Editorial ..........................................................1
Stop looking into the headlights ..................3
Some thoughts on the current crisis

CHINA
Faces of Migration ........................................7
Struggles of Migrant Workers in China
The Generation of Unhappy Workers ..........20
Urban Workers’ and Unemployed Struggles in China
Female Workers under Maoist Patriarchy .30
The Generation of the Cultural Revolution in China

ROMANIA
More Noise, Self-Respect and Daring ........39
Strike at the Dacia-Renault plant in Romania
Europe’s Eastern Gateway Blocked ............42
Strike in the docks of Constanta, Romania
"We have to work like horses!" ............46
Filipina Textile Workers in Sibiu, Romania
Factory or Prison ..........................................49
Textile Workers from Bangladesh in Bacau, Romania

OTHER
Bad vibrations ..............................................51
Report from machine plant in Brandenburg, Germany
"New Labor - New Unions" .........................53
Critique on Organizing

editorial

Last Issue - Looking back in anger

This will be the last issue of the actual prol-position newsletter, but we will keep putting new stuff on the website. The decision to stop publishing is mostly out of logistic reasons, but also some sense of the limitations of the project itself (more below).
We continue working on other projects, for example with Wildcat (www.wildcat-www.de), and gongchao (www.gongchao.org), which is reporting especially on the situation in China, and the newsletter about the developments in the city of Gurgaon, Northern India (http://gurgaonworkersnews.wordpress.com).

Since we published the first issue or prol-position news in March 2005 the world-wide transformation of the conditions of exploitation continued, factories and call centers kept on moving around the globe, workers followed them or went ahead, markets boomed and slumped, laws were made and broken, assembly-lines and offices got re-shuffled and re-connected to the world wide web of transport and divided labor. The newsletters reflected these changes, ranging from reports about working-conditions in modern Western-European assembly plants or middle-class homes, migration experiences of Polish work gangs and Spanish olive pickers, occupations of houses, factories or university departments, proletarian self-management in Argentina, workfare in Israel or riots in China. Writing or translating these reports we tried to go beyond eclecticism, we tried to capture the relation between these material changes of exploitation and workers’ unrest, we tried to highlight the potential of a real proletarian internationalism based on the international character of social production.

The reports remained isolated glimpses of reality, anything which would go beyond that – an actual research and practical intervention – would require more collective efforts. The newsletter did not end up being the spark for an organized and coherent collective debate, although we love all the correspondence we have got, and all the feedback, and playing our role in providing some empirical reports which we hope have been useful.

The newsletter did not manage to organize a collective debate, in that way its short-comings mirror the current condition of the radical left: an
“autonomous” political movement which operates self-organized within a social vacuum. Without any real roots in proletarian reality, which inevitably leaves us as observers and critics, rather than part of the mix. The age-old problem of the political ghetto that we all bemoan, but rarely act on.

Some of the common pitfalls are: some reminiscences of 1970s workplace-based groups, which barricaded themselves on their shop-floor or within their sector-boundaries; a party- and syndicalist left which relates to workers’ reality mainly through their organizational requirements or campaigns; last, but not least, the better wing of academia, which manages to come up with insightful analysis of certain sections or developments of class relations, but which remain on an individual and “scientific” level.

We feel that in this situation better “networking” won’t do the job. We rather think that an actual re-composition of the radical left is required. It will mainly depend on the next cycle of class upheavals to materially re-organize and politically re-orientate the radical left, our collectivity – this cycle is in the making, simmering under the surface of international crisis and sped-up re-structuring.

Never mind - Looking forward in anger

The challenge will be to relate the political “world view” on capitalist development, e.g. analytical works like “Forces of Labor” (Beverly Silver) back to the nitty-gritty proletarian reality and our collective intervention in it. The challenge is not taking place in our head-space, but in front of our eyes: industrial conditions in China or South-East Asia enter workers’ reality in the global North, not merely on the level of media-hype threatening with low wages or promising cheap consumer goods, but on a practical level, e.g. through migration or cooperation within the production process, like the reports on Romania and Eastern Germany in this newsletter demonstrate. The international crisis is rooted in the industrial profit-squeeze and will return to it, affecting millions of workers at the same time and across borders.

We can do our share to help demonstrate that we are not only victims of lay-offs or personal bankruptcy, but a global class of producers feeding the frenzy. We are looking forward to more trouble, we will keep on translating reports about it, and we will publish these reports as single articles on the prol-position website.

