well as brought constant police pressure to bear.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, the authorities created new puppet entities or promoted similar existing bodies. The case of Mataró, in the metropolitan area of Barcelona, is significant: the correspondence between the Mayor and the Civil Governors shows attempts to control the organization, extension and consolidation of new associations, denying their legalization and encouraging others<sup>19</sup>:

In the city of Mataró they are trying to win approval for two neighborhood associations. 1.-Cerdanyola Center: all of it consists of anti-regime elements (...) 2.-Sea Sector: individuals who sign the application are all components of the Young Communists [*Juventudes Comunistas*] or PSUC [*Partit Socialista Unificat de Catalunya*]. (...) We express the view that all possible objections should be raised and approval delayed as long as possible.<sup>20</sup>

The link between urban social movements and anti-Francoism identified by the political authorities during the period of official repression also made activists and their premises the target of attacks by fascist groups.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>This was denounced in various forums: "Ofensiva contra las Asociaciones de Vecinos", *Mundo Social*, 219 (March, 1974), Tudela, Joan, "El difícil parto de nueve asociaciones", *Gramma*, 73 (January 1975) or Giralt, Enric, "Cinco asociaciones de vecinos llevan un año esperando su legalización", *El Correo Catalán*, March 25, 1976. Other areas of the country, including Madrid, did not escape this reality: Lucas, Modesto González, "El difícil arte de asociarse entre vecinos", *Mundo Social*, 226 (November, 1974).

<sup>19</sup>AHGCB, Expediente "Asociaciones de Mataró", November, 1974. Fondo Gobernadores Civiles. Caja 249. Ayuntamiento de Mataró, 1974-1975.

<sup>20</sup>AHGCB, Letter from Luis del Pozo to Martín Villa, April 30, 1975. Fondo Gobernadores Civiles. Caja 249. Ayuntamiento de Mataró, 1974-1975.

<sup>21</sup>«Repulsa por el atentado a unos locales de la Asociación de los Nueve Barrios», *La Vanguardia*, July 23, 1974; «Atentado contra el Centro Social de Sans», *La Vanguardia*, June 28, 1975; «Atentado contra la Asociación de Vecinos de San Andrés», *La Vanguardia*, July 10, 1975; «Artefacto explosivo contra un centro de vecinos», *Informaciones*, January 5, 1976. These attacks and violence by fascist gangs continued throughout the whole process of political change and, as recognized in a document from the Police Headquarters in Barcelona in late 1977, had not only the acquiescence of the police, but their protection and direction. AHGCB, "Panorámica general de los grupos y organizaciones derechistas y actividades desarrolladas por los mismos", Report of Investigation Service of General Security Headquarters. Barcelona, November 14, 1977. Fondo Gobernadores Civiles, caja 323. Quoted by Casanellas, Pau. *Morir matando. El*

Despite all the obstacles, the political and cultural background, the experiences of struggle and conflict, the organizational resources, the discourses and the solidarities that were developed allowed the urban social movements to face the battle beginning in the middle of the decade not only from a defensive standpoint, such as refusing certain infrastructure projects that threatened homes or complaining against the inadequate provision of facilities and green areas; they also prepared the movements to develop and put forward an urban alternative, with proposals for the provision not only of the facilities, services and infrastructure required in their respective districts, but also for the management and democratic planning of the urban framework, for the articulation of a real and effective popular participation in public services. The diversity of forms of struggle that were used give a good account of this broad and qualified opposition: from the accumulation of more than 21,000 collective challenges against the Regional Urban Plan – both by the Neighborhood Associations and by other citizens' organizations – to the organization of mass meetings and demonstrations, occupations of land, stopping and dismantling public and private urban works, self-construction of parks and gardens, self-management of schools and the preparation of so-called Popular Plans. The latter were authentic studies not only of the deficiencies and requirements, but also of the installation of such facilities, services and infrastructure that were considered necessary, because, as was considered at an assembly which decided to devise one of these plans, “the city is ours because we have made it with our efforts and sacrifices”.<sup>22</sup>

The urban social movements reaffirmed themselves as one of the main spaces of popular participation in Barcelona, as one of the central nodes of a highly mobilized society that undertook the final offensive to overthrow a dictatorship that, even with the death of the dictator in 1975, still maintained a strong repressive and social control capacity that was intended to allow the continuation of Francoism without Franco. Between 1975 and 1977, in addition to the urban struggles we mentioned against the Regional Plan, there was also a diversity of conflicts that clearly revealed the pressure exerted on the authorities by the urban social movements, even before the death of the dictator as we have seen. If at the beginning of 1975, Barcelona's Neighborhood Associations undertook a campaign for the

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*franquismo en crisis ante la violencia política, 1968-1977*. PhD thesis. Cerdanyola del Vallès: Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 2011, p. 433.

<sup>22</sup>«¡Sí! Plan Popular. Plan Comarcal ¡No!», *9 Barrios*, (December, 1976). These Popular Plans were mostly devised by 1977-1978. An exemple may be consulted in «Plan Popular», Grama (1978).

resignation of the "eighteen *not* city councilors", who voted negatively for the approval of a small budget for the continuing education of Catalan teachers<sup>23</sup>, between June and November the associations of Cornellà de Llobregat and Santa Coloma de Gramenet explicitly expressed in two public declarations the demand for democracy. These documents, endorsed by different personalities from the local scene – trade union members, presidents of neighborhood and citizen organizations, priests, teachers, professionals, etc. – openly raised the problems of their cities, the urban chaos, the poor facilities, services and infrastructure, unemployment, the high cost of living, and noted, finally, that "the divorce between the city and the people [...] is the cause of this accumulation of problems and its tendency to get worse [...]". According to the activists, this was because:

A municipality that has not been elected by the people, which depends on those who have elected themselves, represents the interests of the minority. Only a democratic city council which is responsible for their actions before the population will answer to the general interests of the population, and only this popular power can deal with the vested interests.<sup>24</sup>

The urban social movements had reached a point of no return in the process of empowerment: their organizations were strengthened; they built increasingly audacious mass actions and radicalized their discourse. This was what led them in the mid-1970s to hoist the banner of democratization and deepen their proposals for political change. In a public document of support to the Catalan Assembly (*Assemblea de Catalunya*), a diverse political platform that motivated a break with the Franco Regime, the neighborhood associations of Terrassa recognized this entity as "the right space for advancing, in a unified manner, the democratic goals [...] in defense of popular interests"<sup>25</sup>, while the associations of Sabadell, endorsed by over nine thousand signatures, demanded the democratization of the City

<sup>23</sup>Castellà i Gassol, Joan, *Los papeles del no al català*. Barcelona: Dirosa, 1975. A declaration signed by various civic and neighborhood organizations demanded the immediate resignation of the city councilors, the political normalization of Catalan and the election of "those who hold public offices [...] that are representative of the will of the people", «Repulsa de varias entidades barcelonesas», *La Vanguardia*, March 8, 1975.

<sup>24</sup>AHGCB, «Situación política en el día de hoy en Cornellà», City Council report, June 4, 1975. Fondo Gobernadores Civiles. Caja 50. Ayuntamiento de Cornellà de Llobregat, 1974-75. The declaration was published in «Manifiesto de los 22. Cornellà por un ayuntamiento democrático», *Tele/eXprés*, June 1, 1975. The other declaration, that reproduces entire passages of the preceding one, may be consulted in ANC, «¡Salvemos Sta. Coloma! Manifiesto ciudadano de los 51». Fondo PSUC. 2392. Santa Coloma de Gramenet. 1970-1975.

<sup>25</sup>ANC, «Declaración de las Juntas de Vecinos». Fondo PSUC. 2393. Terrassa. Setembre, 1966 - juny, 1975.

Council and the subsequent resignation of the councilors. They also demanded a “general amnesty including the political, trade union, religious, academic and administrative spheres, and allowing therefore the return of all those in exile”, in addition to the abolition of the death penalty and anti-terrorism legislation.<sup>26</sup> On this question of the politicization of the urban social movements, the neighborhood association in Carmel spoke forcefully:

Actually, we are politicizing [...]. For many years, residents and members of this Association have fought against the policies of big business, speculation, cost of living, unemployment ... and against municipal politics in neighbourhoods, abandonment, expropriation, lack of hygiene, transport, schools [...]. We believe that the struggle to improve our neighbourhood is the same struggle of the workers in their factories, the same as the many citizens who struggle for amnesty, freedom...<sup>27</sup>

In the same way, the association in Nou Barris affirmed that it was:

A neighbourhood association that since its birth has engaged in politics [...] since it is the only way to defend our interests. [...] That is why the associations take side with anything that affects the neighbourhoods; the boycott of the referendum [of the Political Reform Act of Adolfo Suárez's Government] is a recent example.<sup>28</sup>

Moreover, the neighbourhood associations' clear break with the dictatorship was expressed in their active involvement in this boycott of the referendum in December 1976, whose positive result would come to sanction the reform bill that was being imposed from above.

At the same time, the Nou Barris association was carrying out different urban struggles in its neighborhood among which was the struggle for the elimination of a polluting factory that was adjacent to a group of homes and whose space was claimed for needed facilities. Given the lack of attention to their demands, the neighbors decided to remove the factory:

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<sup>26</sup>Vinader, Xavier and Benaul, Josep M. *Sabadell, febrero de 1976: una semana de huelga general política*, unpublished, Sabadell, 1976 and “Pleno Municipal (30 diciembre 1975). Informe de las Asociaciones de Vecinos de Sabadell”, *Can Oriach*, 90 (1976), p. 31-34. Quoted by Martínez, Ricard. *El moviment veïnal a l'àrea metropolitana de Barcelona durant el tardofranquisme i la transició: el cas de Sabadell (1966-1976)*. PhD thesis. Barcelona, Universitat Pompeu Fabra, 1999, p. 252-253.

<sup>27</sup>“Acerca la Federación de Vecinos”, *El Carmelo*, 19 (February, 1977).

<sup>28</sup>“9 Barrios y la Federación”, *9 Barrios*, 1 (January-February, 1977).

Dismantling meant the demolition of two huge chimneys, dismantling of the entire electrical installation, [...] several motors and conveyor belts were immobilized. The removal was done by *nontechnical* residents expelling an asphalt plant that endangered their health. [...] Once again, they had forced residents to take the law into our hands.<sup>29</sup>

In September 1977, a meeting was held between the civil governor of Barcelona and the respective ministerial delegates. A meeting that, from the reports of different authorities in the context of regime transition, denoted the strong pressure they were receiving by urban social movements tired of waiting for democratization from above in the period after the legislative elections in June of that year and faced with an uncertain future that was marginalizing neighbourhood associations in the political process led mainly by the political parties.<sup>30</sup> The documents generated at this meeting not only show the great capacity of mobilization and the protest repertoire of the urban social movements, but the impact they were having on the remains of the Francoist dictatorship, struggles that meant an obvious continuity with the protest and social conflicts that forced political change in the first place. The delegate of Public Works reported, after presenting the organ's main infrastructure projects and their implementation, that

Almost all these works are the object of disputes, mostly by people affected who lead inexperienced masses who do not know the matters. Obviously a tough stance cannot be taken, but it is also obvious, that once all disinterested opinion is collected and certified, we have to take decisions and carry out them with absolute determination. Recently, the Ministry of Public Works has not been supported by other sectors of the administration [...] and attempts at demonstration organized by parties, neighborhood associations, etc., even with only a few people have forced essential works for the province to stop.

As for the Ministry of Housing delegate, he referred to the thousands of challenges and appeals that had been filed against the Metropolitan General Urban Plan, most of them by neighborhood groups, and the various repairs in public housing that had been forced after long struggles by the residents. He also referred to "illegal, and in some cases violent, occupations by people who have not established their status as beneficiaries,

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<sup>29</sup>"Planta asfáltica", *9 Barrios*, 1 (January-February, 1977).

<sup>30</sup>On this situation, see Bordetas, Ivan, "El movimiento vecinal en el tránsito de la resistencia a la construcción de alternativas", *Historia del Presente*, 16 (2010), p. 55-61.

of several hundred homes in Ciutat Badia and in San Cosme”.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, the representative of the Ministry of Education complained about “the strong desire for 'participation' in public affairs [that] involves the interference of Parent-Teacher Associations [...] and the Neighborhood Associations' 'demand' not infrequently 'solutions' against current legislation”.<sup>32</sup> What this delegate did not recognize was precisely that this legislation contested by social movements was still the Francoist one and for the same reason neighbourhood organizations were maintaining the struggle against the authorities, who, at the same time, admitted their powerlessness in the situation and that they were in a state of “total isolation and total oblivion”, forcing them to notify their superiors of the “impossibility to continue in our posts without a serious approach and clarification of our situation.”<sup>33</sup>

These mayors complained of political disintegration, the crisis of authority and the difficult situation in which they were in after the elections in the summer of 1977, the insults they received in the numerous popular protests, the coverage and collaboration offered by the press to these actions, the pressures of the urban social movements and the municipal political party committees that were supervising their acts, the complaints of retired or unemployed workers and, finally, the insubordination of municipal officials who were organizing constant assemblies and joining unions. This situation was also reproduced in the Rubí district, where the mayor admitted that “the rise of the 'neighborhood associations' and their constant interventions in 1977, which revealed their real mission as a labor political project, forced the resignation of the mayor and then of some city councilors”.<sup>34</sup> In a letter to the civil governor in September of that year, the Mayor of Sabadell –substitute of another who had resigned after the general strike of 1976 – and the City Council claimed that the situation was “increasingly precarious and unsustainable” because

We support on our backs someone else's burdens, [...] we have resisted to the limit of our strength. [...] We are accused of lack of representation [...]. If socio-political conditions of the country have changed and new institutions have been created where new

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<sup>31</sup>In fact, housing occupations spread throughout other neighborhoods and cities from the summer of 1977, happening again in this massive form in 1978 and 1979.

<sup>32</sup>AHGCB, “Reunión de S.E. con Delegados de Ministerios 1977”. Fondo Gobernadores Civiles. Caja 444. Reunión de S.E. con delegados de ministerios 1977.

<sup>33</sup>AHGCB, Collective letter from several Mayors of Barcelona province to Civil Governor José María Belloch, October 10, 1977. Fondo Gobernadores Civiles. Caja 328. Subsecretaría de la Gobernación.

<sup>34</sup>Murillo, Manuel. *40 años de Rubí*. Rubí [the author], 1995, p. 174

men have gained access, the municipalities are still the same, arousing constant invectives by those groups who assumed popular representation [...] our administration has neither form nor support, [...] it is obsolete in a society devoid of any appeal of authority, we are at the mercy of their demands [...].<sup>35</sup>

The urban social movements could not force all political change in the sense that they were demanding for some years – not so much because of the limits of local democratization, which was achieved in April 1979 with the local elections, but rather because of the lack of a true grassroots, participatory and horizontal democracy at the national political level. What is certain, however, is that their actions, struggles, protests and constant pressure on the authorities, even as an undercurrent to the political parties that focused mainly on institutional battles from 1977 onwards, were essential to block a continuity solution to the dictatorship and to the definitive acceptance of several demands such as the right to adequate housing and the need to build neighborhoods and cities based on urban standards that emerged largely through their own proposals and actions.

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<sup>35</sup>AHGCB, Collective letter from Sabadell councilors to Civil Governor, September 19, 1977. Fondo Gobernadores Civiles. Caja 360. CG: 47. Ayuntamiento de Sabadell 1976-1978.



## **L' *Ordine Nuovo* and the workers' councils movement in Turin in the postwar years (1919-1920)**

*Angelo d'Orsi and Francesca Chiarotto*<sup>1</sup>

**A**s is well known, Antonio Gramsci did not participate in the First World War due to unfit physical conditions. Nonetheless, he did somehow participate in it through his work as a journalist for socialist newspapers, denouncing on a daily basis not only the barbarities of the war, but also its stupidity and lies. During the years of conflict, he was perhaps its most ruthless and coherent critic in Italy; from that moment on, and during his whole career and life, he continued to fight in the name of truth.<sup>2</sup>

Once his university companions (Tasca, Terracini, and Togliatti), all socialists like himself, returned from the front, an old idea came back to life: a newspaper. At that moment, the important headlines, aside from the effects of the Great War, were the Soviet Union and the not-so-theoretical international debate regarding the possibilities of a revolution in the capitalist West; alongside these was a heated discourse regarding how to “update” Marxist doctrine without falling into reformist revisionism.

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<sup>1</sup> The authors of this paper have worked together; however, the writing of paragraphs 1, 2, 7, 8 was by A. d'Orsi, and paragraphs 3, 4, 5, 6, by F. Chiarotto.

<sup>2</sup> See d'Orsi, A. “Gramsci e la guerra: dal giornalismo alla riflessione storica”. In: *Gramsci nel suo tempo*, ed. Giasi, Francesco. Preface by Vacca, G. 2 vol. Roma: Carocci, Roma, 2008 (I), pp. 127-53.

The first issue of *L'Ordine Nuovo* (*The New Order*) “a weekly review of socialist culture”, was published in Turin on an extremely convenient date: May 1, 1919.<sup>3</sup> The release of this weekly newspaper took place in a particularly charged political climate. Shortly before May 1, the Socialist Party prepared a manifesto which – in its uncensored pages – exhorted workers with words almost worthy of Marx’s and Engels’ *Manifesto*: “Workers! This great historical hour is calling you, and urges you to make crucial historical conquests!”<sup>4</sup> The editorial of the first issue of this novel newspaper presented an appeal to mobilization, to be achieved through education, upheaval and organization<sup>5</sup>: “this issue is to bring us together, get to know each other, get a first fertile feel of freedom, and of the vibrations of souls united by the same faith. It is a proclamation for the mobilization of socialist intelligence and willpower, to determine and emphasize the Socialist State.”

Despite being listed as “editorial secretary”, Gramsci was, in fact, as confirmed by testimonies, the foremost promoter of this small Turin-based enterprise. The latter, situated within a highly international dimension, was after all not far from the discussions of young Marxists taking place in a variety of locations and settings on both sides of the Atlantic.

The underlying idea of the newspaper was the need for the working class to build a culture of its own, a crucial part of the development of a revolutionary conscience. Nonetheless, it did not disregard, but rather preemptively encompassed, the acquisition of wider and more general cultural instruments. This included major cultural traditions that preceded the advent of the working class in the global scenario, starting from the set of (scientific, artistic, literary, etc...) events that could be summarized with a formula of the great bourgeois culture. Said process was primarily, and understandably, led by Benedetto Croce, undisputed “provoker of theoretical elaboration”.<sup>6</sup> As Mario Montagna, one of the newspaper’s promoters who, after Gramsci’s death, advocated the publication of the

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<sup>3</sup> The amount of 6000 Liras necessary to bring the newspaper to life was recovered, according to Togliatti’s testimony, by Angelo Tasca: see Ferrara, Marcella e Ferrera, Maurizio. *Conversando con Togliatti*. Roma: Rinascita, 1951, p. 47.

<sup>4</sup> Central State Archives, Ministry of Internal Affairs, Direzione generale di P.S., Affari generali e riservati, 1919, K9, b. 53: dispatch of the head of cabinet to heads of office “press review”. Cited in Spriano, P. *L'Ordine Nuovo e i Consigli di fabbrica*. Turin: Einaudi, 1971, p. 17.

<sup>5</sup> The famous headline of the first issue read as follows: “Educate yourselves, for we will need all our intelligence. Rouse yourselves, for we will need all our enthusiasm. Organize yourselves, for we will need all our strength”. *L'Ordine Nuovo*, I, 1, 1° May 1919.

<sup>6</sup> Spriano, P. *Op.Cit.*, p. 25.

Sardinian writer's work, declared: "*L'Ordine Nuovo* must become for young socialists what *La Voce* was for the bourgeoisie: the core around which all intelligence and willpower develops".<sup>7</sup>

2.

Gramsci's work demonstrates that revolution, more than an act, represents a process. At the basis of said process there must be the effort of the working class to acquire political awareness, and thus cultural preparedness. Hereby derives the crucial importance of the determination to help the proletariat educate itself, ("educate yourselves, for we will need all our intelligence" is one of the titles gawking from the newspaper's front page), and more generally the battle of ideas<sup>8</sup>, of pedagogical and cultural work that would later provoke accusations of "culturalism" towards the *ordinovisti*, as the promoters of the newspaper would soon be known. Among these was the well-known recrimination by Bordiga and his group, who backed the Neapolitan newspaper *The Soviet*: "The need for education calls for a convention of teachers, not socialists. One does not become socialist through education, but rather because of the real needs of the class they belong to".<sup>9</sup> After all, a little over a year after the foundation of the newspaper, Gramsci himself would draw up a critical judgment of it which, in excessive terms, reduced the first few issues of the newspaper to a modest cultural hotchpotch: nothing more – according to the (excessively severe) self-critical assessment of its very promoter – than a "producer of mediocre intellectualism", with a predominantly pedagogical nature, supported by vague resolutions:

When, in April 1919, three, four, or five of us decided [...] to start publishing the newspaper *L'Ordine Nuovo*, not one of us (perhaps...) thought we could change the world, renew the brains and hearts of the human multitudes, or open a new cycle in history. Not one of us (perhaps...: some did fantasize with the idea of 6000 subscribers in just a few months) deluded themselves with the optimistic idea of a successful venture. Who were we? What did we represent? What new message were we the bearers of? Alas! The only sentiment that united us

<sup>7</sup> Montagnana expressed such a remark at the Congress of young socialists in August 1919. See, *ibidem*, p. 53. Regarding Montagna's role in the publication of Gramsci's work see Chiarotto, F. *Operazione Gramsci. Alla conquista degli intellettuali nell'Italia del dopoguerra*. Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 2011.

<sup>8</sup> This was the column of the newspaper edited by Palmiro Togliatti, which will be repeated with the same title in *Rinascita (Rebirth)*, in the postwar years.

<sup>9</sup> Bordiga, A. *Preparazione culturale o preparazione rivoluzionaria?*, in «L'Avanguardia», 20 October 1912.

during our meetings was that aroused by a vague passion for a vague proletarian culture; we wanted to do, do, do; we felt anxious, disoriented, drowning in the fervent atmosphere of the months following the armistice, when the cataclysm of Italian society seemed imminent.<sup>10</sup>

However, already from the May 15, 1919 issue, Gramsci identified a specific research focus, the Workers' Councils, which soon became the newspaper's core interest.<sup>11</sup> The path was set with the so-called "editorial turning point" of June 27, the editorial *Working Class Democracy* written by Gramsci with the collaboration of Togliatti.<sup>12</sup> The focus of the editorial group's attention shifted to the factory, the analysis of its mechanisms, and the study of factors of production: here, the germ of tomorrow's working-class State was reflected upon, as well as the nucleus of a new civilization of producers to be built with the revolution. Centers of proletarian life already existed in capitalist society: Internal Councils in the factories, socialist circles, peasant communities; it was just a matter of helping them grow, develop, and mature as organs of an effective counter-power which, at the right moment, would be able to oust and replace bourgeois power, demonstrating an ability to better manage all problems, starting from those inherent to the production process.

Internal councils are organs of working class democracy which must be freed of the limitations imposed on them by entrepreneurs, and fed with new life and energy. Today, internal councils restrict the capitalist's power in the factory, and exercise functions of arbitration and discipline. Tomorrow they will have to be, developed and enhanced, the organs of proletarian power that will substitute capitalists in all their useful functions of management and administration [...].<sup>13</sup>

Councils, district circles, and urban commissariats would thus form a series of concentric circles that, far from the trade unions and party itself, would bring to life to an authentic fabric of working class self-government. Furthermore,

<sup>10</sup> Gramsci, A. *Il programma dell'"Ordine Nuovo"*, in «L'Ordine Nuovo», II, 12, 14 August 1920, now in ID., *L'Ordine Nuovo*, eds. Gerratan, V. and Santucci, Antonio A.. Turin: Einaudi, 1987, pp. 619, 621 (619).

<sup>11</sup> ID., *Maggioranza e minoranza nell'azione socialista*, in «L'Ordine Nuovo», I, 2, 15 May 1919; now therein, p. 373.

<sup>12</sup> ID., *Democrazia operaia*, therein, p. 87-91 (89-90). The text may also be read in Gramsci, A. *Scritti dalla libertà. 1910-1926*, eds. D'Orsi, A. and Chiarotto, F. Roma: Editori Internazionali Riuniti, 2012, pp. 315-18.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

Such a system of working class democracy (integrated with the equivalent peasant organizations) would provide the masses with a permanent form and discipline. It would be a magnificent lesson of political and administrative experience, and it would organize the masses to the very last man: they would thus get used to tenacity and perseverance, and to considering themselves as an army on the field that needs firm cohesion, unless it wants to be destroyed and enslaved.<sup>14</sup>

Behind the political, pedagogical and organizational effort to transform the centers of proletarian life into organs of self-government for the masses (in the case in point, the internal councils into Workers' Councils, the Italian equivalent to the Russian soviet), as theorized by an "ordinovista" such as Gramsci, a preoccupation regarding the situation of crisis could be perceived. This was one of those situations which could only be resolved with the victory of one or the other rival, without middle grounds, compromise, or mediation, as Gramsci himself theorized in his later reflections from prison. Gramsci considered the "proletariat's dictatorship", which was widely discussed in Leninist Russia, as an empty formula, which could only be filled by immediately working towards transformation, and towards the bottom-up implementation of the working-class State, and could certainly "not be improvised".

The world after the war was an exhausted world in all aspects. Thus, revolutionaries could not fall into the temptation of adding destruction to destruction, chaos to chaos. On the other hand, it was a matter of building a different order, based on the expulsion of the capitalist from the factory, the increase of self-managed production, a spontaneously accepted and constructed discipline not imposed by force from the outside, and on a collective effort to build political awareness regarding the epochal duties of the working class and its allies. It was, therefore, a matter of erecting a "new order", which combined authentic justice and productive efficiency, substantial democracy and producers' self-government, thus freeing society and the State from the "plutocratic gangs that detain power and that could once more precipitate the populations into the abyss of war".<sup>15</sup>

Both in the *L'Ordine Nuovo* and in *Avanti! (Forward!)* (whose Piedmont edition he would later edit) Gramsci refined his political theory by insisting on certain key concepts. Among these were the idea of the

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Gramsci, A. *Vita politica internazionale*, in «L'Ordine Nuovo», I, 5, 7 June 1919, now in ID., *L'Ordine Nuovo*, Op.Cit., pp. 66-71 (67).

communist method as a “method of permanent revolution”<sup>16</sup>, the need for proletarian internationalism (organized response to the international antirevolutionary repression), and an alliance between the peasants and the working class, maintaining a specific hierarchy according to the classes’ respective historical characteristics, yet with the certainty of the crucial need for unity.

Factory workers and poor peasants are the two driving forces of proletarian revolution. In particular for them communism represents a crucial necessity: its advent means life and freedom, and the permanence of private property means imminent danger to be crushed, to lose everything, even life itself. They are the invincible element, the continuity of revolutionary enthusiasm, the tenacious willpower to refuse compromise, and to go on relentlessly towards unabridged achievements, without losing hope over partial and transitory failures, and without false hopes of easy success. They are the backbone of revolution, tenacious battalions of the proletarian army that advances, knocking over with impetus all obstacles, or besieging them with the human tides that crumble and wear down patiently and with indefatigable sacrifice. Communism is their civilization, the system of historical conditions through which they will acquire a personality, a dignity, and a culture; through which they will become the creative spirit of progress and beauty.<sup>17</sup>

### 3.

Overall, since the second half of 1919, *L'Ordine Nuovo* characterized itself as an organ of the movement of Councils, and more generally as a means to communicate to factory workers those things that interested them, without worrying about descending to an exaggeratedly basic level. This objective was confirmed by the testimony of one of the protagonists of that experience, Andrea Viglongo, future editor, who in an interview many years later would recall:

[...] what characterized this new newspaper was the tendency to make it unique, because in the proletarian movement this problem always existed: often, the proletarian newspaper, the *Avanti!*», did not offer enough variety of news columns, and almost no sports news. Thus, readers were forced to also

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<sup>16</sup> ID., *Il problema delle commissioni interne. Postilla*, ivi, I, 15, 23rd August 1919, therein, pp. 176-79 (176).

<sup>17</sup> ID., *Operai e contadini*, in therein, I, 12, 2nd August 1919, now in ID., *L'Ordine Nuovo*, Op.Cit., pp. 156-61 (159-60).

purchase other newspapers. One of the *L'Ordine Nuovo's* priorities was, on the other hand, to produce a complete newspaper which could satisfy the most demanding reader's needs.<sup>18</sup>

The Gramscian idea was based on the indispensable need to help the proletariat rise to the ownership of the intellectual instruments and knowledge they had been deprived of, whilst at the same time, be schooled and learn from their experience. Togliatti shared this idea, and remembering their common professor at the University of Turin, Arturo Farinelli, he recalled: "Farinelli was right when he said that one must not descend to the people, but rather rise to them".<sup>19</sup> The testimony of a factory worker, who participated in the experience of the Councils, reflects the almost "spiritual" atmosphere and "disciplined enthusiasm" that reigned in the factory:

A proof of the work carried out is found [...] in the numerous and prolonged meetings till late at night [...]. I would like to give some examples of the disciplined spirit of enthusiasm, on the brink of religious spirit I would say, that inspires those who are participating in the new movement; the Commissioners who want to start exerting control in the factory, the workers who vote for them, support them and surround them. These are episodes that show the new ways in which the spirit of class struggle manifests itself.<sup>20</sup>

In the writings of the young journalist Gramsci, one can perceive, aside from Marx's not-at-all sporadic presence, a strong faith in the thaumaturgical virtues of communism, represented in its historical realization by Bolshevism, although imperfect, to be defended at all costs: "Bolshevism is above all else a reaction of the spirit and of humanity, which strives to be reintegrated into essential values, and which no longer wants to be the object of speculation and exchange".<sup>21</sup> Therefore, one could say that in Gramsci's theoretic-political context before the birth of the PCd'I (Partito Comunista d'Italia - Italian Communist Party), whilst Marx provided instruments to denounce the present, Lenin taught the construction of the "city of the future".

<sup>18</sup> D'Orsi, A. ed. *I fucili nelle rotative. «L'Ordine Nuovo», i fascisti, Gramsci e Gobetti. Una conversazione con Andrea Viglongo, Historia Magistra. Rivista di storia critica*, I, n. 2, pp. 99-107 (102).

<sup>19</sup> Togliatti, P. *La battaglia delle idee*, in «L'Ordine Nuovo», 2, 15 May 1919.

<sup>20</sup> Matta, E. in «L'Ordine Nuovo», I, 1920. In SPRIANO, Op.Cit, pp. 226-30 (227 e 228).

<sup>21</sup> Gramsci, A. *Valori* in «Avanti!» (Piedmont edition), 13th June 1919. Now in ID., *Scritti dalla libertà*, Op.Cit, pp. 307-308 (307).

By that time, however, with the successful Revolution in Russia a perspective of an epochal mutation had arisen on the horizon of history: the revolution could be spread like a beneficial germ, if not even exported with weapons, as the Bolshevik Russians seemed to have been devising for some time. Also for this reason, for Gramsci, fascinated by the Bolsheviks like most other socialist leaders and virtually all young members of the Party, the international dimension became an integral part of political reflection. In this regard, he delivered an extremely clear sentence, which seems to draw him distinctly closer to Leon Trotsky: “Communism will only be when it will be international”.<sup>22</sup>

As is well known, after Lenin's death, the path of socialism was undertaken by one country only, and the international dimension thus started to be interpreted as a supra-national dimension, where the “supra” was the USSR, which was, in turn, the CPSU (Communist Party of the Soviet Union), which was the ruling party, which was the Prime Secretary: in other words, Joseph Stalin. The affiliated parties only had to obey and protect the country of fulfilled socialism, the guiding party, and its leader. This situation would not change for decades to come; and once it did, it was too late.

#### 4.

Of course, over the postwar years, after the already mentioned “editorial *coup d'état*”, and with the transformation of the “socialist culture review” into an organ of the Councils movement, Gramsci's stance rapidly toughened, or, one could even say, “Bolshevized” itself. One must not forget that that was still the era when, as far as Western socialists were concerned, Russia was the country where “a hundred flowers bloomed”: proof that there existed no contrast nor contradiction between communism and culture. This represented, in a new form, the return of the young Gramsci's authentic *leit motiv*. After all, it appears to be particularly significant that he paid so much attention to Anatoly Lunacharsky – at that time the Soviet People's Commissar for Enlightenment – ever since his collaboration in the newspaper *Grido del Popolo*. The newspaper had published an article by the Soviet intellectual, where he argued that cultural activity such as “self-education and proletarian creation” should play an

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22 Gramsci, A. *Lo Stato e il socialismo*, in «L'Ordine Nuovo», 28th June – 5th July 1919; now in ID., *L'Ordine Nuovo*, Op.Cit., pp. 114-20.



equal role compared to the other three typical facets of the working class movement: politics, economics, and cooperation.<sup>23</sup>

This remained the peculiar viewpoint of the *L'Ordine Nuovo* even after having adhered to the theory and practice of Workers' Councils: a respect for art, passion for culture, and some sort of omnivorous hunger for anything that could provide teaching. When speaking of respect for art, not only was reference being made to a place for creativity, expression, and research, but also to a form of truth, of the highest and most noble kind. From this point of view, Gramsci and the other *ordinovisti* had to fight long and hard against widespread stereotypes according to which communism and art were incompatible. As previously mentioned, it was the magical era of the Russian *statu nascenti*, when even Marinetti could find interested listeners. At that time, Gramsci was easily able to compose an authentic paean to a communism that glorified art, as opposed to a capitalist society where poetry was “subdued to the [...] laws of supply and demand”, by “merchants greedy for wealth and exploitation”. The latter, “whilst artificially launching literary adventurers, let first-class artists die of starvation and desperation”, committing authentic “crimes against living creators of beauty”. On the contrary, communism was on a different wavelength. Freeing men from their wage-slavery would allow them back into the world they had been excluded from – “the reign of beauty and grace”.<sup>24</sup>

However, the communist aspiration was directly and immediately related to construction, since the revolution should be built, rather than awaited: in fact, the factory, a physical, economic and organizational space for industrial production, was also at the heart of society. Starting from this vital organ, and through instruments of self-organization, the working class could assemble the center of proletarian counter-power, repudiating the bureaucratic separation between unionists and non-unionists. Internal commissions – who shortly after acquired the form of Italian soviets, i.e. Workers' Councils -, “in the tomorrow would have to become the organs of the proletarian power that would substitute the capitalist in all his functions of management and administration”.<sup>25</sup> Clearly, Gramsci already presented a formula here of proletarian dictatorship that led late Marxism to Leninism. Nonetheless, in Marxism, this formula held an eminently democratic meaning (the overthrowing of bourgeois dictatorship, with the difference

<sup>23</sup> See ID., *La cultura nel movimento socialista*, in «Il Grido del Popolo», 1st June 1918. Now in ID., *Il nostro Marx. 1918-1919*, ed. Caprioglio, S. Turin: Einaudi, 1984, p. 77.

<sup>24</sup> ID., *Cronache dell'“Ordine Nuovo”*, in «L'Ordine Nuovo», 14th June 1919, now in ID., *L'Ordine Nuovo*, Op. Cit., p. 78-79.

<sup>25</sup> ID., *Democrazia operaia*, Op.Cit.

being that here the great majority of the population – in other words the proletariat – would dominate the meager bourgeois minority). How was Gramsci's version of the dictatorship of the proletariat unique?

First of all, according to him, proletarian dictatorship was the movement that suppressed the order of capitalist production and created a new order; it abolished private property of the means of production, and established collective property. At the same time, however, proletarian dictatorship would have a productive and organizational meaning: it would allow an escape from the economic crisis of the postwar period, improve the nation's (and nations') economic fabric, and increase production itself: "no society can survive without production, let alone a dictatorship that, acting within conditions of economic decay after five years of war, and months of armed bourgeois terrorism, needs an extremely high level of production".<sup>26</sup> However, according to Gramsci, proletarian dictatorship ("which must stop being nothing but a formula") possesses a strong pedagogical tension: there is no improvisation yet socialism and the proletarian State cannot be created from scratch. The "communist practice" of "collective" discussion had to be launched in time for it to create a fabric of intrinsic solidarity, set the foundations for a new proletarian life, and plant the seed of socialist culture.<sup>27</sup> Nonetheless, the essential core continued to be a pedagogical work in the cultural realm, which had to help prepare and accompany the revolution and the construction of the proletarian state, and of a new order.

This is the idea behind the renowned motto of the protests of 1968, that "truth is revolutionary". As Gramsci wrote: "Saying the truth, and reaching the truth together, is carrying out the communist and revolutionary action".<sup>28</sup> It is easy to see how "«communism», i.e. socialism in real terms, has drifted apart from the practice of truth; nevertheless, it is even more important to highlight that there existed this overt requirement at the origin of Italian communism.

There existed a theory of revolution behind the willpower to create a communist Party: ever since 1919 Gramsci identified an objective need for revolution. "Proletarian revolution is imposed, not proposed".<sup>29</sup> This position should be aligned with that expressed in the comments regarding

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<sup>26</sup> ID., *I sindacati e la dittatura*, in «L'Ordine Nuovo», 25th October 1919; now in ID., *L'Ordine Nuovo*, Op. Cit., p. 256-62.

<sup>27</sup> ID., *Democrazia operaia* cit.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>29</sup> ID., *Lo sviluppo della rivoluzione*, in «L'Ordine Nuovo», 13th September 1919; now in ID., *L'Ordine Nuovo*, op. cit., pp. 203-207.

events in Russia, *The Revolution Against Capital*<sup>30</sup>, published in 1917. In Russia, the war not only plunged the situation into chaos from a socio-economic point of view, it also “served to awaken willpower”. Socialism inspired that huge social body constituted by the proletariat, creating a united willpower, a social willpower. The latter allowed the development of conditions needed to achieve full socio-economic maturity.

Gramsci was inspired by Lenin in regards to two key issues: 1) despite the fact that socio-economic structure constitutes the foundation of history, it is men (“men in flesh and blood”: an extremely functional expression used by both Marx and Gramsci) who concretely make history; 2) Proletarian dictatorship is necessary and does not consist in the abolition of the State, but in the substitution of the (bourgeois) State with another (the proletarian one), built upon the Soviets (= Councils).

Another issue is the following: even though Gramsci was erroneously setting the question, perhaps he was not (completely) wrong in perceiving that the postwar situation implied a radical change in socio-political conditions. Nothing would ever be the same, the liberal State had fallen behind and the war had caused too much of an overall and profound disruption for the general state of things to endure: a clash of opposing imperialisms, financial and industrial concentrations and impoverishment of economic resources. Above all, social collision was too strong to be allowed to continue with liberal (pseudo) democracy: from it would sprout either the conquest of power on the part of the working class, or its harsh defeat. According to Gramsci, the conquest of power represents the foundation of the economic rebirth of the collective, and it implies “stopping the process of dissolution of the civil world, and setting the grounds for a new order where useful activities could be restarted, as well as a new, energetic, rapid and vital impetus towards higher forms of production and cohabitation”.<sup>31</sup>

In this sense, the proletariat effectively represented a “general class”: a concept that Gramsci essentially defined at the national level. Doing the revolution, and creating a party that would establish a proletarian dictatorship (the republic of Councils, i.e. a self-managed democracy), represented for the working class the fulfillment of a national duty. From this also stemmed the issue of the relation between democracy and socialism. There was no unambiguous, coherent position; there were plenty

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<sup>30</sup> ID., *La rivoluzione contro il Capitale*, in «Avanti!», 24th December 1917; now in ID., *La città futura (1917-1918)*, ed. Caprioglio, S. Turin: Einaudi, 1982, pp. 513-17 and in ID., *Scritti dalla libertà*, Op.Cit., pp. 244-47.

<sup>31</sup> ID., *Lo sviluppo della rivoluzione*, Op. Cit.

of changes of opinion and doubts: nonetheless, this relation stood at the very core of the building of the revolutionary process. Without the objective conditions there could be no revolution; there could be no revolution without the subjective preparation of those who had to do it; and there could be no socialism without a higher form of democracy.

## 5.

During the first elections of the postwar years (November 1919), the Italian Socialist Party (*Partito Socialista Italiano* – PSI) was widely successful; according to Gramsci, this reflected the will of the masses: “a socialist government [that] would use in their favor the State’s administrative, legal, military, and procurement apparatus”. Nevertheless, given what would be in the powers of socialist members of parliament, the underlying issue was a different one, which could only be resolved with and within the masses.

The masses must understand that the resolution of the terrible problems of our times will not be possible so long as the State will be based on private property and national-bureaucratic property, so long as industrial and agricultural production will be based on the individual and competitive initiative of capitalists and large landowners./ They must understand that a radical solution must be found within the masses themselves, organized appropriately so as to constitute an apparatus of social power, the apparatus of the proletarian and peasant State, the producers’ State. However, it cannot be an abstract, passive conviction. The Party must show them proactive work, reconstructive work: the Party must give the impetus for proletarian and peasant Councils to become a reality, and not remain dead words of a congress resolution.<sup>32</sup>

In fact, the decisive phase of the development of Workers’ Councils began in the autumn of 1919: after the constitution of the first Fiat Councils, the idea started to visibly transform (certainly thanks the influence of Rosa Luxemburg and Daniel De Leon on Gramsci) into a movement, which not only became fully recognized within the PSI, but also started to become known at the national and international level: the previous month, Gramsci had met the English communist Sylvia Pankhurst in Turin (Togliatti would later translate a series of *Letters from England* regarding the *L’Ordine*

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<sup>32</sup> ID., *La settimana politica*, in «L’Ordine Nuovo», I, 27, 22nd November 1919, now therein pp. 328-30 (329-30) and in ID., *La nostra città futura. Scritti torinesi (1911-1922)*, edited by A. D’Orsi, Carocci, Roma 2004, pp. 188-90.

*Nuovo*), and the French revolutionary syndicalist Georges Sorel had expressed his fondest appreciation of the newspaper. This appraisal, in fact, brought upon the Turin group suspicions of anarchic-trade unionism, and of generally not aligning with Party ideals. This was demonstrated at the Bologna Congress in October of that year, and during the November elections, when, among the wide-spread socialist success, none of the *ordinovisti* were elected; as a matter of fact, not one of them was even nominated<sup>33</sup>. Nonetheless, Gramsci took it upon himself to clarify the *ordinovisti*'s position regarding said accusations:

The trade unionist tendencies of the *L'Ordine Nuovo* are nothing but a myth: we only bear the fault of believing that the communist revolution can only be carried out by the masses, and not by a party secretary, nor a president of the republic by force of decrees: apparently this opinion is also shared by Karl Marx and Rosa Luxemburg, and Lenin, hence, according to Treves and Turati, they are all anarchic trade unionists.<sup>34</sup>

Even during his reflections in prison, he felt the need to explain in which direction the movement's "spontaneity" and "voluntarism" had been going:

This direction was not "abstract", it did not consist in the systematic repetition of scientific or theoretical formulas: it did not confuse politics or real action with theoretical disquisition; it applied to real men, formed within given historical dynamics, with definite sentiments, ways of living, fragments of conceptions of the world, etc., which resulted in the "spontaneous" combinations of a given environment of material production, and the "casual" agglomeration within it of diverse social elements. This element of "spontaneity" was neither neglected nor despised: it was *educated*, directed, purified from all that might pollute it, to make it more homogeneous with modern theory, but in a historically efficient, alive manner. The very leaders were talking of "spontaneity" of the movement; it was right that it was talked about: this statement represented a stimulating and energetic element of profound unification, and

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<sup>33</sup> The "Soviet" of 3 October 1920, reporting on the discussion which took place at the II Congress of the International Communist (July-August, Moscow-St. Petersburg), underlined Serrati's and Graziadei's positions, who believe the Turin group to be undisciplined. Bombacci thought that it would be dangerous to "value the trade unionist tendencies of the *L'Ordine Nuovo*", Op. Cit. in SPRIANO, «*L'Ordine Nuovo*» e i consigli di fabbrica cit., p. 115.