Stay tuned - Love and Rage

Some Prols - October 2008

This edition’s articles:

Right after this editorial we document some preliminary thoughts on the current crisis: Stop looking into the headlights. Right after that you will find three articles translated from the China-supplement of wildcat #80 (winter 2007/8). The first article, Faces of migration, deals with the formation of a new working class in China, the migrant workers, who leave the countryside to find work in the cities and by now stage strikes in factories, construction sites etc. The second one, The Generation of Unhappy Workers, concerns the old working class, the urban state workers, who where attacked by the economic restructuring during the reforms. Many of them were laid-off and fought back. The third article, Female Workers under Maoist Patriarchy, is about the urban women workers born in the 1950s and 1960s in China. Following a book based on interviews with this generation of women workers it describes how under Maoism there was a particular form of patriarchal repression and exploitation.1

The second part of the newsletter is all about struggles in Romania. It is the result of an ongoing research project into the social changes and conflicts there. More Noise, Self-Respect and Daring is a report from the picket-line during the strike at the Dacia-Renault plant in Pitești, Romania, in March 2008. It was “the most significant struggle in the Romanian private sector since 1989”. Europe’s Eastern Gateway Blocked is another report from a picket-line, this time from the port of Constanța, where the workers of a container terminal fought for a wage-increase.

The following two articles describe the fate of Asian migrant workers in Romania. With young Romanian workers moving to the West to find 1

1 If you can read German you find more information and texts on the new website www.gongchaor.org and the wildcat-dossier on China www.wildcat-www.de/dossiers/china.
better incomes, there is a labor shortage in most parts of Romania. The textile industry is hit hard because the wages are even lower than in other industries in Romania. Without local skilled workers some bosses started experimenting with getting migrant labor from Asia. "We have to work like horses!" is an account of the experience of about 100 female textile workers from the Philippines in Sibiu, Romania. Hired in Manila they discovered that their employer, the Romanian company Mondostar, did not pay them the promised wage and overtime bonus, so they staged an overtime boycott. Factory or Prison follows the experience of 500 male textile workers from Bangladesh, working for the Italian company Wear in Bacau, Romania. Again the company did not pay the promised wages, locked up the workers so they could not escape, and did not give them enough food.²

A workplace report from a machine plant in Brandenburg, Germany, entitled Bad vibrations, and an interview and critique on an experience with an organizing-campaign of precarious service workers, "New Labor – New Unions", rounds up this edition.³

2 The German versions of these articles and upcoming updates on the struggles in Romania can be found on http://www.labournet.de
3 More on organizing see this article in the previous edition: http://www.prol-position.net/nl/2007/09/organizing

comments on crisis

The following are rather more preliminary and turmoiled thoughts in turmoiled times than a collectively debated position...

Stop looking into the headlights – Some thoughts on the current crisis

It’s a production affair!
The current financial crisis is rooted in the crisis of social production: profit squeeze / over-accumulation in the industrialized regions of the world, workers unrests and increasing desires in the newly industrialized periphery, major pressure from the roaming rural proletariat of the South, trying to escape the misery of the soil and village life.

There might be a crash, but no short-cut!
We have to understand the real limits of capitalist social production which are hidden behind the current crisis, not only in order to avoid false short-cuts (demands for regulation of the financial sphere from the moderate left, un-rooted voluntaristic proclamations or "direct-action" from the radicals), but also in order to find a revolutionary answer within the proletariat: not as bank-scratching paupers who have lost their little savings, but as producers who have fueled the frenzy and who are able to produce a different social community.

In the following we will try to lay out some of the material limitations of the current capitalist cycle. We will mainly refer to the global automobile industry and we have a reason for doing so: it was and still is the main industry of this capitalist cycle, the "American Century", it is one of the most socialized industries with the longest production chains within the international division of labor, the most resource and human labor consuming sector.

Under the surface of over-production and financial bubbles: a way too productive social cooperation!
The industrial crisis has been simmering since the early 1970s, since then "de-industrialization" was
the word of the day, everyone focused on rust-belts and increasing unemployment. In fact most industries were not dismantled but underwent a productivity boost. While it took 20,000 workers to produce 100,000 GM cars in the mid 1970s, today the job is done by 6,000 workers. The same is true for misnamed "post-Fordist" industries, e.g. call centers, where 100 or 200 agents easily displace 1,000 white-collar workers, e.g. in banking or insurances. The expenditure for capital to surround and suck out the remaining workers with ever more machinery increases, the real unemployment and unproductive jobs, too. The enormous increase in productivity meets its consequence: falling relative income and falling profits in the production sphere. This emerges as an over-production crisis. The back-bone of Neo-Keynesianism (give people more money and the economy will recover) has now been broken twice. Firstly, people had the deficit spending power, but it didn't help. Secondly, this crisis reveals that capitalism is not a consumer society: a decreasing share of the social product is dedicated for private consumption, the increasing share flows into the extension of the (war/factory) machinery...

**Dot.com dead: No new product-cycle in sight!**

Despite all the talk about an information society and post-industrial relations, no social product and mode of production has emerged which would have replaced industrial products like cars, mobile-phones etc. The hailed new consumer goods (DVD-Players, mobile phones etc.) need a tiny fraction of social labor, the Nokia plant in Bochum manufactured 100,000 to 150,000 phones per day and was closed because it was not productive enough. A micro-wave plant in China supplies half of the world demand for micro-waves: you cannot build a capitalist cycle on that! And you cannot build it on IT services. The dot.com crisis was the final straw, the new sector which was supposed to be the way out of the automobile crisis and it collapsed within no time! The flight into finance accelerated.

**The crisis won't be exported: China and India have to cope with the increasing unrest of a mobile urban/rural proletariat!**

The last WTO talks failed, the global South, namely India and China, did not want to swallow the over-production of the North, particularly the agrarian surplus production. This is not due to any kind of anti-imperialist attitude, but due to the major challenge of global capitalism: a rapidly growing proletariat in the global rural South. Most of the rural population in India and China (about 1.7 billion people) depend on wages and commodities – the ups and downs of markets! They have left the misery of village's personal hierarchies and exploitation and find themselves in the social whirl-pool of proletarianization: increase of insecurity and desire. The states of the South need a relatively calm hinterland; they are busy copying with the new urban working class, migrating workers and growing slums. The state tries to tackle the rural proletariat with migration control and histories' largest job schemes. The complete opening of the regional market for the excess production from the North would cause major disruption in a situation of simmering social turmoil: millions of semi-proletarianized households (half depending on wage work, half on agricultural production) would have to compete with industrialized agriculture and be thrown into the social void.

**No low wage paradise left: The crisis won't be re-located anymore!**

So far the core plants of the automobile sector have not been re-located to low-wage countries, mainly due to the major share of fixed capital: a car plant is heavier than sewing machines or head-sets. If we take a closer look at those industries which actually are relocated, e.g. the textile industry and call centers, then we can state there is no low wage region left to further relocate to in order to solve the profit squeeze by finding even cheaper workers. The textile industry moved from Indonesia, to China, to Vietnam, to Bangladesh and fueled workers' unrest and pressure on wages from below on the way. The same is true, though less riotous, for the new generation of call center workers in the Spanish and English speaking periphery. Wherever new car plants opened in the
periphery, major strikes and demands emerged, e.g. during the last months in the "global car" plant of Dacia in Romania or at Ford in St. Petersburg, Russia. Another problem for the "globalized" hunt for cheap wages is the increasing transport costs due to rising oil prices: the production chains are over-stretched.

**Social death of the peasant worker: The migrants won't do the job!**

So far one of the main ways to undermine a local working class and to re-structure industries was to suck in peasant workers into the new industrial areas. This was true for the beginning of the "Fordist" era in the US, for the "re-construction" in Europe after World War II, for the dictatorships of development of the 1960s to 1980s (from South Korea to Brazil) to India and China today. The problem is that this "peasant"-worker is a dying social figure. In China today the second generation of industrial migrant workers refuses to go back to the country-side, this is what the Turkish "guest-worker" did in Germany in the 1960s and 1970s. Capital has to face migrating proletarians which already have made their experiences with urban life, with factory or wage work, with modern forms of class struggle: e.g. migrating women workers from the Philippines or Bangladesh, who have worked in Dubai, Liberia and Romania and who have learnt how to fight.

**The food riots showed a new subject: not the starving desperate poor, but an urban working class!**

So far capitalism has been able to "starve out" the poor; the main famines and poverty related massacres took place on the countryside, on the bloody soil itself. The recent food riots showed that capital and state have to face a desperate, hungry and angry, but also highly organized urban proletariat. The food riots in Bangladesh were organized mainly by female textile workers, in Cameroon by taxi drivers and local youth. The forms of urban struggles seem to become more similar, be it in Parisian banlieus or industrial suburbs of Dhaka. The ruling class will need one, two,... many Katrinas in order to beat the urban poor, given that even the missiles on Bagdad or Kabul, the CCTV systems in London or job schemes in Villeurbanne do not seem to be able to sort things out.