<sup>34</sup> A. GRAMSCI, [not confirmed], «Cronache dell'Ordine Nuovo», II, 9, 9th October 1920, now in ID., *L'Ordine Nuovo*, Op.Cit., pp. 703-704.

was above all else the denial that it was something arbitrary, adventurous, unnatural [and not historically necessary]. It gave the masses a «theoretical» conscience, to create historical and institutional values, and found States.<sup>35</sup>

1920 turned out to be a decisive year for the Councils, and consequently for Antonio Gramsci's notoriety: at the PSI Congress of October 1919 in Bologna he was a semi-anonymous local delegate, whilst during the course of the following year he managed to impose himself as a recognized leader at the national level. Gramsci was strongly convinced that 1920 was a year to further develop the process started in 1919, a year which he referred to as the year "that has seen the dawn of the history of the human kind freed from classes and intestinal wars".<sup>36</sup> Based on events taking place in Italy and internationally, as well as on ideas he gathered from reading, Gramsci unraveled an ever richer line of thought, which gradually became more precise and dissimilar to that of the other prominent editor of *L'Ordine Nuovo*, Angelo Tasca. The latter, despite his remarkable effort to promote unity within the party and trade unions, "tended, in substance, towards diminishing the novelty and revolutionary charge of Workers' Councils".<sup>37</sup> From this point of view, and at the more general political level, Tasca's political line, within a general trend of moderation, progressively detached from that of the other three founders of the newspaper, who, despite their differences, all held a distinctly more revolutionary stand-point. From this, Gramsci's relative isolation resulted, when, in 1920, the time came to define a line for the autumn administrative elections: split with Tasca, he did not identify with Bordiga's abstentionism either. The latter, after the II Congress of the International Communist, had become a recognized national leader, with followers in the Turin section of the PSI. Nonetheless, Gramsci was perhaps trying to distance himself even more from Togliatti's and Terracini's election craze. Subsequently, the Group for communist education that he established was adhered to by only a handful of comrades and in the August elections for Secretary in the Turin Section, Togliatti was elected, instead of Gramsci.

## 6.

<sup>35</sup> ID., *Quaderni del carcere*, Critical Edition of the Istituto Gramsci, ed. Gerratana, V. therein, 1975, 4 vol. The citation is from Q. 3 (1939), p. 330.

<sup>36</sup> ID., *L'anno rivoluzionario*, in «Avanti!» (Piedmont edition), 1st January 1920, now in ID., *L'Ordine Nuovo*, Op.Cit, pp. 373-75 (375).

<sup>37</sup> SPRIANO, «*L'Ordine Nuovo*» e i Consigli di fabbrica. Op.Cit, p. 89

It was perhaps also to overcome this isolation that Gramsci convinced his brother Gennaro to come to Turin, and assigned him the role of administrator of the newspaper; the latter's originality risked contributing to the exclusion from the Party of these "young men", who were "true self-taught revolutionaries".<sup>38</sup> Nonetheless, one of their shortcomings was a "Turin-centrism", in that they used the city's social and political reality as a national paradigm (which is in fact a rather relevant mistake, since the overall level of political conscience of the great majority of Italian popular masses was far from the one achieved in this city.)<sup>39</sup> Still, the *ordinovistic* theoretical originality was largely identified in the determination of an Italian way applied to the theory and practice of Workers' Councils. According to Gramsci, the Turin working class, "vanguard of the Italian proletariat" (as he repeatedly observed, with an exaggerated optimism), had the task of learning to exercise control of production, subtracting it from capitalists, thus increasing the industrial production capacity, and eliminating profit and its beneficiaries. The Council had to substitute capitalist property not only at the symbolic and political level, but also at a concrete and managerial level. "Proletarian control" was supposed to be proof of, on the one hand, the working class' ability to take a leading role in the management of production, whilst rationalizing and increasing it; and on the other hand, its more general aptitude to be the ruling class. Once again the idea appeared, which had already emerged in June 1919, that the factory should be at the heart of the state, and that the citizen-producer should have a central role in the emancipation from wage-slavery, and be the founding element for the construction of a new society.

In this sense, the foremost strength of the *ordinovisti* was being within the working class, and knowing how to hear its voice and interpret its needs; Gramsci personally made an example of himself in this regard. If he did indeed overestimate the possibilities of a revolution in Italy, also due to the deformed perspective he derived from his Turin-centric view, it is equally true that he was cognizant of the dangers faced by the movement, always aware of the huge difficulties the proletariat was facing, and the immensity of the effort necessary to proceed.

Bourgeois society is anything but simple; it is a complex set of organisms that, whilst operating in an apparently autonomous manner, conspire towards a common goal. Neither will a communal society be simple. The reflection on the problem of

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<sup>38</sup> Lombardo Rdice, LO; Carbone, G. *Vita di Antonio Gramsci*. Roma: Edizioni di Cultura Sociale, 1952, p. 88.

<sup>39</sup> See d'Orsi, A. *Introduzione* to A. Gramsci, *Scritti dalla libertà*, Op.Cit..

the Councils clarifies all the more the gravity of the problems regarding reconstruction, and how there exists no single formula for their solution. [...] Building a communal society means, first and foremost, trying to use class struggle to create organisms able to develop a system for all humanity.<sup>40</sup>

It was, thus, necessary to overcome the purely trade-unionist vision, founded on the pursuit of objectives that were at the same time limited and immediate, and assume a universalistic point of view. Turin represented an exceptional position for the development and acceleration of the proletarian movement. Socialism and proletarian dictatorship were, above all else, needed to save the “magnificent apparatus of industrial production, intellectual production and propulsion of civil life” which was this city; Turin, in particular, represented a “decisive historical force” of the national State, and “forge of the Italian capitalist revolution”, despite not being the capitalist city par excellence, like Milan (“real capital of the bourgeois dictatorship”). Turin, on the other hand, “is the industrial city par excellence, the proletarian city par excellence. The Turin working class is compact, disciplined, distinguished as only in a few other cities around the world. Turin is like one single factory: its working population is of one kind, and is strongly unified by industrial production”.<sup>41</sup>

Faith in the Turin proletariat, and in its role of guidance for the communist revolution in Italy, immediately translated for Gramsci into work towards the conquering of factories, to establish a potentially substitutive power to capitalist command. This is what Workers' Councils were for, and in alliance with those created in rural areas; they would be an instrument for the pedagogical and cultural transformation of the subjects of the revolution (the proletariat). Moreover, it would be a tool for the taking over of the economic system, recovering it from the state of decay the war had plunged it into, developing it, redeeming it from capitalist relations, and directing it towards the establishment of communism, with a constant, “strenuous effort towards productivity”. What was, in Gramsci's idea the role of trade unions? “Obviously trade unions also adopt a revolutionary character if, and only if, their action stops being addressed towards immediate objectives, and starts working towards a final goal which goes

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<sup>40</sup> Gramsci, A. *L'esempio della Russia*, in «L'Ordine Nuovo», I, 33, 10th January 1920, now in ID., *L'Ordine Nuovo*, Op. Cit., pp. 381-85 (381).

<sup>41</sup> ID., *La settimana politica*, Op.Cit., in therein, pp. 386-90 (387).



past struggle between professions, and if this goal is explicitly and consciously expressed".<sup>42</sup>

The real opportunities of the Turin proletariat, its relations with the trade unions and political structures of Italian socialism, and the role of Workers' Councils, faced a revealing moment during the battle of the spring of 1920, also known as the "strike of the clock-hands". A month-long struggle started, which included a 10-day general strike throughout the whole of Piedmont, involving half a million industrial and agricultural workers. The strike, however, ended due to a harsh defeat of the Councils movement, ratified on April 24 with the signing of an agreement elaborated by the prefect.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, this event represented a great proof of the maturity of Turin working class. An atmosphere of enthusiasm and hope reigned in the city. Even those who did not work in factories were directly involved: there was a need to "maintain a connection between one factory and the next, among the different organizations, and between the struggling workers and the families". In the words of the "professional revolutionary" and party militant Teresa Noce: "Those of us who were not occupying, were always among the workers that directed the struggle".<sup>44</sup> The workers saw occupations as a more revolutionary form of struggle than the general strike: "do as the Russians" became their motto; in this perspective, defense, also armed, was organized. One should not forget that "even though there were hundreds of millions of Liras in the plants' safes, the workers paid for all expenses with their personal money, funds from some trade unions, and class solidarity".<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> ID., *L'esempio della Russia*, Op.Cit., therein, pp. 381-85 (381-82).

<sup>43</sup> For a reconstruction of events, see SPRIANO, «*L'Ordine Nuovo*» e i Consigli di fabbrica cit., p. 101. The agreement provided for a rise in salary of 4 Liras per day for metallurgists, and an increase in salary of up to 20% for other workers. Moreover, the government promised to as soon as possible present to the parliament a law draft for the «workers' control of the industry». Finally, it was guaranteed that there would be no retaliation against the workers that occupied the factories. See Noce, N. *Rivoluzionaria professionale. La storia del P.C.I. nella vita appassionata di una donna*. Milan: Bompiani, 1974, p. 41.

<sup>44</sup> Noce, N. *Rivoluzionaria professionale*, Op.Cit., p. 40.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* Regarding this experience see also the testimony by Viglono, in D'Orsi, *I fucili nelle rotative*, Op.Cit., pp. 104-105: "The workers who occupied the factories were convinced they had them, so they took care of production. It was a merit to demonstrate that during the occupation of the factories there was still production: the workers produced [...]. Naturally production was very difficult because it was complicated: the stocking of raw materials was impossible, and the supply, despite being excellent, was also very difficult. On the other hand, the "Saturday pay" that Luigi Einaudi counted on was not a big problem: he used to say 'we'll see them on Saturday'. However, despite there being no pay on Saturdays because there were no buyers who paid [...], the workers kept on working and producing. If the reformist trade union movement had not reached an agreement, led by the

## 7.

How did Gramsci feel about this defeat? His analysis was clear and bitter. Nonetheless, his resolution and strength of will did not fade. And he was the first to incite the proletariat, highlight its heroism, and theorize regarding its invincible strength.

During the general strike, capitalism and State power unsheathed all their weapons. The bourgeois State provided Turin industrialists with fifty-thousand men under arms, with armored cars, flamethrowers, light batteries; for ten days the city was at the mercy of royal guards, the working class seemed to have been annihilated, to have disappeared into darkness. Industrialists, having raised ten million Liras, flooded the city with posters and leaflets, hired journalists and 'barabbas', provocateurs and strikebreakers, published a newspaper that used the same typographical style as the strike bulletin, diffused scaremonger news, false news, started associations, leagues, trade unions, political parties, from every corner of the city; [...]; the only thing that the working class had to oppose this unleashing of capitalist forces was nothing more than its energy, resistance, and sacrifice. Metallurgic workers lasted one month, without salary: many of them suffered hunger, had to pawn their belongings at the Mount of Piety; the rest of the working population also suffered hardship, misery, desolation [...]. The strike ended with a defeat; the idea that had brought the fighters forwards was scorned even by some of the working class representatives; the energy and the faith of the leaders of the general strike was labeled as illusion, naivety, and a mistake; once back in the factories, the proletariat had to take a step back due to the terrible pressure enforced upon them by the owner-class and the power of the State: a discouragement, a bending of consciences and willpower, the undoing of class sentiments and energy could be justified, the prevailing of bitterness could be natural, a step back of the revolutionary army could be predicted.<sup>46</sup>

Yet, even after this terrible experience, hope was not to be lost; Gramsci adopted Romain Rolland's motto, "pessimism of intelligence, optimism of willpower", and transformed it into the insignia of political

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national FIOM and the Confederacy of Work..., if they hadn't reached a compromise, the workers could have resisted for who knows how long...".

<sup>46</sup> Gramsci, A. *La forza della Rivoluzione*, in «L'Ordine Nuovo», I, 2, 8th May 1920, now in ID., *L'Ordine Nuovo*, Op.Cit., pp. 518-20 (518-19); and in ID., *Scritti dalla libertà*, Op.Cit., pp. 363-65.

action, but also of existence: “Our pessimism may have increased, but our willpower has not decreased”.<sup>47</sup> The great Mayday protest following the strike of the clock-hands, which ended with a terrible police repression that did not manage to wear down the people’s fighting spirit, represented for him a proof that the Turin proletariat, despite having been defeated, had not been won. And it was ready to fight.

[...] the hungry, the miserable, the flogged to blood by the capitalist whip, the scorned by their own unaware or infamous struggle comrades (?), have not lost faith in the future of the working class, have not lost faith in the communist revolution; the whole of Turin’s proletariat flooded the streets and squares to demonstrate its belief in the revolution, to unleash against the millions and billions of wealth of the capitalist class the human strengths of the working class, the hundreds of thousands of hearts, arms, and brains of the working class, to contrast the safes with the iron battalions of militants of the proletarian revolution.<sup>48</sup>

The “weekly review of socialist culture”, the *L’Ordine Nuovo*, had by this point become a declared instrument for the working-class revolutionary struggle, and was recognized by Lenin as “fully respondent to the fundamental principles of the II Comintern”.<sup>49</sup> When commenting on the first anniversary of the newspaper (“a year of research, experience, taste, networking; a year of uncertainties, also, errors, also, disillusiones, also”), its author summarized the ideology of the *ordinovisti* as follows:

[...] the constitution of the proletarian State must be founded on the factory, on the workers’ organization of the factory, in whose hands industrial power, now held by the private owner, must be deposited [...]. Having supported with honesty and ardor the theoretical thesis and dependent practices of this line of thought, the *L’Ordine Nuovo* has won the sympathy of many among the vanguard of the industrial and agricultural working classes in Italy, and a lot of spite and hatred on the part of the enemies of the working class.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Gramsci, A. *Funzionarismo*, in «L’Ordine Nuovo», 4th March 1921, now in ID., *Socialismo e fascismo*. Turin: Einaudi, 1966, pp. 90-91.

<sup>48</sup> ID., *La forza della Rivoluzione*, Op.Cit.

<sup>49</sup> Cfr. *Tesi sui compiti fondamentali del II Congresso dell’I.C.*, point 17, in LENIN, V.I. *Sul movimento operaio italiano*, Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1962, p. 4.

<sup>50</sup> Gramsci, A. *Cronache dell’“Ordine Nuovo”*, now in ID., *L’Ordine Nuovo*, Op.Cit., pp. 500-501.

During the occupation of the factories, a real overturning of the existing order took place; however, it was not merely a form of protest, a refusal of that order; it was, rather, precisely an attempt to establish a “new order”.

Working class activity, initiatives in production, internal order, military defense on the part of the working class! The social hierarchy has been broken, historical values inverted; the “working” class, the “instrumental” class has become the “ruling” class, it has taken the lead, found representatives within itself, men that can be invested with government power, men that can assume all functions of an elementary and mechanical aggregate to form an organic structure, a living creature. [...] Today, with the proletarian occupation, the factory’s despotic power has been broken [...]. Every factory is an illegal State, a proletarian republic living day by day, awaiting the evolving of events.<sup>51</sup>

## 8.

Events might have not been favorable, both due to a lack of support of the Councils movement by the Party and trade unions, and to the internal divisions of the movement itself, and the delayed response of the leaders to the emergencies of the historical situation.<sup>52</sup> Years later, this judgment would still not change. A letter by Gramsci to Alfonso Leonetti, dated 28<sup>th</sup> of January 1924, reads as follows:

[...] in 1919-20, we made very serious mistakes [...]. For fear of being labelled as status seekers and careerists, we did not establish a fraction and try to organize it in the whole of Italy. We did not want to give the Turin Workers’ Councils an autonomous executive center, which could have exercised a great amount of influence all over the country, for fear of a division among trade unions and of being prematurely expelled from the PSI.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>51</sup> ID., *Domenica rossa*, in “Avanti!”, 5th September 1920, now in ID., *L'Ordine Nuovo*, Op.Cit., pp. 668- 72 (668-69) and in ID., *Scritti dalla libertà*, Op.Cit., pp. 382-84.

<sup>52</sup> It cannot be forgotten, for the sake of argument, that “L’Avanti!” refused to print in Milan the manifesto of the Turin section of the party, which invoked the solidarity of all workers. The newspaper harshly commented on the strike, judging it as a “painful experiment”, in Spriano, P. *L'Ordine Nuovo e i Consigli*, Op.Cit., p. 99.

<sup>53</sup> See the letter of 28 January 1924, in Togliatti, P. *La formazione del gruppo dirigente del Partito comunista italiano nel 1923-1924*. Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1962, pp. 461-62.

Fruitful work, discipline, rigorous dedication, seriousness in resolutions, attention to real necessities and problems, and not to mere ideological issues: the Gramsci of autumn 1920 was not, in essence, so different from the one that had arrived to the city nine year earlier, despite the obvious process of intellectual, political and human growth. Now, the progressive, inevitable hardening of his political position, in an anti-reformist and filo-Bolshevik sense, would shortly after lead him from the communist Fraction, to the Communist Party of Italy (PCd'I).

The failure of the "Italian revolution", following the occupation of the factories, did not induce Gramsci to withdraw in the heat of the moment; the battle continued, and, before transferring it to the insignias of the PCd'I, in January 1921, he still led it from the PSI, within the group of young people which had constituted itself as "communist Fraction". The priority was to defend the communist idea and principle from the daily ideological attacks on the part of the press, and turn those attacks around towards the bourgeoisie, which by then appeared to be in complete moral, and social, decay. The situation left behind by the war was "atrocious", and, addressing his political rivals, Gramsci added:

it is the landscape of your "civilization", collapsed like a building with no human inhabitants, it is the landscape of your institutions, reduced to mere form with no driving spirit; it is your imperialistic war that mowed down five-hundred-thousand youths, the flower of productive forces, and reduced another half a million energies to an army of beggars and wretches; it is your inability to give a bloody world back its peace; it is the unconstrained luxury and thirst of pleasures that you have triggered among your irresponsible ranks; it is the barbarity, slackness in work, the elementary brutal instinct that you have filthily prompted because of your hunger for riches and power: this landscape is that of your decomposition as a class of incompetents and failures, overcome by history.<sup>54</sup>

In the face of such a landscape of debris, Gramsci continued to contrast, with strength but without denying the difficulties of such a huge task, revolutionary willpower: communism as the only alternative to the barbarities and catastrophe of humanity. For such a task, recalling Marx was fundamental, whilst highlighting the importance of "re-elaborating, within the master's conceptions, present reality".

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54 Gramsci, A. *La Compagnia di Gesù*, in «Avanti!» 9 oct. 1920, now in ID., *L'Ordine Nuovo*, Op.Cit., pp. 705-707 and in Id., *Scritti dalla libertà*, Op.Cit., pp. 390-93.

Despite developing his political position in an ever more Leninist sense, Gramsci continued to use different resources, directly and indirectly, from Sorel to Rosa Luxemburg, with a strong characterization of his own socialism, which could in some way be defined as “national” and “Turin-based” at the same time; nevertheless, he always remained lucidly antinationalist and intensely internationalist. His journalist work transformed more and more into political action, whilst the criticism of the reformists’ “wait and see policy” and of the verbal extremism of inflexible Party members, lethally brought Gramsci and his comrades of the communist Fraction to separation from the mother organization. During the two years following the end of the war he focalized onto a new political conception; now it was time to transform it into action. The problem he faced was the appropriation, in its original terms, of the soviet revolutionary experience, which forced him to “stand up to a socialist tradition”<sup>55</sup>. Gramsci’s very work, just as Bordiga’s and the others – especially between Turin, Naples and Milan – who would bring the PCd’I to life, thus placed itself inside the crisis of the Italian socialist movement; however, “Gramsci constituted the most advanced and complex part of this crisis. In the permanent acquisition of new strategic and tactical terms in which to set out the class struggle”.<sup>56</sup>

## 9.

In reality, after the occupation of the factories, and up until his death, Gramsci considered the problem of the revolution in Italy (and in Europe) both in terms of a reflection on defeat (the pessimism of reason), and in those of a resetting of a possible counter-charge (the optimism of willpower). Even though with time the first prevailed, together they represented a critical meditation on the reasons behind a failed revolution. Hence, Gramsci immersed himself into the fervent debate, which had arisen both in Turin and elsewhere, regarding the imminent Congress of the Socialist Party. At the end of the month, after having been announced in a Manifesto published in October in Milan, the communist Fraction officially came to being in Imola; in it, however, Bordiga’s position strongly prevailed, which, on the contrary to Gramsci’s encouragement of an action of renovation from within, argued for the immediate rupture from the mother organization. Bordiga prevailed, also thanks to the backing of Soviet circles and Lenin himself. In short, Gramsci was no protagonist of the

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<sup>55</sup> de Felice, F. *Serrati, Bordiga, Gramsci e il problema della rivoluzione in Italia 1919-1920*. Bari: De Donato, 1971, p. 391.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

separation of Livorno, nor of the founding of the Communist Party; he accepted this, after all, with no major enthusiasm. Nonetheless, he later stuck by the defense of its reasons and necessities, quite like Marx had done with the Communes.

Bordiga was the real author of the separation, and at the Congress in Livorno Gramsci did not even speak: he was, however, elected representative of the Turin group, together with Terracini, within the central Committee of the new Party, finally called “Communist”. The Turin group, since January 1, 1921, in other words since before the founding of the PCd'I, had already established a daily newspaper, which maintained the title and premises of the *L'Ordine Nuovo*, on Arcivescovado St. in Turin, but in fact pursued the well-tested experience of the Piedmont edition of the *Avanti!*. The circulation also remained more or less the same (30-40,000 copies) and the editor-in-chief, Gramsci, became its director. Within this new newspaper, a small community of editors, typographer, professionals, and readers was brought together. Yet, it was not a party newspaper in the strictest sense; in fact, Piero Gobetti was hired to be in charge of the theatre page and to collaborate in the literary section: this had previously been taken care of by Gramsci himself, who decisively influenced the professional preparedness of this young man. Unforgettable pages by the director of the *L'Ordine Nuovo* read as follows:

Through his work in the newspaper, he has been put into contact with a living world that he had previously only known through formulas in books. His most outstanding characteristics were his intellectual loyalty and the complete absence of any form of petty vanity or meanness: thus, he could not help but convince himself that a whole series of ways of looking at, and thinking about, the proletariat were false and unfair.<sup>57</sup>

10.

Ever since the editorial of the first issue of the newspaper, not signed but without a doubt written by Gramsci, one could perceive a particular tension between being an eminent member of the new party – a section of the Comintern and thus having a series of obligations –, and the originality of a line which, before it was political, was intellectual and human. The formula of the “proletarian State”, so often evoked, was now being more

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<sup>57</sup> Gramsci, A. *La costruzione del Partito Comunista. 1923-1926*. Turin: Einaudi, 1971, p. 157.

analytically explained. Within the centrality and almost-sacredness of the idea of the state, concepts and cultural auras that in Gramsci were already present since his first years in Turin resurfaced: discipline and hierarchy, words used in a very different way to that developed and repeated in those same years by Alfredo Rocco or Benito Mussolini (“*Gerarchia*” - hierarchy – was the theoretical newspaper founded by the Duce exactly one year later, in January 1922); men in flesh and blood, together with the overcoming of disorganic individuality: the young humanism is not left behind, but it is at the same time tempered by an attention to the reasons of the state, which certainly should not be confused with the “National Interest”. There was no “firm domination of the people”, according to Botero’s famous definition of the state nor “news of half attempts to buy it, keep it, confirm it” for the “National Interest”. Here, there was the opposite, the state of the workers, which is also – as Gramsci clarifies – the state of peasants and of all the other states of populations who recognized the need to break the bourgeois machine and substitute it with a new one, which would keep in mind the fact that the great majority of the population was proletarian or semi-proletarian. In the Comintern, Gramsci saw the intent to create a global proletarian state, starting from the Russian core. Also from this arises his harsh critique of the Italian socialist leaders’ policies, who were unable to understand events and guide the masses within and ahead of them. The PSI was not able to “organize the political life of the Italian people”, nor provide it with a sense of direction or objective. This is mainly due to the fact that the party did not possess its own notion of the state, and operated politically accordingly. The new state hierarchy needed to have the working class at the top, and the socialist party (or the communist party, from then on: even though the PCd’I had not yet formally been born) had to be its political representation. Those who tried to represent all (as Italian socialists do) ended up not representing anyone. Nonetheless, to this canonical position of Leninist revolutionary vanguard (in the shoes of the urban proletariat), Gramsci added a desire and a need for institutional functioning, seriousness of people, importance of work, and honesty in behavior.