**Impasses in the factories in the North: neither low wage temp jobs nor humanized team-work solved the crisis!**

Facing this dead-lock situation in the periphery, capital has to try harder to solve its crisis in the factories and other spheres of exploitation in the North. In order to do this capital has met a further situation of impasse concerning the development of a "post-Fordist" production model, the attacks of the core workers, the employment of precarious or temp workers, outsourcing to suppliers or sweat-shops. Following short glimpses on the matter.

**Fordism re-loaded: capital was not able to overcome the assembly-line!**

There were two specters haunting the shop-floor of factories in the North during the 1980s: the automated production and the humanization of work. It became clear quite early on that the new technologies (IT) are first of all used to speed-up work (particularly in logistics) and to tighten control, but that the actual physical work remained more or less untouched. The "humanization" of work got another turn in the 1990s, when everyone was talking about Toyotism, job enrichment and team-work. Since then "team-work" in most factories is a synonym for "peer-pressure" and institutionalized group bullying. Actual "team-work" turned out to be unproductive once placed under the necessity of valorization: role model manufacturers like Volvo returned to the assembly line. There seems to be no way out: value production, abstract labor, has to be met by a material form of production – factory work based on a rigid division of labor and connected to the rhythms of machines. Capital was not able to "revolutionize" its very own fundament – the focal point of workers’ reformism was crushed.

**Expensive attacks on the core workforce: future focal point of popular discontent?**

The last decades have seen hundreds of examples of expensive attacks on the core work-force in the North: Rover in England, VW in Brussels, several GM plants in the US. In the "best cases" capital
and state had to pay quite high redundancy payments or social benefits. In "worse cases" workers managed to organize a collective response, e.g. the wildcat strike at GM in Germany 2004 against outsourcing and dismissals.

During the last weeks car makers announced major job cuts or production stops. With the aggravating crisis, the struggle against closures of major plants and or other job cuts could become a focal point attracting everyone who felt fucked over by the current crisis regime. This is much more likely than an organized unemployed movement or spontaneous looting of the stock-market. Therefore capital and state will also calculate the "political price" of a direct attack on the core workers.

Relatively low labor costs compared to costs for capital: Low wages won't help!

If we talk about the major industries, e.g. automobile, chemical, agro-business etc., we can see that low wages won't be the solution for capitalist crisis. In a modern car factory only four to five per cent of the total production costs are spent on wages (including those of the managers). At GM in Germany a temp worker might only get 6 to 7 Euros before tax compared to 14 to 17 Euros of a permanent worker.

Mathematically, lower wages would not change the general costs calculation too much, but in times of crisis every cent counts. Actually the increasing use of temp and low wage work has hit productivity: recently Spain got an official warning by the EU that too many temp contracts would cause a major increase in sick leave and lowering of work performance. Today most industrial workers are not able to identify with "their" company anymore, which for capital is a very high price to pay.

The crisis won't be out-sourced: Crisis and re-concentration of the supplying industries!

One attempt to lower production and wage costs was by increasing the outsourcing of certain departments. In this process some major car part suppliers grew nearly as big as the actual car manufacturers, e.g. Delphi, Bosch, Visteon. Everything seemed to fit the picture: a flexible production on demand, just-in-time, and a fragmented workforce. During the last years these myths collapsed: the strike at Fiat Melfi in 2004 finally showed the vulnerability of the supplier-assembly plant link, for a stable production the suppliers started to manufacture in close spatial distance, the wages at the suppliers increased, and in 2005 the crisis of Delphi and Visteon showed the still existing mutual dependency: GM had to save Delphi, pay its workers' pensions and wages, Ford had to jump in and pay out its former outsourced daughter Visteon in order to guarantee production.

In this dead-lock situation credits become crucial: preparing the financial crisis!

Having met these various impasses the industrial capital had to bet on future profits by increasing the amount of credits. This became obvious even before the current financial crisis; major industrial companies had liquidity problems, GM and Ford lost millions with their pension funds on the stock market, Chrysler's leasing bank was close to bankruptcy. The run for money started on a global scale. Proletarians did the same, low wages were compensated with private debts and mortgages – but compared to the state and to companies their indebtedness remained marginal (and within the global proletariat the average Indian rural proletarian household is probably deeper indebted than a US-American working-class family, relatively to both economic output and income). Once the financial crisis kicked in, once the "credits" turned bad it swung back and aggravated the industrial crisis further: particularly the BRIC states (Brazil, Russia, India, China), the only states where, e.g. car production and sales were still increasing, are badly hit by the crisis. Neo-liberalism is dead, major parts of the left have been flogging a dead horse. Time for reorientation...