Whilst Gramsci’s popularity in the city grew, within the new party he maintained rather isolated positions; he did not share Bordiga’s line, extremist to the point of sectarianism, but did not mean to attack it, in particular due to his full awareness of the dramatic moment the working class movement and the proletariat were going through, suffering the extremely violent and systematic aggression by fascist groups. In the political elections of 1921, which constituted a great success for the new party – even within an overall situation of retreat on the part of antifascist forces – Francesco Misiano and Pietro Rabezzana were elected members of



parliament, but not Gramsci. This was not at all surprising; an acute observant of the Comintern efficiently described the situation: “Gramsci, a lot more profound than other comrades, analyzes the situation fairly. He acutely understands the Russian revolution. Yet, on the outside, he cannot influence the masses. First of all, he is no public speaker; secondly, he is young, short and hunchbacked, which has a deep meaning for listeners”.<sup>58</sup> After all, by this point Gramsci’s physical and psychological conditions had once again worsened, and family problems had arisen to create new sources of worry. His health and family problems, together with his dissatisfaction with the prevalence of Bordiga’s line within the Party, heightened his sensitivity. Reliable witnesses, such as Alfonso Leonetti, later spoke of his nervousness, some degree of irritability, and his violent scolding of the editors, demanding the uttermost seriousness, rigor, and dedication. We must demonstrate to the owners – he repeated – that we are capable, what the working class and its newspaper are capable of. If we do not know how to manage a newspaper, he asked, how do we mean to be capable of managing a state?

As a result of the experience of the Workers’ Councils and of the *L’Ordine Nuovo*, despite the failed attempt to reach immediate objectives, the need to break from the Socialist Party arose clearly: Livorno’s turning point took place precisely in that “warm autumn” under the *Mole*. Many years later, Palmiro Togliatti confirmed:

At the end of 1921, the majority of the proletarian movement of Turin became communist, and this fundamental acquisition was never lost. [...] Turin’s proletariat, in the most industrialized city in Italy, always resumed its leading role in decisive turning points. [...]. For this reason, when remembering the founding of our party, it is necessary to recognize its roots in that string movement which brought to the constitution of Workers’ Councils. The latter were not a creation of Gramsci’s intellect, but rather an organization arisen from the working class itself; likewise, the separation from the socialist party was not imposed, but rather spontaneous, a separation which was rooted in real facts and in the conscience of the Turin proletariat.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> See Degott, cit. in Fiori, G. Op.Cit., p. 175.

<sup>59</sup> Togliatti, P. *Discorsi di Torino*, ed. Gianotti, R. Preface by Pecchioli, U. Turin: Gruppo editoriale piemontese, 1974, p. 406.



# **A last desperate, but futile, attempt to shore up the industrial pillars of apartheid: the miners' strike of 1979 and the impact of the Wiehahn reforms on South African labour**

*Wessel Visser*

## **1 Introduction**

Skilled work in South African industries remained an almost exclusively white preserve until the late 1960s, while at the same time persistent shortages of skilled artisans were beginning to appear in the labour market. As the South African economy continued to expand, there were no longer enough white workers to provide all the artisans required. In addition, South Africa's white worker population was declining steadily. The unemployment that had prevailed among whites in earlier periods had effectively been eliminated and the labour shortage faced by industry was aggravated by the tendency of increasing numbers of white employees to choose higher-status, white-collar occupations in preference to manual work. For the economy as a whole, the lack of skilled labour was becoming an increasingly serious bottleneck. During the early 1970s, the expansion of modern industry and related services was increasingly being retarded by a lack of skilled and semi-skilled workers.

Black workers sensed that the labour market was turning and their bargaining position was improving, especially for those with some skills and experience. A new mood of confidence reinforced old grievances and demands, and a long period of industrial quiescence was finally broken by a remarkable wave of strikes. The movement started spontaneously in the Durban-Pinetown industrial centre at the end of 1972 and continued through 1973 and into 1974, spreading to the Witwatersrand and other key industrial

regions. The strikes were a series of spontaneous, unorganised actions by black workers with no clear demands, but in essence the causes were low wages, increasing cost of living, increasing transport costs and lack of adequate bargaining machinery. There were also hostility between workers and management.<sup>1</sup>

The institutionalized racial separatism entrenched in labour structures and the 1973 strike waves prepared the ground for the unprecedented growth of a new brand of black trade unionism in the history of the South African labour movement. The work stoppages signaled the evolution of a profound consciousness of solidarity and power among the black working masses.<sup>2</sup>

The initiative in the labour field had now passed beyond the reach of the traditional organizations of white labour. However, a clear distinction should be made between mining and manufacturing. Since the Durban strikes, the manufacturing sector experienced black labour activism, employer reform efforts, and structural challenges, which, for various reasons, were not experienced to a similar level by the mining sector until the end of the 1970s.<sup>3</sup> Eventually though, this period of intense turmoil among the black labour force in the manufacturing sector was moving the mining industry to re-examine old labour practices. Events in other spheres, most notably the Soweto uprising of 1976, were putting paid to past policies of paternalism and grand apartheid.<sup>4</sup> Black unrest resulted in a capital outflow and a decreasing influx of immigrants, as well as declining business confidence. South Africa was increasingly threatened with sanctions and disinvestment, while multi-national companies doing business in the country were increasingly forced by employment practices such as the American Sullivan Code to employ black workers also in those labour sectors that were regarded as the exclusive domain of white workers. Apartheid was

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<sup>1</sup> Maré, G.P. *The Durban Strikes 1973*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 2001, pp.9-27,35-38,49,84,99; Feinstein, C.H. *An Economic History of South Africa. Conquest, discrimination and development*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp.191,230-231.

<sup>2</sup> Ncube, D. *The Influence of Apartheid and Capitalism on the development of Black Trade Unions in South Africa*. Johannesburg: Skotaville Publishers, 1985, p.114,143; Maré, Op.Cit., p.45.

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. von Holdt, K. *Transition from below. Forging trade unionism and workplace change in South Africa*. Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 2003 and Forrest, K. *Metal that will not bend. National Union of Metalworkers 1980-1995*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2011. For a discussion of the incipient intransigence in terms of black labour relations in the mining industry, see pp.15-17 of this article.

<sup>4</sup> Lever, J.T. *South African Trade Unionism in an era of Racial Exclusion*. PhD thesis, UNISA, 1992, p.220.

creating political and economic instability, which was detrimental for industrial peace, and it became clear to the National Party (NP) government that labour reform was essential: firstly, as a result of the white manpower shortages, and secondly, to accommodate the interests of black workers in the labour relations system. These factors also resulted in a declining growth rate and would force the apartheid government to reconsider its policies.<sup>5</sup>

In the face of challenges by black workers, the international climate, anxiety on the part of employers, and declining growth rates due to a lack of consumption and shortage of skilled labour, the apartheid state thus embarked on a journey of labour reforms. But, in doing so, they ran head-on into the intransigent interests of one of apartheid's key constituencies and stakeholders: white workers and white miners in particular.

Change in South Africa was not confined to the realm of labour only as political fissures also began to develop in Afrikaner society and within the NP itself since the 1940s. Various authors conclude that the character of the NP in the 1970s was completely different from the "people's party" it had been in the 1940s, when party policy was determined by ordinary party members during NP congresses. In contrast with the situation during the 1948 general election, when the party's victory was determined to a great extent by white working-class constituencies, the NP of the 1970s was controlled by an Afrikaner elite. This elite consisted of an increasing group of urban, middle-class professionals, who were more concerned about their own materialistic needs and comforts than about the altruistic ideals and the obligation to sacrifice and consolidate for the purpose of Afrikaner ethnicity. Consequently this group began to dominate the formulation of party policy, which was submitted for rubber stamping at NP congresses without criticism. Their identification with the Afrikaner people as an ethnic group weakened, while their identification with the idea of a multi-racial South African state grew. These factors, among others, caused the NP to become more and more estranged from Afrikaner working-class supporters and eventually the party forsook them.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Beinart, W. *Twentieth-Century South Africa*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, pp.172-248.

<sup>6</sup> Friedman, S. *Building Tomorrow Today. African Workers in Trade Unions, 1970-1984*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1987, p.167; O'Meara, D. *The Apartheid State and the Politics of the National Party, 1948-1994*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1996, p.165; Lipton, M. *Capitalism and Apartheid. South Africa, 1910-1986*. Cape Town: David Philip, 1989, pp.308,310; Giliomee, H. *The Afrikaners. Biography of a People*. Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2003, pp. 544,598,607,609; Beinart, Op.Cit. p. 248; Barnard, H.J. "Die Rol van die Mynwerkersunie in die Suid-Afrikaanse Politiek, 1978-1982". MA-thesis, Randse

This article investigates the consequences of the recommendations made by the so-called Wiehahn Commission for white labour in the light of these developments as well as the (white) Mine Workers' Union's reaction to the recommendations.

## 2 Prologue to strike: The MWU's reaction to the Wiehahn Commission of Inquiry

Against the background of a worsening economic climate the government appointed the Commission of Inquiry into Labour Legislation on 21 June 1977. The chairperson was Nick Wiehann, a professor of labour relations at the University of South Africa, and in general the commission became known as the Wiehahn Commission. Its terms of reference were to examine all labour legislation and the whole system of labour relations in South Africa, and to make recommendations that would ensure future industrial peace.<sup>7</sup> According to Douwes Dekker, the appointment of this commission was also the result of increasing pressure from organized commerce against discriminating and restrictive labour legislation, the rise of unrecognized black trade unions and the impossibility of suppressing them any longer, as well as increasing pressure from abroad that made it more and more difficult for South Africa to obtain foreign loans.<sup>8</sup>

The conservative, all-white South African Mine Workers' Union (MWU) was deeply concerned about these developments and would eventually react vehemently to the report and the reforms recommended by the Wiehahn Commission and their implications for white labour. Because of the protracted period of state protection since the promulgation of the Industrial Conciliation Act of 1924, many white workers were totally unprepared for any socio-economic reforms or black advancement, which they saw as a direct threat to their own position. The recommendations of the Commission drew the battle-lines along which the MWU would attempt to thwart these reforms on every level of implementation. White workers resented the desegregation of public amenities and the possibility of having

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Afrikaanse Universiteit, 1991, pp.118; van Rooyen, J. *Hard Right. The New White Power in South Africa*. London and New York: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1994, p.30; Cooper, C. The Mineworkers' Strike. *South African Labour Bulletin*, 5, 3, October 1979, p.20; Usher, D. The strike that fell on deaf ears. *Sunday Tribune*, March 3, 1979, p. 20; "Moenie die Kiesers Vergeet!". *Oggenblad*, January 31, 1980, p.10.

<sup>7</sup> Friedman, Op.Cit., pp.149-150; J.A. Slabbert en M.E. Steyn, *Vakbondwese en arbeidsverhoudinge*. Roodepoort: Digma-publikasies, 1987, p.21.

<sup>8</sup> Douwes Dekker, L.C.G. Aspects of the labour market. In: Matthews, J. (ed.), *South Africa in the World Economy*. Johannesburg: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1983, p.76.

to work under black supervision. On the one hand, there were fears that they could be replaced by blacks or that their wage levels could be undermined by cheaper black labour. On the other hand, the numbers of white workers in relation to the total South African labour force were declining and therefore they became less valuable as a resource. Consequently their political and bargaining power to influence labour legislation was also reduced.<sup>9</sup> For instance, in 1960 there were 26 white holders of blasting certificates to every 1000 black workers in the gold-mining industry, whereas in 1979 there were 17. As a result of new designs of mining at the stope, improved drills, safer explosives, the use of more efficient fuses and other technical innovations, fewer rock-breakers were required by 1979 to supervise more black miners for a higher level of ore output than in 1960; 88 fewer white artisans were employed than in 1960, and 2,863 fewer semi- and unskilled white workers.<sup>10</sup>

There were also other factors that placed the MWU in a vulnerable position in terms of the expected Wiehahn recommendations. Firstly, the union's intransigence on maintaining white job reservation was increasingly undermined by artisan unions and other employee organizations in the mining industry, which had begun to accept black workers into their occupations since the 1970s. In terms of collective bargaining for the position of white workers, the MWU thus became increasingly isolated. A very important reason for the artisan unions' complaisance compared to the MWU's resolutely defiant attitude was that the positions of the technically well-qualified artisans were more secure against black encroachment than those of white miners, because such qualifications enabled these artisans to move freely between industries. They were well qualified, while miners required only Grade 8 school education and sixteen months' training. Much of their work consisted of supervising blacks, some of whom consequently became proficient without formal training and certificates. These positions occupied by white miners would be the first occupational level to which black workers could be promoted. The white miners, unlike artisans, had no trade affiliation to protect them and so they stood to lose more from reform than most other white workers. The threat to their position was more

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<sup>9</sup> Giliomee, H. *Afrikaner Politics 1977-87: from Afrikaner Nationalist Rule to State Hegemony*. In: Brewer, J.D. (ed.), *Can South Africa Survive? Five Minutes to Midnight*. Basingstoke and London: The Macmillan Press, 1989, pp.118-119; Van Rooyen, Op.Cit., p. 31; Sparks, A. *The Mind of South Africa. The Story of the Rise and Fall of Apartheid*. Johannesburg and Cape Town: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 1990, p.324.

<sup>10</sup> Lever, J. and James, W.G. *Towards a Deracialised Labour Force: Industrial Relations and the Abolition of the Job Colour Bar on the South African Gold Mines*. Department of Sociology Occasional Paper No. 12, University of Stellenbosch, October 1987, pp.5, 30-31.

immediate and their fears about job security – in that they could be replaced and that their high earnings which depended upon barring black competition were in danger – were therefore rational. Because they did not have the same skills as artisans, they relied on protectionist legislation to defend their privileges.

The number of white miners in the mining industry also dwindled because of the unpopularity of mine work as an occupational choice among whites. The strong bargaining power of the MWU, which led to the relatively high wage levels of its members, was thus situated in statutory job reservation as entrenched by the Mines and Works Amendment Act of 1926. This protection could easily be eroded if white miners lost their occupational monopoly in underground mining positions. Because of economic growth and development after the Second World War, white miners constituted a declining percentage of the total South African labour force, while the entry of Africans and Coloureds into strategic skilled jobs further eroded their bargaining power. Therefore their industrial and political power declined accordingly. There was also a decline in the degree of mobilization of white labour, a consequence of both prosperity and complacency, and the centralized Industrial Council system, which discouraged activity at plant level and left much of the work of unionists to Industrial Council officials. The unions thus did not have tight control over developments at the shop-floor level, where informal deals were often struck between management and white workers. According to Lipton, this loss of control over the changing labour situation often meant that at the negotiating table the unions were faced with the *fait accompli* of black advance.

Unions such as the MWU were also weakened by their unduly close connection with the NP government, which led them to rely on political support rather than industrial organization. A tradition of unrestricted access to, and close alliance with, a pro-white labour government created a situation in which the MWU began to rely on political backing, rather than labour organization, to protect and promote its position. However, this open channel to the government – and even the Cabinet when they felt disgruntled at legislation pertaining to the mining industry – began to change. With the MWU's dwindling influence as a labour and political factor, the NP became less prone to take notice of the miners' complaints.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Lipton, Op.Cit., pp.207,210-214,309; Cooper, Op.Cit., p.5; Wiehahn, N.E. *Die Volledige Wiehahn-Verslag*. Johannesburg en Kaapstad: Lex Patria Uitgewers, 1982), pp. 730-731,737; Hamilton, D.F. The Role of the Mine Workers' Union in the Gold Mining



During Fanie Botha's term as Minister of Labour, the relationship between the Department of Labour and the MWU disintegrated to one of general and mutual distrust. A feeling of mutual aversion developed between Botha and Arrie Paulus, the MWU's unyielding and hard-line general secretary.<sup>12</sup> According to Botha, it was unacceptable for the MWU, under the jurisdiction of the Department of Mines, to be involved in an investigation by the Department of Labour that could have a profound consequence for their occupations.<sup>13</sup>

Against this background Paulus and the MWU were implacably opposed to change. Paulus refused to give evidence to the Wiehahn Commission because there were blacks on the commission and, from the moment it was appointed, he began to mobilize resistance to it. He threatened at a hearing of the commission that should any blacks be appointed over MWU members in the mining industry, South Africa "would know industrial peace no more" and that there would be "friction" and "labour unrest" as union members "would definitely not work under a non-white".<sup>14</sup> When rumours began to emerge that the Wiehahn Commission was going to recommend the abolition of job reservation, Paulus warned in no uncertain terms that such a move could cause a repetition of the violent miners' strike of 1922. According to Paulus, the MWU would never allow job integration and that the white miner would not "yield an inch" to such a development.<sup>15</sup>

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Industry - A Present and Future Perspective. MBL thesis, University of South Africa, 1977, pp.92,94; Giliomee, H. en H. Adam, *Afrikanermag. Opkoms en Toekoms* (Universiteitsuitgewers en Boekhandelaars (Edms) Bpk., Stellenbosch en Grahamstad, 1981, pp.202-203; Friedman. Op.Cit., pp.163-164,166. For the MWU's close labour relations with the NP government see Visser, W. *Van MWU tot Solidariteit. Geskiedenis van die Mynwerkersunie, 1902-2002*. Pretoria: Solidariteit, 2008, Chapters 3 and 4.

<sup>12</sup> Private interview with Mr. P.J. Paulus, July 7, 2001; Private interview with Mr. S.P. Botha, May 27, 2002; Barnard. Op.Cit., pp.32,34,114; Hamilton. Op.Cit., p. 27; Friedman. Op.Cit., p.164.

<sup>13</sup> Private interview with Mr. S.P. Botha, May 27, 2002.

<sup>14</sup> Jacobsz, J.A. Die Amptelike Standpunt van die Mynwerkersunie en die Standpunt van Mynwerkersunie-lede ten opsigte van Werkreservering. *Bedryfsosiologie Honneurs*, PU vir CHO 1980, pp. 10,12-13,20; Friedman. Op.Cit., p.163; Barnard. Op.Cit., pp.47,79; Alle Blanke Werkers moet Lid van een Vakbond wees. *Die Mynwerker*. February 7, 1979, p 3.

<sup>15</sup> Barnard. Op.Cit., pp.45,57; Paulus, P.J. Min Fanie Botha: Sê aan Werkers of die Berig waar is!, p. 1, Swart vakbonde gaan erken word berig *Die Vaderland*, p.3 and MWU sal nooit brood uit wit monde laat neem, p.6 in *Die Mynwerker*. March 7, 1979.

### 3 The strike of March 1979

The gauntlet was finally thrown down on 22 February 1979, when MWU members at the obscure O'Okiep copper mine in the dry Namaqualand region of South Africa began to strike. Ostensibly the strike was about a wage dispute, but the underlying issue was the protection of white miners against a gradual relaxation of job reservation. The MWU miners at O'Okiep disputed the transfer of three Coloured artisans to posts which, according to the job reservation regulations of the Industrial Conciliation Act, were allocated to whites. Soon after the outbreak of the strike, however, the O'Okiep mine management dismissed all the striking workers on the grounds that the MWU's demands were contradictory to the company's policy of eliminating racial discrimination. On 6 March 1979, the MWU head office reacted by announcing a country-wide sympathy strike of white miners on platinum, gold and coal mines in solidarity with the dismissed mine workers of the O'Okiep mine. Approximately 9,000 of the MWU's 16,800 members took part in the strike, which spread to about 70 mines.

In anticipation of the findings and recommendations of the Wiehahn Commission, this country-wide strike thus served as a catalyst for the mobilization of white miner protest to warn the government of the consequences of the possible abolition of job reservation. Clearly the Minister of Labour's assurances that the MWU would be consulted if any changes were to occur in the existing labour dispensation did not convince them. Even the Chamber of Mines was of the opinion that the strike was not directed in the first instance against the employers but against the government. However, the Chamber regarded the strike as illegal, because the MWU had not announced its resolve to strike according to the procedures of the Industrial Conciliation Act. Therefore, in terms of the Chamber's agreement with the MWU that all contracts would automatically be terminated at the outbreak of any strike action, the strikers were dismissed accordingly and their accumulated benefits were forfeited. Should the strike continue, strikers would also have to evacuate any homes belonging to mining companies within seven days.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Cooper. Op.Cit., pp.4,6-7,9-11; Barnard. Op.Cit., pp.83-84,114,117; Friedman. Op.Cit., p.164; Lang, J. *Bullion Johannesburg. Men, Mines and the Challenge of Conflict*. Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 1986, p.469; Paulus, P.J. Wat het op O'Okiep gebeur voordat lede daar besluit het om te staak?. *Die Mynwerker*. March 21, 1979, p.3; Strike hits mines. *The Star*. March 7, 1979; 9000 se werk in gedrang. *Die Transvaler*. March 8, 1979.

There were also other factors which doomed the strike to failure. Although there is conflicting evidence as to the status of the strike and the motives behind it, and whether it was spontaneous industrial action or not,<sup>17</sup> it seems apparent that the nature and reasons for the strike were not known to the rank and file members of the MWU and no strike ballot was held beforehand. Neither was the Council of Mining Unions, a joint body representing all the employee organizations in the gold mines, informed about or consulted on any resolve to strike. It seems that there were even cases of pickets intimidating those miners who wanted to return to work as early as 9 March 1979. The MWU executive also threatened to suspend union members who wanted to resume work before the dispute was settled. Both the Chamber of Mines and the MWU made various claims and counter-claims about the number of strikers to prove its success or failure, and to advance their own image among the miners in this way. On the gold mines alone, the absentee figure was between 60% and 80%. The Chamber, however, made use of the Underground Officials Association (UOA) artisans who were not members of the MWU to fill certain positions held by the strikers in order to minimize as much as possible any decrease in production for the duration of the strike.

In the meantime Fanie Botha, the Minister of Labour, refused several requests by Paulus calling on the Department of Labour to intervene in the dispute. He declared that the government would not interfere and that the employers and employees should resolve the dispute among themselves, as the Minister regarded it as a domestic affair. Consequently, a motion of no confidence in Botha was passed at a meeting of miners in the mining town of Rustenburg. The MWU's efforts to arrange an interview with Prime Minister John Vorster were equally unsuccessful. The Chamber was also resolute in its resolve that no negotiations could be resumed unless the strikers were prepared to resume work again. By 13 March 1979, a constant stream of miners was applying for reinstatement in their posts. In the light of all these factors, the MWU executive decided by 17 votes to 2 to call the strike off and on 14 March the strikers began to return to work. According to Paulus, the MWU executive took the decision at the request of the Minister of Labour. The Chamber of Mines, though, claimed that the union called the strike off because only 40% of the miners were still on strike by 13 March.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> See Visser. Op.Cit., pp.236-237.

<sup>18</sup> MWU Archives, Minutes of a Meeting of the General Council, January 30, 1979, p.23; Private interview with Mr. S.P. Botha, May 27, 2002; Cooper. Op.Cit., pp.8-18,21-23,25;

Press views on the strike were that the miners' failure to challenge the state's new labour dispensation was the result of "weak leadership" by Paulus and the MWU executive, because they over-estimated white miners' willingness to strike at all costs on the principle of job reservation. In this regard the flaws in the MWU's strategy to try and protect white workers against a change in labour policy were exposed.<sup>19</sup> According to Cooper, by using strike action, Paulus tried to demonstrate that the white miner was irreplaceable for the mining industry and that production would be seriously affected without them. She also concurs with Lipton that, in the light of the increase of black miners' competence levels, white miners' fears that eventually they could be replaced as a result of pressure by the mining houses were real. Ironically, the strike made the Chamber of Mines realize that a white work stoppage created an opportunity for training blacks in skilled mining tasks such as blasting. It also seems as if there was dissatisfaction among the miners about the MWU executive's handling of the strike. MWU membership on the O'Okiep mine also fell dramatically from 223 to 52 after the strike. Many miners were simply not prepared to lose benefits such as subsidized housing on the mines.<sup>20</sup> This view was confirmed by Peet Ungerer, who succeeded Paulus as MWU general secretary. Ungerer acknowledged that the fear of hardship and hunger among the wives and families of those men who were on strike put tremendous pressure on the executive to call it off.<sup>21</sup> Barnard also claims that the outcome of the strike damaged the image of Paulus and the MWU among white miners.<sup>22</sup>

With their refusal to intervene, the Minister of Labour and the government indicated that they would not tolerate illegal lightning strikes in the mining industry and that they were even prepared to prevent such occurrences in the future by means of legislation. In a speech in Parliament, Botha warned Paulus not to create his own form of "mine politics".

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Barnard. Op.Cit., pp.79,84-86; Lang. Op.Cit., p.469; Friedman. Op.Cit., pp.164-165,177; Coetzee, J.H. Mynstaking: Deur 'n spiel in 'n raaisel. *Woord en Daad*, 200, April 1979, p.2; Mynvakbonde-Raad wis niks van Staking. *Hoofstad*. March 8, 1979, p.1; Usher, D. The strike that fell on deaf ears. Op.Cit., p.20.

<sup>19</sup> Groot fiasco. *Beeld*. May 31, 1979, p.6; Mislukte Staking. *Oggendblad*. March 15, 1979, p.12; Staking misluk. *Die Burger*. March 15, 1979, p.14; Lessons from the Strike. *The Natal Mercury*. March 16, 1979, p.10; Usher, D. The Strike that fell on deaf ears. Op.Cit., p.20.

<sup>20</sup> Cooper. Op.Cit., pp. 2,4,17-18,20-25; Lipton. Op.Cit., p.208. See also MWU Archives, Minutes of a Meeting of the General Council, January 29-30, 1980; O'Okiep-Bestuurder wil van die MWU ontslae raak. *Die Mynwerker*. April 18, 1979, pp.1-2; van Loggerenberg, J. Ek voel slegste oor Paulus se hou na my. *Die Transvaler*. May 23, 1979.

<sup>21</sup> Private interview with Mr W. Ungerer, July 2, 2001.

<sup>22</sup> Barnard. Op.Cit., pp.79-80,87-88,116.

According to O'Meara, Friedman and Lipton, the failed miners' strike of 1979 was another indication of the changed relations and growing divide that appeared between the interests of the state and those of white workers, and of the schisms that began to appear in Afrikaner politics since the founding of the right-wing Herstigte Nasionale Party or HNP (Reconstituted National Party) in 1969. Throughout the 1970s the NP government moved further away from its former white working-class supporters and closer to the business sector. White union demands for protection and higher pay stood in the way of economic growth and the government now preferred growth. The fact that certain sectors of the white labour movement, in contrast to the MWU, adopted a more flexible approach to controlled reform of the labour dispensation also made it easier for the government to implement a labour policy that the union tried to oppose. In this regard, the UOA's willingness to do some of the work of the strikers during the dispute contributed towards undermining the strike effort. Thus the failure of the 1979 strike emboldened the Chamber and the pro-labour reform mining unions. The UOA agreed to phase out job reservation protecting its members, provided it could enroll blacks moving into the jobs concerned. In 1982 the all-white Council of Mining Unions was disbanded in favour of a confederation including multi-racial unions, thus further isolating the MWU.<sup>23</sup>

As this strike was an industrial action launched entirely by white miners in an effort to protect and maintain white job reservation and white privileges in the mining industry, the position of black miners during the strike comes to mind. As mentioned before, UOA artisans were willing to do some of the strikers' work "in order to keep the industry going for the good of the country". The Chamber of Mines contended throughout that the strike had not affected production significantly due to this aid and the general efforts of the miners, both black and white, who remained at work. Throughout the years, black miners had picked up skills "unofficially" on the job as well as through official training. According to Cooper, the maintenance of production was no doubt due to this factor also. However, despite the Chamber's claims those miners who remained at work were pushed to their limits and development as well as production were affected negatively during the strike.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> O'Meara, D. *Forty Lost Years. The Apartheid State and the Politics of the National Party, 1948-1994*. Randburg: Ravan Press, 1996, p.130; Friedman. Op.Cit., pp.164-165; Lipton. Op.Cit., p.208.

<sup>24</sup> Cooper. Op.Cit., pp.12,22-23.

There were various reasons for the inertia towards black unionization at the time of the release of the Wiehahn recommendations and the white miners' strike of 1979. The Chamber of Mines and the white mining unions were reluctant to contribute towards a climate conducive to the establishment of trade unions for black miners. No trade union for black miners existed to argue their case at the Wiehahn Commission's hearings. The Chamber of Mines assumed the responsibility of informing the commission what it should do in the best interest of black mineworkers. Mining companies such as the Anglo American Corporation and Johannesburg Consolidated Investment insisted that there was no possibility of any black mineworkers' union emerging in the near future and that when it did, it would begin at mine level. The big mining companies rather advised the continuation of controlled mine-level liaison and works committees.

The Wiehahn Commission was enthusiastic to the idea of establishing an industrial council where bargaining rights for black employees could take place. Only registered unions, however, could participate so that they were dominated by the white unions and could remain that way because the existing memberships had the right to veto new applications. Without different constitutions, the white mining unions could prevent a black mineworkers' union from ever becoming a member of an industrial council for the mining industry in the event that one was established. Neither the Chamber nor the white mining unions were impressed with this proposal and took no action to implement it.<sup>25</sup>

The mines were able to adopt this stance partly because they were not subject to the same pressures for black unionization as those in secondary industry. Because all but a handful of their workers were migrants, housed in compounds on mine property ruling out any access by union organizers to these hostels or workplaces, the mines had been able to exercise tight control over their workforce. A further factor was the relative white monopoly on both artisan and skilled production jobs in the mines. It also ensured that black mineworkers would remain relatively unskilled and thus easily replaceable if they attempted to strike.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Allen, V.L. *The History of the Black Mineworkers In South Africa. Vol. II, Dissent and Repression in the Mine Compounds 1948-1982*. Keighley: The Moor Press, 2003, pp.451-452,455.

<sup>26</sup> Friedman, S. Chamber of Mines' Policy and the Emerging Miners' Unions. *South African Labour Bulletin*, 8, 5, April 1983, pp.27-28.

The Wiehahn Commission also proposed various possibilities of black representation but each one was to be a management creation into which black mineworkers were fitted rather than independent black unions free of restrictions and managerial control. The commission concentrated on mine-level committees as the most suitable form of organization.<sup>27</sup> Against the background of a lack of any labour representation in the mining industry by 1979, the position of black mineworkers was quite precarious. Eventually however, even the more conservative members of the Chamber of Mines agreed that some form of effective communication between workers and local management was absolutely essential to quiet the dissent that kept surfacing and interfering with gold production. Thus, in 1982, the Chamber decided to grant access to unions who wished to recruit black mineworkers. As a consequence, the black National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), with Cyril Ramaphosa as general secretary, was launched in August 1982. The NUM applied for access to mines and was granted it, thus becoming the first independent black union in the mining industry since 1946.<sup>28</sup>

#### **4 Futile resistance to the inevitable: The MWU's reaction to the findings and the recommendations of the Wiehahn Report**

According to Barnard, the appointment of the Wiehahn Commission and the government's subsequent adoption of its recommendations – *inter alia* to abolish job reservation and to legalize black trade unions – were the most important factors in the eventual rupture of the ties between the MWU and the NP. The political price the NP had to pay for introducing labour reform was the loss of political support from the MWU and the white workers. After the release of the recommendations, the estrangement between the MWU and the NP government became complete and irreversible.<sup>29</sup> Although the gist of the recommendations of Part 1 of the Wiehahn Commission had been anticipated by the MWU to be negative on issues such as job reservation, its endorsement by the government still came

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<sup>27</sup> Allen. Op.Cit., pp.456-457.

<sup>28</sup> Allen, V.L. *The History of the Black Mineworkers In South Africa. Vol. III, The Rise and Struggles of the National Union of Mineworkers 1982-1994*. Keighley: The Moor Press, 2003, pp.91,100; Dunbar Moodie, T. *Going for Gold. Men, Mines and Migration*. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1994, p.249; Friedman, S. "Chamber of Mines' Policy and the Emerging Miners' Unions". Op.Cit., p.29.

<sup>29</sup> Barnard. Op.Cit., pp.35,66.

as a shock. Suddenly white workers would no longer be able to rely on state protection of their jobs.<sup>30</sup>

Spokespersons for the MWU vilified and lambasted the findings and recommendations and the union declared its outright rejection of the Wiehahn report in its entirety. For Paulus it meant “suicide” for the white worker and he regarded the recommendations as “the greatest act of treason against the white workers of South Africa since [the strike of] 1922”. Paulus stated that the “so-called guarantees” which promised to protect the white workers were rather “gradual arsenic poisoning”, because they eroded their positions so slowly that they would not notice it. To him the amendment of the Industrial Conciliation Act of 1979, which legalized trade union membership of black migrant workers who had permanent residence rights in “white” South Africa, was a “sugaring of the arsenic pill”. Even before the report was released, Paulus threatened that the union would not budge on labour equality in the mining industry and that no black worker “would take bread from the mouth of a white miner”. Fanie Botha, the Minister of Labour, was accused of breaking his promises to consult with white workers before considering any changes to labour legislation.<sup>31</sup>

Part 6 of the Wiehahn report was released on 30 September 1981 and dealt specifically with legislation regarding relations in the mining industry. It confirmed the MWU’s “worst fears”, as the union’s president, Cor de Jager, put it. The term “scheduled person” in the wording of the 1965 Mines and Works Act was replaced with “competent person”, thus implying that black miners would in future also be able to obtain blasting certificates.<sup>32</sup> Lipton, Lang, Friedman and Hamilton, however, concur that, despite the MWU’s lament that the Wiehahn recommendations had abolished job reservation, the union succeeded in keeping the colour bar intact on the mines until as late as 1987, because of its pervasive influence in the mining

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<sup>30</sup> Giliomee en Adam, *Afrikanermag*. Op.Cit., p.203; Lipton. Op.Cit., p.322.

<sup>31</sup> MWU Archives, Minutes of a Meeting of the Executive, May 15, 1979, p.1; *Ibid.*, Minutes of a Meeting of the General Council, January 29-30, 1980, pp.1-4,22,25; MWU sal nooit brood uit wit monde laat neem. *Die Mynwerker*. March 7, 1979, p.6; Paulus, P.J. Wiehahn-Arseenpil” slegs tydelik bietjie versuiker. *Ibid.*, July 11, 1979, p.1; Paulus, P.J. Wanneer Regering sê nee – Pasop!. *Ibid.*, November 26, 1980, p.1; Paulus, P.J., Die Grootste Verraad teenoor Blanke Mynwerkers!. *Ibid.*, May 16, 1979, pp.1-2; Paulus, P.J. Min. Fanie Botha het geen Simpatie met Mynwerkers. *Ibid.*, May 30, 1979, p.1; Paulus, P.J. Paulus antwoord Volksraadslid oor Wiehahn-verslag. *Ibid.*, September 19, 1979, pp.1-3.

<sup>32</sup> Wiehahn. *Die Volledige Wiehahn-Verslag*. Op.Cit., pp.740-765; Lang. Op.Cit., p.471; Friedman. *Building Tomorrow Today*. Op.Cit., p.173.



industry, its persistent opposition to the encroachment on job reservation, and their awareness of the government's wariness of this situation.<sup>33</sup>

Obviously a time lapse occurred between the publication of the Wiehahn recommendations and parliamentary White Papers on labour relations and the actual passage and implementation of new labour legislation. Therefore Paulus and the MWU tried to play their cards at each stage in order to disrupt the process. The MWU made an effort to rally the South African Confederation of Labour (SACLA), a conservative umbrella body representing pro-segregationist unions at the Wiehahn hearings, to endorse a report by Paulus which called for the banning of black unions, a crackdown on black strikers and tougher job reservation. But the white railway unions, who supported government policy, threatened to leave SACLA if Paulus's plan was adopted so it was shelved. Eventually SACLA lost its influence with the government and, by the mid-1980s, was a little noticed oddity.<sup>34</sup>

Another MWU strategy to try and thwart the government's implementation of labour reforms was to extend its scope by recruiting members beyond the ranks of mine workers especially among members of white unions who did not feel at home any longer in the new racially integrated labour circumstances. The idea was that the MWU would become the mother union and home for all resentful and aggrieved white workers.<sup>35</sup> Recruiting was done in an organized way through the appointment of liaison officers who recruited new members for the MWU in other industries.<sup>36</sup> As a first step the union targeted steel and electricity workers at Iscor and Escom and in March 1983 opened its first office outside the mining industry in the industrial town of Vanderbijlpark. As part of a recruitment drive, *Die Mynwerker*, the union's official mouthpiece, advertised the benefits of membership and presented the MWU as being "the last sanctuary of white workers". Eventually membership applications were received from workers

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<sup>33</sup> Lipton. Op.Cit., pp.63,208; Lang. Op.Cit., p.471; Friedman. *Building Tomorrow Today*. Op.Cit., pp.167,173; Hamilton. Op.Cit., pp.28,79.

<sup>34</sup> Friedman. *Building Tomorrow Today*. Op.Cit., pp.165-166,177.

<sup>35</sup> Barnard. Op.Cit., pp.52,56-58,64; Wat ons aanbied aan blanke werkers wat by MWU beskerming soek. *Die Mynwerker*. September 13, 1978, p.4; Ons roep alle blanke werkers op Vanderbijlpark. *Ibid.*, October 11, 1978, pp.1,3; 1000 Staalwerkers gereed om by MWU aan te sluit. *Ibid.*, November 22, 1978, p.1; Alle Blanke Werkers moet lid van een Vakbond wees. *Ibid.*, February 7, 1979, p.3; MWU werf wyd vir een groot vakbond. *Beeld*. January 29, 1981, p.5.

<sup>36</sup> MWU Archives, Minutes of a Meeting of the General Council, January 27-28, 1981, p.12; *Ibid.*, Minutes of a Meeting of the General Council, January 25-26, 1983, p.20; Friedman. *Building Tomorrow Today*. Op.Cit. p.176; Barnard. Op.Cit., pp.60-61; Private interview with Mr. P.J. Paulus, July 3, 2001.

on Iscor plants in Pretoria and Newcastle, the Modderfontein dynamite factory, the Sasol plants at Secunda and from workers in industries at Sasolburg, Middelburg and Witbank. Scores of workers from Iscor power stations in the Eastern Transvaal (now Mpumalanga) also joined the union.<sup>37</sup> And an increasing number of white workers from trades in industries such as steel and metal, electricity, chemicals, wood, printing, plastics, food, building, engineering and explosives became members.<sup>38</sup> Hence, at the 1983 general council meeting the MWU president could report that the union's membership has increased approximately by 20% in that year.<sup>39</sup>

In political terms the MWU under the Paulus administration would, for the first time since the period of militant strikes in the 1910s and 1920s, begin to oppose the governing party and provide moral support to right-wing opposition parties. A disillusioned De Jager reproachfully declared in his presidential address that "the National Government of 1981 is indeed not the same as the National Party we helped to bring to power in 1948".<sup>40</sup>

By implementing the Wiehahn recommendations the government could eventually not escape the political counter-reaction among white workers and in particular those who were members of the MWU. For Arrie Paulus the final break between the MWU and the NP had already taken place on 5 May 1979, when he returned from a meeting with Fanie Botha (then Minister of Manpower) in Pretoria because the government's new labour policy, as recommended by the Wiehahn Commission, was not

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<sup>37</sup> MWU Archives, Minutes of a Meeting of the General Council, 27-28.1.1981, p.12; *Ibid.*, Minutes of a Meeting of the General Council, January 30-31, 1984, p.22; *Ibid.*, Minutes of a Meeting of the Executive, June 23, 1982, p.1; Barnard. Op.Cit., pp.62,66; Cooper. Op.Cit., pp.5-6; Paulus, P.J. Kragwerkers word lede van MWU. *Die Mynwerker*. February 25, 1981, pp.1,7; Ons open kantoor op Vanderbijlpark. *Ibid.*, February 2, 1983, p.2; Baie nuwe lede in Vaal-Driehoek. *Ibid.*, June 8, 1983, p.3; Paulus, P.J. Mynwerkersunie 'n toevlugsoord vir blanke werkers. *Ibid.*, July 6, 1983, p.1; 400 Ambagsmanne en Myners van Sasol Secunda nou lede van M.W.U. *Ibid.*, August 31, 1983, p.4; Paulus, P.J. Die Mynwerkersunie se voordele bly verreweg die beste. *Ibid.*, September 28, 1983, p.3; Paulus, P.J. Met 400 lede by Secunda vorder onderhandelings met Sasol fluks. *Ibid.*, October 12, 1983, p.5; Paulus, P.J. Ons praat met ons lede by Yskor en Modderfontein. *Ibid.*, October 12, 1983, p. 5; de Villiers, R. Miners' union spreads its wings. *Rand Daily Mail*. February 10, 1981, p.2.

<sup>38</sup> MWU Archives, Minutes of a Meeting of the General Council, January 30-31, 1984, p.22; Paulus, P.J. Meer lede: MWU op pad na 'n blink toekoms! *Die Mynwerker*. August 22, 1984, p.1; Paulus, P.J. Ons groei van krag tot krag! *Ibid.*, January 25, 1985, p.1; Jaaroorisig deur Paulus. *Ibid.*, February 8, 1985, p.4.

<sup>39</sup> MWU Archives, Minutes of a Meeting of the General Council, January 30-31, 1984, p.7; Cor de Jager lewer staatsmansrede voor kongres van die MWU. *Die Mynwerker*. February 8, 1984, p.5.

<sup>40</sup> MWU Archives, Minutes of a Meeting of the General Council, January 27-28, 1981, pp.1-2,4,8-9.

acceptable to the union. But this schism left the MWU without a political guardian or parliamentary representation.<sup>41</sup>

The MWU therefore gave moral and electoral support to the HNP in the by-elections of 1979 and the general election of 1981. In NP-controlled constituencies where white miners formed a large portion of the electorate, these elections served as political barometers of white counter-reaction at a time when the contents and implications of the Wiehahn report were still fresh in people's minds. For both the MWU and the HNP reciprocal moral support had practical advantages. Since the HNP broke away from the NP, the party showed few signs of growth, because the South African political situation was turning away from racist Verwoerdian policies. The white miners' grievances coincided with those of the HNP regarding the dismantling of apartheid. The MWU offered the party the ideal opportunity to expand its membership as the HNP was the only political party to fully support the abortive miners' strike of March 1979. The HNP offered protection to the white worker and saw the abolition of job reservation as a move by the mine owners to increase their profits by employing cheap black labour.<sup>42</sup> Although the NP retained the mining seat of Randfontein in the by-election of 1979, the election results indicated a marked swing to the right in what was regarded as a strong anti-government protest vote against the Wiehahn recommendations.<sup>43</sup>

In the mining constituency of Rustenburg, the home of MWU president Cor de Jager, the electoral swing towards the right was even more phenomenal and the NP won the seat only by a small majority of 846 votes over the HNP. And in the 1981 general election, De Jager stood as HNP candidate in the mining constituency of Carletonville. The HNP, aiming to become the white workers' new political guardian, vowed to protect their interests but, surprisingly, lost to the NP again as a result of internal strife and an ineffective election campaign and strategy.<sup>44</sup> O'Meara, Bekker and Grobbelaar argue that material considerations also played a role in the election outcomes. According to these analysts, the Afrikaner working class

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<sup>41</sup> Barnard. Op.Cit., pp.65-66,78-80,92-93,114; Hamilton. Op.Cit., p.44; Yudelman. Op.Cit., p.269; Staking. *Rapport*. March 11, 1979; Don't flinch at the Rightwing threat. *Rand Daily Mail*. May 18, 1979, p.10.

<sup>42</sup> Barnard. Op.Cit., p.93; Cooper. Op.Cit., p.15; Coetzee, J.H. Mynsteking: Deur 'n spiel in 'n raaisel. *Woord en Daad*, 200, April 1979, p.2; Private interview with Mr. C. de Jager, January 22, 2004.

<sup>43</sup> Barnard. Op.Cit., pp.65-66,78-80,92-94,114; D. Yudelman. Op.Cit., p.269.

<sup>44</sup> Barnard. Op.Cit., pp.98-100,104; Yudelman. Op.Cit., pp.264,269; O'Meara. Op.Cit.,p.165; Ries, A. en E. Dommissie. *Broedertwis. Die Verhaal van die 1982-skeuring in die Nasionale Party*. Kaapstad: Tafelberg-Uitgewers Bpk., Kaapstad, 1982, pp.83,96.

realized that the HNP, despite its pro-white ideology, still did not possess the means to increase their economic wellbeing. As long as the economy, managed politically by the NP, would continue to raise their standards of living, the majority of these workers would only symbolically acknowledge the HNP's warnings that the Nationalists "betrayed and sold them" to the Afrikaner and English capitalist class. The HNP failed to see the changing material and structural circumstances that were taking place in South Africa, especially as far as the budding materialism and middle-class norms in Afrikaner society were concerned.<sup>45</sup>

The clearest indication of the MWU's anti-government political position, however, was the moral support the union's leadership gave to the new right-wing Conservative Party (CP) since its founding in 1982. This party was founded in reaction to the NP's liberal reformist policies on racial issues in South Africa. Soon after its establishment Paulus indicated that the MWU agreed with party leader Andries Treurnicht's criticism of the "Botha-Wiehahn labour policy" and that they supported the CP leader's point of view. The union's attitude towards the NP steadily chilled even further and even turned to hostility.<sup>46</sup> Therefore it came as no surprise when Paulus was approached to contest the Carletonville seat for the CP in the general election of 1987. Although he won by a narrow margin of only 98 votes, this victory constituted a huge swing towards the right in mining constituencies, as had been the case in 1979 and 1981. Paulus succeeded in turning the NP's majority of 3 000 votes in the previous general election into a CP gain.<sup>47</sup>

However, it became clear that in terms of influencing the country's labour agenda in a significant way, white labour had become a spent force. The events of the 1970s and 1980s generally confirmed the long decline of white miners as an influential political and economic entity. By 1976, according to statistics of the Chamber of Mines, the (non-unionized) officials' associations on the mines had almost as many members as all the

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<sup>45</sup> O'Meara. Op.Cit., pp.165,310; Bekker, S. and Grobbelaar, J. The white right-wing movement in South Africa: before and after the May 1987 election. In: van Vuuren, D.J. (eds.) *et al, South African Election 1987. Context, Process and Prospect*. Pinetown: Owen Burgess Publishers, 1987, p.71.

<sup>46</sup> MWU Archives, Minutes of the Meeting of the Executive, January 24, 1983, p.2; Ons is reg vir praat", sê Arrie Paulus aan dr Treurnicht. *Die Mynwerker*. July 1, 1981, p.1; Ries en Dommissie. Op.Cit., pp.96,108-187; Barnard. Op.Cit., pp.118-119.

<sup>47</sup> MWU Archives, Minutes of a Meeting of the Executive, January 26, 1987, p.11; *Ibid.*, Minutes of a Meeting of the Executive, April 29, 1987, pp.1,12-13; *Ibid.*, Minutes of a Meeting of the Executive, May 27, 1987, pp. 1,13-14; *Ibid.*, Minutes of a Meeting of the Executive, June 24, 1987, pp. 1,14; Minutes of a Meeting of the Executive Committee, April 29, 1987, pp. 3-4; Private interview with Mr PJ Paulus, July 3, 2001.

white unions put together – 18,815 compared to 18,994 unionized men. Of the union men, less than half – 9,409 – were MWU members.<sup>48</sup> The MWU could also not escape the political ferment in South Africa in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In 1987 the Mines and Works Amendment Act (the actual implementation of Part 6 of the Wiehahn recommendations) was promulgated. This signaled the final scrapping of job reservation in the mining industry and enabled black miners to enter job categories previously reserved for whites.<sup>49</sup> Clearly, the writing was on the wall for apartheid in the sphere of labour in general.

## 5 Conclusion

All things considered, the mining strike of 1979 was a last desperate, but futile, effort by white miners to obstruct a major change in the South African labour dispensation based on apartheid legislation. Arrie Paulus was well-known for using brinkmanship tactics<sup>50</sup> to force concessions from the Chamber of Mines and the government in order to protect white workers' privileges, but the 1979 strike backfired on the MWU hardliners. White workers' resistance to erosion of the job colour bar was less effective and less fierce than expected.<sup>51</sup>

The report of the Wiehahn Commission was a bold move by the NP government to test the white electorate's readiness to move away from discriminatory practices in South Africa. Although the Commission's report did not bring an end to the official policy of apartheid, the implementation of its recommendations to end discriminatory practices in the field of labour represents a clear watershed in South African politics. Labour reform was thus the first legislative initiative taken by the white minority government towards the eventual dismantling of apartheid. The failure of the 1979 mining strike and the results of the political elections which followed in its wake proved that the claim by right-wing political parties – that the NP government was acting against the interests of the majority of white South Africans and therefore no longer represented them politically – was grossly exaggerated.

In the general election of 1989 (and also in the referendum of 1992) a majority of the white electorate gave the NP a mandate to negotiate a

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<sup>48</sup> Yudelman. Op.Cit., p.269.

<sup>49</sup> Ungerer, W. My siening van die MWU. MWU Memorandum, Carletonville, 2001.

<sup>50</sup> Friedman. *Building Tomorrow Today*. Op.Cit., p.164.

<sup>51</sup> Lipton. Op.Cit., p.212.

political settlement with the ANC. This was followed by President F.W. de Klerk's announcement in Parliament on 2 February 1990 that all anti-apartheid political organizations and exiles were to be unbanned. These negotiations led to the establishment of a democratic political dispensation from 27 April 1994 and the institution of a de-racialized South African Constitution in 1996.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> See Beinart. Op.Cit., pp.252-304.

## Adamant and multifaceted: diamond workers' strikes in World War II Palestine

*David De Vries*

Strikes often present a curious tension. They are basically local events, framed in local contexts and impacted by local actors, who themselves are placed along local traditions of employment relations and collective action. At the same time, strikes are also part of larger continua of regional and global competition and changes in prices of products that influence the strategies of local employers and labor costs, which in turn impinge on workers' decision to launch strikes, and on employers' resistance to workers' demands. Such tension is relevant in particular to the relatively understudied association between collective action and commodity chains<sup>1</sup>, between strikes and the distinctive labor process that commodity chains create, and even more so when the latter are disrupted and changed by wars. Belligerent tensions and wars cause havoc in commodity chains: production sites are dislocated and relocated and the established balance between regions distraught by wars and those that the latter benefit is transformed, often resulting in the surge of strikes. Strike activity in the global diamond industry is an apt case in point, as is well reflected in the case of the transplantation of diamond production from Europe in British-ruled Palestine.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Van der Linden, Marcel. *Workers of the World: Essays toward a Global Labor History*. Leiden: Brill, 2008, pp.173-207.

<sup>2</sup> For the diamond industry in Mandate Palestine see De Vries, David. *Diamonds and War: State, Capital and Labor in British-Ruled Palestine*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2010. The case here focuses on the 1940s and reflects a small part of the myriad collective action in the global network of modern diamond making. For the commodity chain, see Grodzinski, Paul. *Diamond Technology: Production Methods for Diamond and Gem Stones*. London: N.A.G. Press, 1953; Even-Zohar, Chaim. *From Mine to*

World War II and the Holocaust left indelible marks on Mandate Palestine, but none seemed more paradoxical than the tremendous surge of strike action. On the one hand, the war propelled an economic boom and therefore created a conducive atmosphere for enhanced strike action. At the same time, the turmoil the strikes caused in relations between workers and employers seemed totally indifferent to the climactic contexts in which they happened - the severance of Palestine from Europe, the decimation of Jews, the mobilization of the Middle East for the fight against Germany, and, last but not least, the progressive political tension between Arabs and Jews in Palestine itself. It was as if the strikes, always attuned to and impacted by social and political contexts, took off on their own course and sustained a life of their own.

Wartime strike action was, however, far from insular. For the British government of Palestine and the Colonial Office and London, the strikes not only ignored their colonial legal authority, but signaled that British intervention in Palestine's economy – justified and encouraged by the needs of war – should not be extended to civil society and industrial relations. For the Palestine Arabs the wartime strikes – concentrating mainly in the Jewish community – marked a surge in trade union activity<sup>3</sup>, but also a platform to enhance the impact of the war on their opposition to colonial rule. And among the Jews there were many who regarded the parallel life of the strikes as a demonstration of the war-induced strengthening of capitalism, and the inability of the Histadrut – the institutional arm of organized labor in the Jewish polity - to contain its effects. However, as demonstrated by the diamond industry – the most strike-prone sector in wartime Palestine – strikes also interlaced workplace issues with international factors. Evidently, they coupled the impact of war on the diamond production chain with imperial interests.<sup>4</sup>

The context in which diamond cutting emerged in Palestine in the late 1930s and early 1940s was economic and political and as usual along the diamond commodity chain it mixed international and local forces. The rise of Fascism in Europe destabilized Jewish life in the Low Countries, and when the war broke out and began to paralyze the diamond trade, merchants and polishers in Antwerp and Amsterdam looked for temporary shelter. This

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*Mistress: Corporate Strategies and Government Policies in the International Diamond Industry*. London: Mining Communications Ltd., 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Trade union activity in the Jewish community was mostly organized by the Histadrut, the roof union organization in Mandate Palestine and Israel.

<sup>4</sup> Nathan, Robert, Gass, Oskar, Creamer, Daniel. *Palestine: Problem and Promise*, Washington, DC: Public Affairs Press, 1946, pp. 506-514.



destabilization was perceived among local Jewish entrepreneurs in Palestine as an opportunity to help their Belgian and Dutch brethren, and at the same time to introduce to the Jewish economy in Palestine an industry in which Jews in the Netherlands, Belgium and South Africa have had a long-standing presence.<sup>5</sup>

This initiative, merging a capitalist venture with Zionist-oriented industrialization, matched nicely with the needs of two powerful forces. One was the De Beers cartel. In the late 1930s its reserves of rough diamonds mined in the British Protectorate of Sierra Leone and the Belgian Congo (present-day Democratic Republic of the Congo) were dwindling, and it needed an alternative to the paralyzed diamond trade in Europe. The second force was the British who needed diamonds for the war effort, looking for ways to prevent diamonds from reaching the Germans, and seeking more American dollars so needed for their war economy in Europe and the Middle East. For both forces Palestine seemed an obvious choice. It was far from the European fronts, the Jews in Palestine were perceived by the British as part of an ethnic group historically associated with the occupation of diamond making and trading, and Palestine being under British Mandate rule promised control over the country's exports.

When the Germans occupied the Low Countries in May 1940, Palestine was therefore destined to become an alternative diamond production center – mainly to Antwerp, but also to the German diamond production centers of Hanau and Idar-Oberstein that in the late 1930s competed (with strong Nazi government backing) with Antwerp. During the ensuing war, Jewish refugees established cutting workshops in London, Cuba, Brazil, New York and Puerto Rico where Belgian and Dutch craft traditions, and where even organizational models of diamond manufacturers and traders were reproduced.<sup>6</sup> However, among these “industrial Diasporas” Palestine was the fastest growing diamond center, and the only place where the decision to establish the industry was coupled with a formal and explicit policy that it should be limited in its expansion, and that it should not compete with Antwerp and Amsterdam after the Germans ended their

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<sup>5</sup> For the diamond industry in Belgium see Laureys, Eric. *Meesters van het diamant. De Belgische diamantsector tijdens het Nazibewind*, Tiel: Lannoo, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> The number of diamond workers in Palestine rose from 60 in 1939 to 5,000 in 1946. In Belgium, the number declined from 25,000 to 15,000 and in the Netherlands from 8,000 to 1,000 respectively. See Friedman, Avraham. "On the Crisis in the Industry," *Niv Poel Hayahalomim* [Bulletin of Histadrut Diamond Workers' Union], no 1. 1947 [H]; *Proceedings of the First Congress after the Liberation of the Universal Alliance of Diamond Workers*, Antwerp 2-6 September 1946. The George Meany Memorial Archives, Silver Spring, Maryland, RG 18 – 005/12.

occupation. This could be enforced only in a British-controlled territory, clearly reflecting British thinking on the future postwar relations with Belgium and with the Belgian Congo. Moreover, British intervention in the transplantation of the industry from Belgium to Palestine was reflected also in the Colonial Office and the Ministry of Economic Warfare on the British side and a group of local entrepreneurs in Palestine itself agreeing that the industry would be exclusively Jewish. This was quite an unprecedented understanding in the British Empire. State and capital agreed here formally not only on maintaining an ethnic occupational tradition, but also on ethnic segregation and Arab exclusion that could well affect labor market tensions between Arabs and Jews. The Jewish diamond cutters in Palestine were to become therefore Britain's and De Beers' "special natives", tasked with a particular role, and relying on them was based on the perception of their historical occupational niche and on the application of the notion of trust in trade to production itself. In this way a coalescence of interest was created between Britain and Zionism, in which Palestine was serving the needs of the war by replacing paralyzed Belgium, and Britain was serving the economic foundations of the Jewish community in Palestine on the other.<sup>7</sup>

This cooperation was further reflected in the mutual understanding that all the imports of rough diamonds and the export of polished stones would be centralized and controlled. Furthermore, it was understood that the rough-diamond distribution mechanism of De Beers in London would be the sole supplier to Palestine, that all production of the polished product would be exported, mostly to the USA and India, and that all involved in the industry in Palestine would have to be certified and authorized to operate. Thus, in diversifying organizational traditions in the diamond industry of the Low Countries these instructions shaped the high degree of centralization of the manufacturers and employers organization – The Palestine Diamond Manufacturers' Association (PDMA).<sup>8</sup> It determined Palestine's dependency on London, and seriously limited the freedom of individual action of the manufacturers who in turn were driven to save on labor costs.

No less formative was the decision that all work was to be centralized in the framework of a factory. Home work and familial induction systems – among the hall marks of the industry in pre-war

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<sup>7</sup> Government of Palestine. *Report of a Committee Appointed by Government to Examine the Question of Post-war Regulation of the Palestine Diamond Industry*, Jerusalem: Government Printing Press, 1946.

<sup>8</sup> The Palestine Diamond Manufacturers' Association was established in 1940 and during the 1940s and 1950s was the leading organ of the diamond manufacturers in Mandate Palestine and Israel. See De Vries, 2010, Op.cit, ch. 2.

Belgium – were barred, and the free movement of expert cutters and inductors between the workshops was equally restricted. These aspects of regimentation of the nascent industry and its mobilization for the war effort made the manufacturers' organization an extremely powerful cartel-like operation. It was selective in accepting new manufacturers, it controlled the wages paid, and it practically turned into an entrepreneurial community espousing a culture *mélange* of profit, nationalism and the fight against Fascism. Supervised from above by the British Government and strengthened by a common sense of capitalist purpose, the diamond industry could therefore well exploit the persistent American demand for polished stones and the absence of competition from the occupied Low Countries. However, the same factors also harbored the tensions that provoked – at least in Palestine's historical context – quite an unprecedented vibrant strike action.<sup>9</sup>

The swift take-off of the Palestine diamond industry during the war was related also to another key determinant of workplace regimentation that would influence strike activity. In contrast to tradition, Palestine asked De Beers to specialize in one type of stone - the small stone (or Sand). This also used to be Antwerp's specialty and it also catered to the need of the De Beers cartel to dispose of large reserves of such stones created by the paralysis of the Low Countries. The specialization in the small stone turned Palestine into one of the world's leading suppliers. Furthermore, in Amsterdam and Antwerp it took at least three years to apprentice a cutter, and apprenticeship usually covered all types of stones and all cutting and polishing skills. In Palestine the labor process was fragmented into a chain or conveyor system, in which the apprentice learned just one phase of the polishing process. "Taylorization" of production enabled the shortening of the learning process to six months and the quickening of the entry of the cutter to production and earning. This merging of capitalist efficiency with considerations of time and international competitiveness well fitted the thinking of Zionist economists who propounded the association between Theodor Herzl and Frederick Taylor, between a national home for the Jews and efficiency, a sort of "Zionization" of the labor process. It also attracted the attention of the diamond people in London, some of them Jewish Belgian exiles, who feared that Palestine's consequent specialization in small stones would not only surpass Belgium's pre-war supremacy, but practically hamper its post war recuperation. These fears added to the

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<sup>9</sup> De Vries, *Op.cit*, 2010, pp. 45-64 and 109-141.

tensions in which the strikes in the local diamond industry were contextualized.<sup>10</sup>

As employment relations in the diamond industry lent themselves to control and regulation, voluminous strike action seemed unlikely. From the establishment of the industry the PDMA selected the labor force and the workers were wholly dependent on the knowledge and experience of the expert work managers. While the manufacturers could little affect the exogenous sources of supply of raw diamonds, they could still discipline the workers and delimit the actions of their union representatives and the emissaries of the Histadrut in particular. Moreover, the manufacturers could build on the attraction of the industry for Palestine's youth who imagined the short training and the orientation of the industry on export as promising sources of income. The latter allowed the manufacturers to mold workers' loyalty to the workshops and limit the cost of labor that made diamond cutting worth it in the first place.<sup>11</sup>

In reality, employment relations in the diamond industry turned extremely tumultuous, and as the intensity of strikes in the Jewish community and Mandate Palestine as a whole significantly increased during the war, they attracted the intense attention of the press and public opinion. After all, though the 4,500-5,000 diamond workers in the mid-1940s (in 33 workshops mostly in Netanya and Tel Aviv) were approximately 10% of the wage earners in Palestine, the number of workdays lost due to strikes in the diamond industry was two thirds of the entire workdays lost in strikes in Palestine. Moreover, despite the power of the diamond manufacturers, the strikes often destabilized the balance of power in the industry, cemented the legitimacy of strikes, and added to the image of unruliness the British authorities in Palestine increasingly came to hold of their creation.

**Table 1. Strikes and Strikers in Mandate Palestine's Jewish Community and Diamond Industry, 1940–1944**

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<sup>10</sup> De Vries, Op.cit, 2010, pp. 94-101; Laureys, Eric. "De joodse diamantdiaspora en de versnippering van de Antwerpse diamanthandel en -nijverheid tijdens de Tweede Wereldoorlog," *Jaarboek van het Nederlands Instituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie*, NIOD, 2003.

<sup>11</sup> Six organizations were present in the diamond factories. The largest was the Histadrut. The second was Histadrut Ha-Ovdim Ha-Leumi (National Workers Association), representing the Revisionist Movement. The third represented the religious Hapoel Hamizrahi. The fourth, Ha-Oved Ha-Leumi, represented the liberals while the fifth, Poaeli Agudat Israel represented the religious orthodox. The sixth represented the Communist Party and occasionally acted together with various splinter groups. During the war about half the diamond workforce was unaffiliated.

	Jewish Community		Diamond Industry		% Diamond Strikers in Jewish Community Strikers
	Strikes	Strikers	Strikes	Strikers	
1940	89	3,317	-	-	-
1941	71	4,185	2	1,400	33.45
1942	88	9,258	13	2,613	28.22
1943	123	15,220	43	5,017	32.96
1944	82	7,805	15	4,166	53.37

Sources: Etkin, Yeshayahu. "Sixty Years of Striking in Israel, 1921–1980," *MA thesis*, Tel Aviv University, 1982 (H); *Sikumim*, Statistical compilations by the Histadrut's department of statistics, 1946 (H).

Any explanation of the relatively high strike propensity of the Palestine diamond workers during the war must start by framing the relations that had evolved between the manufacturers and the workers as a social pact. On one side of the pact there was an intensely expanding stratum of workers. They were mostly young and eager to work in a venture that seemed much more attractive than other available jobs. They quickly became highly skilled workers, and in comparison to many others in Palestine's industrial workforce, their skill was rooted in tradition, knowhow, precision, and manual dexterity. On the other side of the pact were the diamond manufacturers, the providers of the economic opportunity and of the novel economic attraction that emerged during the war. The employment structure the manufacturers created, the "Taylorized" conveyor system of the cutting process and the mix of piecework and collective bargaining was conducive to high levels of efficiency and productivity. Long hours of work and high pressures on the immobilized body of the workers and on their penetrating eyes were coupled with an atmosphere of regimentation and recurring worries over dropping stones off the cutting tables or harming their inner qualities. These were balanced by relatively high wages protected by an all-industry collective agreement, a strong sense of workplace solidarity, and pride in skill and in the worldwide reputation of the quality of their work. The diamond workers therefore felt their commonality much more through the labor process and work experience than by organizational framework, union affiliation, and presence of union activists. This was often reflected in their deference to the manufacturers

and to allegiance to the workplaces, the basic ingredients of any such social pact.<sup>12</sup>

The diamond workers became strike prone much more because the social pact with the owners of the diamond factories was regularly under stress and often violated - and less because of traditions of militancy.<sup>13</sup> After all, the legacy of strike action among diamond cutters and polishers in Amsterdam, Antwerp and New York was hardly of one of adversity and militancy. The radicalism of the cutters and polishers in the Low Countries expressed itself less through strike action and more in robust organization, in the attainment of improved pay and working conditions, through piecemeal organizational (and educational) action, and composed demonstration of power. What the widely known leaders of the diamond workers' unions in Belgium, the Netherlands, England and New York had in common was labor's reformism and gradualism.<sup>14</sup> Much of their organizational energy in their respective countries was spent on attaining rapprochement with the diamond manufacturers and employers and less on fighting them. This was what defined them as a sort of "labor aristocracy", a term usually connoting highly skilled jobs, craft workers and restrained militancy. The respect of the employers for the leaders of the diamond workers and to their organizations (e.g. the diamond workers union in the Netherlands and Belgium or the Protective Union of Diamond Workers in the US) testified not only to the sense of occupational commonality, but also to the need to maintain industrial peace and wide areas of consent.<sup>15</sup>

It is difficult to substantiate why these non-radical legacies found less expression in Palestine, where so many of the traditions of the industry kept on feeding the daily life in the diamond workshops of Tel Aviv and Netanya. Perhaps it was due to the fact that those arrived in Palestine were diamond experts and not workers or union activists, and therefore the

<sup>12</sup> Editorial, "Palestine Industry in Light of the Diamond Workers' Strike", *Palestine Illustrated*, 16 December 1943; Horowitz, S., J.L. Fletcher, D. Anderson, *Report of the Diamond Control Sub-Committee, Confidential Report*, 21 June 1944, Central Zionist Archive, S40/269/1.

<sup>13</sup> On the concept of violation of social pact see Bonnell, Victoria E. *Roots of Rebellion: Workers' Politics and Organizations in St. Petersburg and Moscow, 1900-1914*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983, pp.1-18.

<sup>14</sup> Among the leaders were Henri Polak and Piet van Muyden of the Algemene Nederlandse Diamantbewerker Bond; V. Daems and Frans Schoeters of the Algemene Diamantbewerkerbond van België, William Jacobs of the British diamond workers' union and Meyer Andries at the Diamond Workers' Protective Union of America.

<sup>15</sup> Polak, Henri. *A Short History of the Diamond Cutting Industry*. London: The Diamond Workers Section Committee of the Society of Goldsmiths, 1950; Jacobs, William. "History of the Organized British Diamond Workers," *Ibid.*, pp. 37-43.

continuity of labor traditions of collective action was disrupted. It could have been also affected by the PDMA's insistence on not allowing the Histadrut – the Jewish General Federation of Labor, evidently a national oriented non-radical organization – to become the hegemonic representative of the workers and overshadow all other minority unions. Whatever the reasons, the diamond manufacturers in Palestine, some of them eager to reproduce the Belgian model of employment relations, repeatedly bemoaned the failure of the Low Countries' legacy of restraint to take root.<sup>16</sup>

In the manufacturers' perception, the social pact practiced in their factories was under constant threat because of their high financial exposure. On the one hand, they were dependent on the regular supply of rough stones arriving from Africa and distributed in London. The high irregularity of supply was a corollary of the war conditions but also of the distributive policies of De Beers, themselves influenced by the diamond commodity chain, the fluctuations in demand for raw materials, and by British policy towards the Belgian pressure to contain the expansion of the new cutting centers outside Europe. The irregularity of stone supply could be expressed in the varying size of stones sent for cutting in Palestine, but mainly in the constant thirst of the factories for more materials. On the other hand, the reserves the manufacturers kept were under a constant threat because of overproduction, low replenishment, or uneven distribution by the PDMA in Palestine itself of the rough diamonds to the individual factories. Each manufacturer in Netanya and Tel Aviv was therefore inclined to hoard reserves to preempt irregularity.<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, for his guarantee the manufacturer had to cut his labor costs. He could do that by decreasing the distribution of stones to the workers and the number of apprentices in his factory, or simply by tampering with workers' pay. All these the manufacturer could employ to a certain limit. He had to be careful not to harm the workforce he took so much care to cultivate and on whose trust and loyalty he depended. He had also to take into consideration the collective agreement the PDMA signed on his behalf, which obliged the manufacturers to guarantee workers' pay when supply of stones decreased or when the factory had to temporarily

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<sup>16</sup> Jerusalem Labor Council. "The Diamond Workers and their Union", *The Histadrut in Jerusalem 1942–1944*. Jerusalem: Histadrut, 1944, pp. 92–94 (H). On diamond workers' unionization see Van Tijn, Theo. "A Contribution to the Scientific Study of the History of Trade Unions," *International Review of Social History*, vol. 21, no. 2, 1976, pp. 214–215; Bloemgarten, Salvador. *Henri Polak sociaal democraat 1868–1943*, Den Haag: 1996, chapters 7 and 10.

<sup>17</sup> Paltin, Naftali. "Relations between the Manager and the Workers," *Hayahalom*, [Bulletin of the diamond industry in Palestine], vol. 2, no. 9, 1945, p. 9 (H).

close. The manufacturers often preferred not to harm their workers and instead digressed from the PDMA's pay policies and collective agreements with the unions. In more extreme cases, the manufacturers chose to lock out the factory and drastically decrease activity and renewing it again when profit levels allowed. All in all, therefore, the manufacturer was incessantly calculating the extent of his exposure to his sales' levels in the US, to the arrival of rough diamonds from Africa to Europe, to London's stones' distribution policy, and finally to the PDMA's collective pay directives. His autonomy and freedom of action, so cherished by all the liberal-oriented diamond manufacturers, were therefore limited, and on encountering these limits he would opt to cut labor costs, otherwise it would not be profitable for him to continue. This was a permanent source of pressure on relations with the workers and it was often enhanced by the manufacturers and the PDMA who exaggerated the extent of these dangers to the press.<sup>18</sup>

In this way, the world of booming diamond production in Palestine unraveled itself not only as an attractive source of income, occupational attainment, and mobility for the young Jewish diamond workers. It was also unstable, fluctuating, and laden with threats to shatter the system of trust and interest they shared with the manufacturers, the experts that taught them their skills, and the workplace that provided them with a sense of social order and economic future. The backing that could have been provided to them from outside by a single solid union organization was frail. Furthermore, the PDMA's successful splintering of labor organization in the factories discouraged the traditional restraining barriers usually placed by the labor movement on the social unrest of the urban workers.<sup>19</sup>

The age of the diamond workers was indeed a crucial factor in explaining their propensity to strike. Upon entry to apprenticeship at a young age, the workers expected to start earning after three months. Despite the regimentation and arduous conditions of the work, they enjoyed the benefits that piecework accrued to them. Willingness to work for hours on end, the lack of familial commitment (other than to parents whom they could quickly provide for), and flexibility in their adaptation to changes in supplies and in sizes of stones all made them also susceptible to spontaneous action. They could be children of members of one of the four or five unions, but were hardly satisfied with the collective agreement in the industry or paid little respect to the unions' restraining attempts. For the

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<sup>18</sup> Rothblum, David. "Wish Them Godspeed!," *Dapei Hamenahel*, [Bulletin of the managers in the diamond industry in Palestine], no. 1, 1944, pp. 6–7 (H).

<sup>19</sup> *Hasapir* [Bulletin of a diamond factory in Jerusalem], 1943 (H); *Hatzohar* [Bulletin of diamond workers in Jerusalem], 1943 (H).



union organizers in the labor movement they seemed an unruly lot, wholly dedicated to work and uneasily recruited to union work, distant from values of loyalty to a labor movement and much more prone to organizational independence than to traditional union frameworks.<sup>20</sup>

The Labor Department of the Palestine government was aware of these characteristics.<sup>21</sup> In the department's logic the propensity of the diamond workers to strike was related to the large number of unions in Palestine, and to the effect of the expansion of the industry on the entry of large numbers of unaffiliated workers. These explanations may have had a ring of truth to them, but they ignored the relation between the entry of the unorganized and the PDMA's worker-selection policy. Furthermore, they overlooked the relation between the great number of unorganized and the fact that in times of low unemployment, workers affiliated with the labor movement could have preferred not to enter the diamond industry because they disliked its characteristics (exposure to fluctuations in supply, long working hours, the instability of the employers, etc.) despite the relatively higher pay rewards.

Clearly the multiplicity of strikes was related to the breakdown of negotiations on collective agreements, to the workers' realizations of the increasing prosperity of the industry, and to their desire to have a share in it. The young diamond workers interpreted the recurrent intermissions of supplies and consequent changes in work schedules as a taken-for-granted feature of their work experience that turned work stoppages into routine. Manufacturers who wished to hoard rough stones in reserve instead of distributing them for cutting were quickly blamed for breaching their commitments to the apprentices and workers. Fluctuations in supply, and intermittent attempts to cut labor costs and to empty collective agreements of their original contents portrayed the manufacturers as unwilling to share their high profits from the industry. The workers' pride in acquiring a craft, in their technological adaptability and in the culture of the skill they cultivated, deeply affected this portrayal.<sup>22</sup>

The impact of the propensity of the diamond workers to strike and of the weakness of the unions to restrain strike action was hardly confined to

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<sup>20</sup> Gurevich, David. *Workers' Wages in the Jewish Diamond-Polishing Industry in Palestine in 1944*, Jerusalem: Department of Statistics of the Jewish Agency, 1945 (H).

<sup>21</sup> The department was established in 1940 and by 1942 formulated an anti-strike ordinance. However it lacked teeth as shown by wartime strike action among industrial workers and diamond workers in particular.

<sup>22</sup> Government of Palestine, Op. cit.

employment relations.<sup>23</sup> First, the strikes added to the anxiety of the manufacturers during the war largely caused by the instable supply of raw material from London. The latter contrasted to the image that the PDMA wished to market (in particular to the British authorities and the Diamond Syndicate) of a viable industry and at the service of the war effort and the empire. This was true with regard to the general strikes in the diamond industry, and it was further made explicit in the wake of the general strike in diamonds in 1944 that lasted for ten weeks and turned into one of the largest and intransigent strikes in the history of Mandate Palestine.

**Table 2. General Strikes in Mandate Palestine's Diamond Industry, 1941-1946**

	Workers Affected	Working Days Lost	Average Intensity (Days lost per Striker)
1942	2,600	82,000	32
1943	2,000	24,000	12
1944	3,250	182,000	56
1946	4,320	56,000	13

Source: Histadrut. *The Diamond Worker in Palestine*, Tel Aviv: Histadrut, 1946.

Second, the recurrent strikes exposed the weakness of the Palestine government and the PDMA to fully control the industry, and thus added to the threats posed by the movement of experts between the factories and by the persistence of home work. Third, the strikes forced the manufacturers to take into account the chronic industrial unrest in their business-expansion strategies. This was clearly seen in their willingness to attenuate the objection to the presence of the labor organizations and – quite without precedent in Mandate Palestine - to a branch-wide collective agreement.<sup>24</sup>

The strikes had a deeper effect on labor organization, in particular on the presence of the Histadrut. To the PDMA's attempts to prevent a meaningful presence of workers' representation in the labor process, the strikes added a from-below challenge to the organizations themselves. Naturally this resulted in a growing effort to widen union influence over workers and in a concerted action by the Histadrut to unite the organizations under its umbrella and to discipline the workers through the cultivation of loyal workshop workers' committees. Nevertheless, the strikes emphasized

<sup>23</sup> For the strikes see De Vries 2010, Op. cit., chapter 5.

<sup>24</sup> Minutes of the PDMA's executive and labor committee, 8 December and 14 December 1943, Netanya city archive, G/67/389; *Hamashkif* [Daily of the Revisionist movement], 9 December 1943 [H]; PDMA's proposals, 20 December 1943, Labor Movement Archive, Lavon Institute (Tel Aviv), LA/IV-250-49-175-b; "2-Month Diamond Strike May End Today", *Palestine Post*, 17 May 1944.

the partial effectiveness of these attempts, in particular among the diamond workers who were affiliated with Communist party or the right-wing Revisionists. It thus made the Histadrut recognize the limits of its hegemony in the industrial sector in the Jewish community, and of its capacity to reach consensus with private capital which so deeply depended on external resources and colonial politics.<sup>25</sup>

The sense of a limited power produced among the union ideologues negative images that coupled the diamond workers with all the wrongs of capitalism and unorganized labor. Focusing on the “pathology” of workers’ attraction to personal profit and defiance of mainstream organization, the images reproduced the traditional arsenal of social hatred that since the 1920s Zionist-Socialism cultivated against capital on the one hand and unaffiliated workers on the other. The imagery never excluded a national-oriented reasoning of Labor’s need to cooperate with Jewish industrialists and capitalists; neither did it weaken the quest of the organized labor movement to widen its bases by tempting those objecting to organization. Uncontrolled militancy in the diamond industry signified for the Histadrut union activists that its ambivalent language towards both capital and the unorganized remained ineffective. The militancy testified to the wider, menacing problem that the Histadrut was too weak to overcome workers whose working conditions and power in the workplace was improved by the wartime boom, and who consequently defied Labor’s authority and collective interests. The tactics used by the leadership of the Histadrut and Mapai (labor's dominant political party) to contain these better-off workers could not work in the diamond industry because of the piecework character of the labor process and because the PDMA and the manufacturers took care to keep workers’ representation at bay. The Histadrut had nothing left but to recognize the failure of its organizational efforts, to divert its best forces to other industries, and to hope that relations with the industry and its workers after the war would correspond to the presence of organized labor common before the war.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Avniel, Binyamin. "The Role of the Manager in Labor Relations," *Hayahalom*, no. 7, 1944, pp. 3-4 (H); PDMA, Minutes, 13 September 1945, Netanya City Archive, G/99/744; Report by the PDMA’s labor department, May 1946, NCA, G/99/744(H); Rosen, Op. Cit.; Etkin, Op. Cit., pp. 215–268 (H).

<sup>26</sup> Y. L. "Diamonds," *Hapoel Hatsair* [Periodical of Hapoel Hatsair Zionist-Socialist Party], 25 June 1942 (H); Kalisher, Arie. "The Diamond Workers in their Strike," *Misgav* [Bulletin of the Histadrut-affiliated diamond workers in Palestine], no. 7, 1944, pp. 9–10 (H); De Vries, David, "British Rule and Arab-Jewish Coalescence of Interest: The 1946 Civil Servants Strike in Palestine," *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 36, no. 4, 2004, pp. 613–638.

The impact was, however, wider. As a part of a state-building project, the labor movement wished to cement the economic autonomy of the Jewish community and the preference in the workplaces of Jewish immigrants and workers over Arab workers. Many labor disputes and strikes against Jewish employers in agriculture, construction, and industry revolved around that issue. Moreover, many improvement disputes were no less immersed in Zionist terminology: the employers claiming the workers were disrupting their national-capitalist operation, while labor arguing that the Jewish capital and employers were more capitalist than Zionist. The Zionization of the terminology of capital-labor negotiation and of collective action did not mean that class issues were absent. Rather, they were overshadowed by an agenda that argued for the primacy of the politics and the hegemony of the Zionist-oriented Histadrut in the labor market: in providing the employers with a labor force, in participating in fixing wages, and in regulating the workforce. In the latter part of the Mandate period, contestation in the workplaces became increasingly class-based. The Zionist agenda continued to influence the segmentation of the economy and the organizational segregation of the workforce. However, when the diamond workforce was created in the early stages of World War II and during the ensuing booming of the economy, the balance was already tipping away from the national politics of the labor market toward the social politics of relations between capital and labor.<sup>27</sup> The diamond workers became the leading force in this gradual veering from national-segregationist aspects of strike action to economic and social ones. For an industry and a workforce hardly existing before the war and representing just one type of manufacturing, such levels of conflict – an average of 34 percent of the strikers among Palestine's Jews – were remarkable. Even more significant was the fact that the diamond industry was Jewish-only, and that from the start it did not experience the labor market competition between Arabs and Jews that was so influential in social and employment relations in the Jewish community as a whole.<sup>28</sup>

While the effects of the strikes on the diamond manufacturers and on organized labor were direct, militancy had another, less blatant consequence. The close association in Palestine between the instability of

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<sup>27</sup> Shalev, Michael. *Labor and the Political Economy in Israel*, Oxford: 1992, pp.137–144 and 166–172.

<sup>28</sup> On the national agenda see De Vries, David. "Drawing the Repertoire of Collective Action: Labor Zionism and Strikes in 1920s Palestine," *Middle Eastern Studies* vol. 38, no. 3, 2002, pp. 93–122. On communists' approach see Gozansky, Tamar (Ed.). *'Arise, ye Workers from your Slumber': Life and Collected Works of Eliahu Gozansky*, Haifa: Pardes, 2009 (H). pp. 45-98.

external supply of rough stones and local industrial unrest made local organizers of diamond workers aware of a similar association in the African diamond mines between the regulated mining and the working conditions of the South African, Belgian Congolese and Sierra Leonean miners. As the diamond industry never knew a supranational workers' organization (similar to the Amsterdam-based Universal Alliance of Diamond Workers, which referred to cutters and polishers) this awareness never expressed itself in an organized international solidarity. However, the fact that the stones polished in the various centers originated in those African mines provided a sense of "imperial connectivity" that the war strengthened through the increasing importance of noncombatant regions for international politics. The effect of stone supply on the multiplicity of strikes made this connectivity another aspect of an imperial social formation that tied through the diamond commodity chain the experiences of diamond miners in Africa to those of the cutters in Palestine. This was partly reflected in the growing awareness by the owners of the diamond factories and the PDMA itself of information on the tribulations of the diamond industry in other parts of the globe. It was also expressed by the diamond cutters in Palestine who saw that apart from their participation in the Zionist state-building project, they were also part of an empire, of a colonial network, and of an international war effort that crossed national borders. In the last year of the world war, this awareness of the relations between the postwar international arrangements, the plans for economic development, and their potential influence on the international division of labor in the diamond industry deepened.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> On the atmosphere of an international strike wave see "Wage Cut for Diamond Cutters," *Palestine Post*, 26 June 1942; Inspector of Labor for the Southern Region to the Secretary of the Jaffa-Tel Aviv Labor Council, 1 May 1943, LA/IV-250-72-1-335; see also Alexander, Peter. *Workers, War and the Origins of Apartheid: Labor and Politics in South Africa 1939-1948*. Oxford: James Currey, 2000, pp. 27 and 129; for a wider context see Atleson, James B. *Labor and the Wartime State: Labor Relations and Law during World War II*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1998.



## **Three cheers for data! Interviews with Beverly Silver and Sjaak van der Velden**

*Interviewer: Vilja Hulden*

**A**s labour historians try to move from nationally-centred to global understandings of the development of workers' movements and labour protest, one problem they have to deal with is the question of how to gather and assess data that has a global reach. The questions this provokes have to do with not only compatibility and representativeness, but also with the basic accuracy of the kinds of data we have traditionally used to measure labour conflict.

The two interviews below (both conducted over e-mail during the fall of 2012) address different aspects of the problem of accurate, global-level data on labour conflict. Both Sjaak van der Velden and Beverly Silver have worked extensively with large data projects that aim to offer new tools for researchers researching labour conflict locally and globally. As their own projects – which they also discuss here – demonstrate, both the way in which data are gathered and the ability to manipulate data on a large scale can have a major impact on our interpretation of the patterns of labour and class conflict.

### About the interviewees



**Sjaak van der Velden**'s dissertation work was based on the massive amount of data he gathered on strikes in the Netherlands, and subsequently he has endeavoured to encourage the collection of similarly detailed data for other countries as well. Van der Velden is currently the coordinator of the Labour Conflicts project, based at the International Institute of Social History (IISH).

The Labour Conflicts project aims to gather a moderated list of data files on strikes, lockouts and other labour conflicts. Currently there are data collections on the website for time periods of varying lengths for France, Germany, the Netherlands, Portugal, Sweden, the United Kingdom, Russia, Ghana, and Argentina.



**Beverly Silver** was involved in the creation of a large-scale database on global labour conflict now known as the World Labour Group database, constructed at the Fernand Braudel Center for the Study of Economies, Historical Systems, and Civilizations at SUNY-Binghamton. The database, which is constructed from the reporting of labour conflict in *The Times of*



London and *The New York Times*, covers labour conflict in 168 countries between 1870 and 1996.

Silver draws on the World Labour Group database in her critically acclaimed book, *Forces of Labour: Workers' Movements and Globalization Since 1870* (University of Cambridge Press, 2003). Silver is currently a professor of Sociology at Johns Hopkins University.

### Interview with Sjaak van der Velden

**VH: Can you explain the basic motivation behind the project – why is this type of data important and what problem does it aim to solve?**

SV: Strikes are in my opinion still the most open and common sign of existing contradictions between capital and labour. If you want to understand the development of capitalist society you cannot ignore the existence or absence of labour conflicts.

However, doing strike research is often a time consuming affair because official statistics and ILO data derived from these are only published on an aggregate level (although there are of course a few exceptions to this general rule – for instance, Canada and Brazil). The focus on the aggregate level has its roots in two different concerns: the first, ideological, and the second, budgetary. The International Labour Organization (ILO) decided in the late 1920s to begin to focus on the economic consequences of strikes and lockouts: that is, what is the cost of strikes. That's an ideological decision – what is important about labour conflict is its impact on the economy. In any case, the side effect is that there is little call for more than aggregate data. On the other hand, national statistical bureaus had for budgetary reasons already stopped publishing micro-level data on labour conflict, and welcomed the ILO's decision to focus on the aggregate. As a consequence, now many countries publish only data that combines strikes and lockouts and barely note any other conflict.

Combining strike and lockout data obscures the picture. Strikes and lockouts are weaponry used by opposing sides in the social struggle, so we should always separate the two. And of course other forms of labour conflicts (absenteeism, theft, demonstrations etc.) also indicate the state of affairs. During fascism, it was almost lethal to go on strikes, for instance, but perhaps workers used other means to express their discontent.

So there's the level of accurately representing what is going on in a particular situation. Further, though, global comparative data may reveal broader patterns or indicate intriguing correlations. This requires compatible and accurate data, however. For example, I wrote an article together with Wessel Visser from South Africa in which we showed that despite the big difference between the Netherlands and South Africa – especially during the apartheid years – the strike history showed more similarities than expected. We of course used aggregate data, but maybe the use of microdata might give an explanation for this phenomenon. It looks as if there is a global trend in the struggle between capital and labour that has its national peculiarities.

**VH: If I understand correctly, your work on Dutch strikes is something of a model for the Labour Conflicts project. In that work you go beyond official statistics and use reports in newspapers, books, and pamphlets as well as in trade union and chamber of commerce reports to create a kind of a shadow record of labour conflict in the Netherlands between 1830 and 1995. Can you elaborate on how microdata of this type help address the problems with official strike data?**

SV: That's correct. My database was regarded at the IISH as a good example of data collection that covers a long period of time. In my database I try to distinguish between strikes, lockouts and other forms.

The analysis of the different forms of conflict may change received wisdom. I discovered, for example, that although the literature on the union movement commonly depicts the years 1904–1910 as an era of working-class aggression, that is not actually true. No, these were years when aggressive *employers* locked out more workers than were on strike. Official statistics used by most labour historians do not distinguish between strikes and lockouts (although the original publications in those years did) so all they see is a growth in conflict activity. But it was the employers who took the initiative.

There are a few other reasons, too, why microdata can shed new light on strike activity. Only microdata can help correct the errors in official data and make these suitable for comparison. Official data collections are often incompatible because definitions vary. This is so despite the existence of official guidelines designed by the ILO.

And there are holes in the data. ILO data starts only in 1927 and for many countries the data is spotty. You will not find data on strikes during

the Hitler regime, but German researchers have written about strikes during fascism. The same is true for the DDR [East Germany] during the pre-1989 era.

In a similar vein, the United States since the early 1980s has excluded from official statistics all strikes with fewer than 1,000 participants. This gives a very biased picture of labour conflicts in that country. The statistics still cover most of the days not worked, but investigation of labour conflicts is about more than lost days. A small strike can have an enormous social impact that does not register in the official statistics. It all has to do with the aim of most official statistical bureaus to get a picture of the economic consequences of strikes and lockouts.

In the ideal case, we would have access to microdata on many labour conflicts from a number of countries, and then we might be able to redefine these according to one standard definition.

Finally, microdata can help discover why workers go on strike. Aggregate data can only give general pointers (e.g. metal workers are more strike prone than workers in retail trade), but with microdata we may perhaps gain a more fine-grained understanding of workers' behaviour. But this has to be proven. Maria Bergman from Sweden and I have tried to do something like this, and our piece will be published in a report of the meeting I called when we started the Labour Conflicts project.

**VH: Since we also have an interview with Beverly Silver here, would you mind commenting on the somewhat different approach that the World Labour Research Working Group (WLG) that she's been associated with takes to gathering comparative labour unrest data? Did you know of Silver's work when the IISH project was started and did it influence your thoughts on collecting data at all?**

SV: Yes, I knew the project. I think there are some problems with it. First of all, there is the question of definition. In our database, there are strict criteria for labour conflicts, whereas the WLG definition implicitly depends on the definitions used by the journalists of two newspapers, *The New York Times* and *The Times* of London.

The other problem is that relying on one British and one U.S. newspaper will inevitably bypass much information. First, these newspapers look at the world from a Western perspective, and second, newspapers are looking for big news. When the tsunami struck Asia a few years ago it was understandable that this news was regarded as more important than news

about some strikes or demonstrations in e.g. Peru. It is also understandable that in the midst of the New Economy hype during the nineties, newspapers didn't pay much attention to strikes and lockouts. After all, these were regarded as a thing of the past, soon about to disappear.

So, despite the great effort undertaken by the Working Group, their database tells us more about the view of the two newspapers towards the importance of labour conflicts than about what actually happened.

**VH: Incidentally, have you checked how the WLG data for the Netherlands compares with yours?**

SV: No, at the time I didn't have access to this data, only to the results as they were published in the Review of the Fernand Braudel Center. But I suspect that statistically it would be pointless because the Netherlands is a very small country that will probably not show up often in the two *Times*.

**VH: OK, so let's move on to the details of the Labour Conflicts project. Tell me a little about the basics.**

SV: The project started in 2008 as part of a wider project: Global Labour History. Because the bigger project was intended to act as collaboratory, and most researchers on strikes seemed not to be interested in collaboration, the Strikes project continued separately. Despite the current crisis the study of strikes is still not very popular among mainstream historians.

In the Global Labour History project, the main goal is to change the focus of labour history in the direction of global history. It is an offspring of the ideas presented by Marcel van der Linden and Jan Lucassen about Global Labour History.

The entire project was funded externally and the ultimate goal is to collect comparable data on labour history. At first the idea was to collect time series but this soon proved to be too difficult. So the focus changed to a few sample years like 1500, 1750 and 1950. An international group of researchers under the guidance of Prof. Karin Hofmeester met several times and collected that data.

The Labour Conflicts project was also originally envisioned as collaboratory, but the researchers I contacted were more interested in sharing data than in collaborating. So they just sent me their data. Then I suggested to the management of the Global Labour History project that we

could change the aim of the labour conflicts group a little: we could make it a repository where researchers can store their data.

**VH: Do you have plans to create a master database that would incorporate the individual collections now linked to from the site?**

SV: Originally this was the idea. But suppliers of data were mostly not in a position to use the format in a Microsoft Access environment I built. So, now data comes in various ways and gets put on the website as it is.

When we started the project, I called a meeting in Amsterdam in 2008, and it attracted participants from Russia, Ghana and Brazil, among others (a report will be published online this year by the IISH). The discussions and comments were pretty fruitful, but other than that, the meeting didn't really get the project much further.

The problem is that we are looking for microdata on a time series scale. There aren't that many researchers working with such data. They either use aggregate data or just descriptions of a limited number of strikes. The Russian project on our website is one of the few exceptions to this.

So I've just kept on collecting data myself (e.g. on Germany, together with Heiner Dribbusch) and asking people to send data. This last has to be repeated every now and then, because people forget...

It's basically a matter of better this than nothing. The ideal situation would be that all data were part of one database. Maybe in the future when we have demonstrated that it is possible to collect a substantial amount of data from different countries and all parts of the globe, we can apply for additional funding to rework that data into a coherent database.

**VH: Do you know of any research so far that has made substantial comparative use of the data coordinated by the project?**

SV: Unfortunately I don't know of such use of the data. This is understandable because it is too scarce and dispersed. Some researchers have used individual data collections from the repository, however.

**VH: What is the current status of the project?**

SV: Right now I am working on the project at a very slow pace on a freelance basis - I was originally employed for about a year and a half on a part-time basis, but now we basically have run out of funding. The limited resources we have are mostly devoted to keeping the website alive until we can regenerate the project. At the IISH we intend to apply for new funds to

get the project off the ground again, but it's a matter of priorities. These are hard times financially, also for the IISH.

Meanwhile, the website is up and people are welcome to take a look at it and make use of the data that is now there. And of course, on behalf of the IISH I would be pleased to see more researchers send their data to the repository.

### Interview with Beverly Silver

**VH: Can you talk briefly about the aims that the World Labour Group (WLG) database project had/has?**

BS: When the World Labour Group (WLG) first formed back in the 1980s, it was already common to hear people claim that there was a worldwide crisis of labour movements. But while labour movements at that time were clearly on the defensive in the United States, this was not the case everywhere in the world. At that time, there were strong and effective mass labour movements in countries that had been industrializing rapidly in the previous decade, ranging from Brazil and South Africa to Poland and South Korea. In other words, we could observe a geographically uneven pattern of labour movement strength/weakness corresponding to the geographically uneven nature of industrialization/deindustrialization.

These observations brought us to one of the key hypotheses that was to animate the WLG project – that is, “where capital goes, labour-capital conflict follows shortly.” This hypothesis contrasts sharply with the dominant “race-to-the-bottom” narrative that sees globalization as producing a relentless downward spiral in the power of labour worldwide.

But it was not possible for us to “test” this hypothesis (or the alternative hypothesis) with the existing data compilations on labour unrest. Among other things, official strike statistics for periods longer than a decade or two existed for only a handful of wealthy countries. So our research group set about creating a database on labour unrest throughout the world from 1870-1990 based upon reports from the leading newspapers of the two world hegemonic powers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – *The New York Times* and *The Times* (London). We wrote down every international report of labour unrest from the Indexes of the two newspaper sources. The result was a database with 91,947 reports of labour unrest

around the world including the type of unrest (e.g., strike, demonstration, riot, factory occupation), the location (country, industry) and date.

This data provided the empirical basis for the analysis of the relationship between labour movements and capital mobility in *Forces of Labor*. Working with the World Labour Group data, I was able to show that capital relocation did not produce a simple race-to-the-bottom for labour worldwide. To be sure, when faced with strong labour movements, capitalists have followed a recurrent strategy of relocating production to new sites in search of cheap and disciplined labour. But strong and effective labour movements emerged in each new site of production within less than a generation. We could see this clearly for the leading global industry of the twentieth century (automobiles) and for the leading global industry of the nineteenth century (textiles), the focus of chapters 2 and 3, respectively.

From the analysis of the historical pattern we were also able to make a strong prediction (which has proven in many respects to be accurate) – that by the first decade of the twenty-first century we would see strong new labour movements emerging in the sites that manufacturing capital had been moving to massively in the 1990s – most notably China.

In sum, one of the main overall organizing hypotheses of the World Labour Group project was: “where capital goes, labour-capital conflict follows”. Here, our focus was on the interrelationship between *world-economic transformations* and labour movement dynamics. But something funny happened once we collected the newspaper data for the entire 1870-1990 period. When we graphed the data as a time series of total number of reports of labour unrest in the world, something we hadn’t been particularly looking for when we went into the data collection project jumped out at us. The two highest peaks in the times series of world labour unrest – by far – were the years immediately following the First World War and the Second World War. We had not been thinking about the relationship between geopolitical dynamics and world labour unrest when we initiated the data collection project, but investigating this relationship – in particular the relationship between the world-scale patterning of labour unrest and world hegemonic cycles (of which world wars are a particularly morbid manifestation) – became central to the World Labour Group project (and the main focus of chapter 4 of *Forces of Labor*).

**VH: Is the WLG database freely available to any researcher, and if so, where and how can it be accessed?**

BS: An Excel file with the number of reports of labour unrest per year from 1870-1996 for each country is freely available. Requests should be sent to wlg@jhu.edu.

**VH: Can you respond to the critique that relying on two Western newspapers does not provide an accurate picture of world labour unrest?**

BS: I think the question about the reliability of the two Western newspapers – *The New York Times* and *The Times* (London) – needs to be answered in two parts. First is the question of the reliability of *any* newspaper or combination of newspapers for creating indicators of labour unrest. A separate question is the reliability of these two newspapers in particular. Let me deal with these in turn.

One important thing to point out is that we never expected these two newspapers (or any combination of newspaper sources) to provide a complete census or count of all labour unrest events in the world. Newspapers only report on a small fraction of the labour unrest that occurs. Rather than using the image of a counting machine we should use the image of a thermometer to think about the utility of labour unrest databases created from newspapers, including the WLG database – that is, as a tool for understanding when/where the “temperature” of labour unrest is relatively high/low relative to other times and places. Thus, times/places with a relatively high number of newspaper reports of labour unrest in the database should be times/places where the labour movement is relatively “hot”.

But what do we mean by “hot”? This brings me to another point about the difference between databases of labour unrest created from newspaper reports and official government-collected strikes series. Government-collected strike statistics generally include all strikes (aim at a complete census of all events). Newspapers, in contrast, tend to be biased against reporting routine events (such as routinized and institutionalized strike activity). They are more likely to see as “news” events that are non-normative, involving actions (e.g., illegal strikes, particularly violent strikes) or actors (e.g., groups that have been previously quiescent) or outcomes (e.g., significant disruption to “business as usual”).

If you are working from a theoretical perspective that assumes that most important social change happens as a result of non-normative waves of social conflict (rather than during periods of routinized and institutionalized social conflict) then the bias of the newspapers in favour of the latter



actually make them a better source for identifying times/places of transformative waves of labour unrest than official strike statistics.

The second part of the question is the reliability of the two newspapers used to create the World Labour Group database – *The New York Times* and *The Times* (London). Our goal was to get a picture of labour unrest worldwide from the late-nineteenth century to the present. Adding up country-level sources would have been unfeasible from the time-input point of view. It also raises methodological problems related to how to weight the different sources in creating a single indicator. Instead we chose to rely on the leading newspapers of the two world hegemonic powers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – the United Kingdom and the United States. The two sources had both the capacity and the motivation to report on significant events of labour unrest worldwide. (It is important to note that we only included their international reports; we excluded reports of labour unrest in the United States from the *New York Times* data collection and we excluded reports of labour unrest in the United Kingdom from *The Times* data collection.)

The simplest answer to the question about the reliability of a database from these two sources is that “the proof of the pudding is in the eating”. We conducted seven country reliability tests (for Italy, China, South Africa, Argentina, Egypt, the United States and Germany). Here we compared the peaks/troughs in labour unrest identified by the World Labour Group database with the peaks/troughs identified by official and unofficial long-run data series (if they existed for the country) as well as with the peaks/troughs identifiable from the secondary literature on labour movements for those countries. We found that the World Labour Group database did an excellent job of identifying the peaks/troughs of labour unrest for each of these countries. (We published the results as a special issue of the Fernand Braudel Center’s journal, *Review* (volume XVIII, number 1, Winter 1995).

Moreover, we found that the range of countries for which we have a significant number of reports of labour unrest largely confirmed our expectation that we could get a global picture from these two sources. Not surprisingly there were some gaps—for example, we don’t get a satisfactory picture of labour unrest in French colonial and post-colonial Africa. Adding the international reports from a major French newspaper might help remedy this blind spot in the current WLG database.

In the meantime, with the WLG database, *as with all data sources no matter what their origin*, we need to always keep in mind its limitations

and biases, and not jump to any conclusions that cannot be sustained given the current state of the data collection. Such a cautionary approach to using data is not something that is required just when using newspapers as a source of data. It is required no matter what the data. It is no less important when using official government collected statistics on strikes – which have a whole set of problems of their own. Researchers tend to take government collected statistics at face value, but awareness of their strengths and weaknesses and an assessment of what is actually being measured is as important when working with these as with new databases created from newspaper sources.

**VH: What do you see as the main benefit of databases like the WLG? What makes them worth the substantial investment of time and resources?**

BS: Many important questions about the impact of globalization on labour (and vice-versa) cannot be asked, much less answered without a database that captures the whole. In order to get a picture of the whole, it was necessary to produce a new database rather than rely on existing compilations.

Creating new databases is indeed a huge investment of time and resources. But there are also huge drawbacks to relying on existing compilations. Long-run official strike statistics exist only for a handful of countries, most of which are wealthy western countries. This has led researchers interested in long-term patterns of strike activity to focus only on a handful of countries for which data exists. Sometimes researchers will attempt to generalize to all cases (or to the world) from this handful of cases. But, doing this is not an easily defensible move. If we work from the premise that historical capitalism is a singular process that results in uneven local level outcomes across time-space, then generalizing from a few cases is bound to mislead us. The dependency theory insight that development and underdevelopment are two sides of the same coin (and therefore one cannot generalize from the experience of Britain or Western Europe to the rest of the world in trying to understand and explain “modernization”), can be applied to thinking about labour movement outcomes across time and space. Rather than thinking of each local or national labour movement as a discrete case, independent from all other cases, local labour movements should be understood as being linked to each other through the dynamics of global capitalism. So, the reasons to invest in new long-term world-scale databases on labour and other forms of social unrest are compelling, notwithstanding the huge investment in time and resources needed to produce them.

**VH: A reviewer of *Forces of Labor* noted the absence of struggles in the sphere of consumption from the data. Did you consider the question of e.g. labour boycotts or other forms of consumer-based protest that can be construed as labour unrest?**

BS: The World Labour Group database is limited to reports of protests where workers themselves are the protagonists. Historically, workers have organized consumer boycotts (the grape boycott organized by US farmworkers in the 1970s is one obvious example) and such worker organized boycotts are included in the World Labour Group database. I have not drilled down into the data to find out how many of the total mentions of labour unrest would fall in this category. I am sure there are many reports of this type, but it would be a tiny percentage of the total (which I am also guessing is “reliable” in terms of the overall impact of worker-initiated consumer boycotts in bringing about major turning points in labour-capital relations).

Because our goal was to identify the role that workers *as protagonists* play in bringing about social-economic and political change at the local and global level, if the reported boycott campaign appears to have originated as solidarity from consumers (with workers cast in the role of powerless victims who can only be helped by activism from outside the working class), then these boycotts were not included in the World Labour Group database. Of course, there is a whole interesting array of questions on cross-class alliances with labour movements that could be made more central to the project. Indeed, we have recurrently considered expanding the database in ways that capture the importance of cross-class alliances in bringing about significant social change (e.g., links between workers and nationalist movements, workers and student movements). To do so we would not want to blur the analytical distinction between labour unrest and other forms of unrest (including solidarity with workers); but we would need to expand the data collection to include protest non-labour actors and then analyse the relationships among these different actors. This, needless to say, would involve another major (and analytically complex) data collection project that we have toyed with undertaking, but have not yet done.

**VH: What about the argument that a broad-scope vision such as that in *Forces of Labor* - or indeed, implicitly in the WLG database - unduly obscures the impact of local-level developments and/or local agency? Do you consider that to be a problem?**

BS: Virtually all the labour unrest events in the WLG database are local (e.g., strikes and occupations in factories, demonstrations and riots in

specific neighbourhoods or cities). In its totality, the database captures the long-term world-scale patterning of local level agency. So I don't think the project is obscuring or devaluing the importance of local agency. Indeed, a key argument in *Forces of Labor* is that actions by workers at the local level have been critical in shaping the global, including the patterning of international capital mobility, the rise and decline of leading industries on a world-scale, and the social content of world hegemonies. Labour unrest is shaped by *and shapes* world-economic and political processes.

What is true is that you get very little in the way of details, depth or context from newspaper reports. So the compilation and cleaning of the newspaper database – although it is in itself a major research task – is only a fraction of the work needed in order to analyse the interrelationships between local labour unrest and the historical transformation of global capitalism. The WLG database gives us a time-space patterning of labour unrest by city/country and industry from the late-nineteenth century to the present. From the WLG database we have been able to identify a number of interesting patterns to explain—patterns that one would not have been able to see from data collections that were shorter in time span or narrower in geographical scope. So, for example, we were able to see the shift over time in the epicentre of labour unrest in the mass production automobile industry from the United States (1930s and 1940s) to Western Europe (1960s and 1970s) to Brazil, South Africa and South Korea (late 1970s and 1980s)—and as we update the database to the present, we are starting to clearly see at least one (and perhaps two) new epicentres of labour unrest among mass production automobile workers – that is, China and India. Likewise, we were able to see a clear difference in the overall patterning of labour unrest during the decades of crisis of British world hegemony versus the period of stable US world hegemony – and as we update the database to the present (a period of crisis of US world hegemony) we are beginning to see the re-emergence of labour unrest dynamics that are reminiscent of the late-nineteenth and early-twenty-first centuries.

But in order to explain the patterns observed we need a wealth of additional empirical and theoretical inputs. On the empirical side, we need to stand on more fine grained materials gathered from local labour histories for the times/places identified as epicentres of labour unrest in our database; we need to stand on national level histories on the relationship between war, revolution, nationalism/internationalism, the rise/decline of the welfare state and labour unrest, and on histories of individual business enterprises and leading global industries that emerge from our database as key sites of labour unrest. I already mentioned automobiles and textiles, but the

importance of transportation jumps out as well from the WLG data as does the importance of the “education industry” more recently. And of course, none of this “data” speaks for itself. To make sense of it we need theories about the how local agency and the global processes shape each other; about how the economic and political dynamics of global capitalism are both shaped by and shape workers and workers’ movements.

**VH: Do you see any recent developments as clarifying or modifying your thoughts (as expressed in *Forces of Labor*) on the present state of the labour movement or the potential of particular sectors to emerge as key in labour struggles?**

BS: The ongoing major wave of labour unrest in China over the past several years is in line with the expectations expressed in *Forces of Labor* – that is, where capital goes, labour-capital conflict follows shortly. While manufacturing capital, including automobile capital, had flowed in torrents to China, in part attracted by relatively cheap and disciplined labour in the 1990s, over the past decade labour unrest has been mushrooming among what had been widely assumed to be an exhaustible supply of easily exploitable labour. The spate of strikes that hit the Chinese automobile industry in the summer of 2010 in many ways looked like a continuation of the “Detroit (1930s) to Ulsan (1980s)” story told in *Forces of Labor*. The new title would have to be “from Detroit (1930s) to Guanzhou (2010s). Moreover, the recent spate of strikes reported among autoworkers in India may turn out to be another instance supporting our key thesis linking capital mobility and waves of labour unrest.

While the WLG findings about the relationship between world-economic transformation (especially capital mobility) and labour unrest have received the most attention from readers of *Forces of Labor*, I think that the geopolitical part of the analysis (chapter 4) is at least as important for understanding where labour movements might be headed in the future. After all, there is now widespread agreement that we are in a period of deep crisis of US world hegemony. With the WLG data we were able to study how labour movement outcomes were deeply enmeshed in the unfolding world hegemonic crisis of the late-nineteenth and early twentieth century—the crisis of British world hegemony. There is every reason to believe that the geopolitical dimension will be central to labour movement outcomes in the current period as well.

From the WLG database, we teased out two different patterns of world-labour unrest in the period of crisis/breakdown of British world hegemony (late-nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth century)

and the high period of US hegemony (the second half of the twentieth century). Both periods had approximately the same number of reports of labour unrest per year on average. Yet, in the period of hegemony the total world reports were spread out relatively evenly across time (i.e., labour unrest waves did not occur simultaneously in most countries at the same time). By contrast, in the period of crisis/breakdown of hegemony, there was a tendency for labour unrest to cluster in time, creating massive world-wide explosions – most notably, but not only, after the First and Second World Wars.

The fact that labour and other forms of social unrest have been escalating simultaneously across multiple continents since 2008, encompassing both core and peripheral countries, at the same time that there is widespread talk of a crisis/breakdown of US world hegemony, raises a whole set of interesting questions about the present that a comparison with the past crisis/breakdown of world hegemony can help us illuminate.

**VH: Do you know of any plans to expand the WLG database in any form, or to create similar databases on related topics? In particular, are there plans to bring the WLG up to the present?**

BS: I am now working on updating the WLG database with a group of PhD students at Johns Hopkins, this time relying on the full text digital newspaper archives rather than the printed newspaper Indexes. The original WLG database collection ends in 1996. By the late 1990s, the number of reports of world labour unrest found in the newspaper Indexes each year had reached a nadir; at the same time the printed newspaper Index had become longer and longer over the years. Coders had to comb through hundreds of pages to find just a few reports of labour unrest. It was a bit like looking for a needle in a haystack. From time to time over the past decade I would run a pilot study to determine whether it was feasible to restart the data collection project; but rather than reach into the haystack (whether in print or digital form) to find a few needles, I would always decide to wait for a more propitious moment. The more propitious moment arrived in the summer of 2010.

In May 2010 I was on a flight from Seoul to Beijing where I picked up a copy of *The Financial Times* (London). Virtually the entire front page of the paper was filled with reports of labour unrest around the world – major strikes in major automobile factories in China, general strikes in South Africa, food riots and cost-of-living demonstrations in Tunisia, and mass demonstrations against austerity in Greece and Spain. The needle in the haystack problem was no longer.

To be sure, I always worked from the premise that the late 1990s lull in reported labour unrest was not permanent. Indeed, a central theoretical premise of the WLG project is that the world's working classes and workers' movements are recurrently made, unmade and remade as an outcome of both the "creative" and "destructive" sides of historical capitalism. The underlying argument in *Forces of Labor* was that we should have our eyes open for the emergence of new sites, protagonists and forms of labour unrest as new working classes and workers' movements are "made", and as established working classes (and social contracts) are "unmade".

The 2010 intuition about 'the propitious moment' seems validated: evidence in support of the hypothesis that we are in the midst of a new period of upsurge of labour and social unrest worldwide has mounted in the past two years. By expanding and updating the WLG database we will be able to investigate systematically the varied protagonists of this new wave of struggles. One important part of it, we expect, will correspond to the making of new industrial working classes and to our hypothesis that "where capital goes, labour unrest follows shortly". Another important part, we expect, will be linked to the related unmaking of established working classes and abandonment of previously won social compacts, including those around the welfare state. But part of the dynamic that we will observe going forward might very well be tied to how labour unrest intertwines with geopolitical dynamics, especially the crisis of US power on a world-scale. As such, we will be on the outlook for similarities and differences between the current worldwide resurgence of labour unrest and previous periods of crisis/breakdown of world hegemony. Are we on the cusp of a new period of in which major waves of labour unrest (rooted in both the creative and destructives sides of capitalist development) cluster in time, creating world-scale explosions of labour unrest and fundamental anti-systemic challenges.

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