Stop staring into the headlights: more than ever before the global character of this crisis can reveal the global character of the working class today!

Instead of letting ourselves be hypnotized by the debt clock and share price slumps we should first of all analyze the struggles which relate to this crisis, e.g. the short wildcat strike of Renault workers against the announced dismissal of 1,000 work-mates in Sandouville (France) or of Greek
airport workers against a pension scam. We will also have to review the uprising in Argentina during the last crisis in December 2001: only during the first weeks of financial crash everyone seemed united, then the middle-classes got appeased and went back to the election ballots again, the employed workers only went on demos after the end of their shift and the unemployed movement turned into thugs for the new government or got occupied with the struggle for survival. The crisis itself won’t unite us, we have to reveal the global character of social production today: within the chains of migration, the global experience of industrial work and urban life, the growing desires of the rural proletariat – which all demonstrates that neither the factory work-organization nor profit margins or interest rate cuts will be able to contain our collective productive unrest!

china’s migrant workers

Article translated from German supplement “Unrest in China”, wildcat #80, Winter 2007/08

Faces of Migration

Even before the beginning of the reforms in 1978 socialist China had experienced migration movements. In the early 1950s millions came from the countryside to the cities to work in the new state industries. At first, they were needed there, but with unemployment and problems with supplies of e.g. food in the mid-50s the government introduced a strict household registration system (hukou). The hukou-system restricted the mobility of most Chinese and kept them in the countryside for the next decades. It controlled whether someone stayed at the place of registration, and the allocation of food and other resources was directly tied to it. For the construction of heavy industries – the central part of the soviet-style modernization program – peasants in socialist China were bled through low grain prices. Only a minority of people were allowed to live in the cities and benefit from the achievements of the socialist planning state.

But the migration did not end here. The famines of the "Great Leap Forward" (1958-62) set off large waves of it. And in the 1960s and 70s millions of people from rural areas were pulled into the cities to do the dirtiest and most dangerous jobs in state companies. These migrants were only temporarily employed and had to go back to the countryside when the job ended. During their stay in the cities they were still excluded from the social benefits of urban workers (the "Iron Rice-Bowl").

The first large migration movement after the beginning of the reforms was the "returnees". In the 1960s and 1970s millions of young people were sent to the countryside in the wake of the Cultural Revolution to "learn from the peasants". The Party wanted to push them out of the cities in order to get the social and political unrest of the Cultural Revolution under control and to lower urban unemployment. After 1978 many of these migrants successfully fought for the return to the cities. Many worked in state industries; others became self-employed and took part in undermining the
banning of private businesses. They became street peddlers or worked in urban services.

In the early 1980s the stream of parts of the rural population into the cities began, the result of both pull- and push-factors. Land distribution to family-households and increasing agricultural productivity led to a "surplus population" of labor power in the countryside. Meanwhile, companies in villages and small cities (which to a certain extent had gained independence from the central state), the new "special economic zones" and later expanding state industries were all searching for cheap labor. When at the end of the 1980s and particularly in the early 1990s the state invested in many infrastructure projects and urban construction, and when at the same time foreign investments in industrial enterprises expanded, many millions of mostly young people left the countryside to find jobs and earn money in the cities. At the same time they wanted to take part in the excitement of city life, in modernity and the freedom to consume that came along with the reforms. However, until now the new workers did not become permanent city dwellers. The hukou-system, dividing all Chinese into urban people and rural people, still operates. Whoever leaves the village to go to the city today has to apply for a temporary work- and residence-permit. That permit is usually limited to one year and linked to employment. For this reason, migrant workers are still called mingong, peasants-who-became-workers. They lack the same rights as the urban hukou-holders and are excluded from many urban services.

Numbers and Faces

The exact number of all migrants is unclear. Even the government newspaper China Daily gives figures between 150 million – or 11.5 percent of the population, nearly double the figure of 1996 – and 200 million (28.11.2006). According to 2005 statistics the urban population was about 560 million – including the mingong and their families who lived in the cities for more than 6 months –, that is about 43 percent of the 1.3 billion people in all of China. 358 million had an urban hukou, 949 a rural hukou. That means that about 200 million people without an urban hukou stayed in the city.1 We cannot be too sure about these numbers since many migrants do not register with the urban administration.

The State Commission for Population- and Family-Planning estimates that there is still a labor surplus of 150 to 170 million in the countryside (China Daily, 18.01.2007). So the migration to the cities will continue, and the army of migrant workers will grow even larger. The government has to create at least ten million jobs every year, which is only possible if economic growth continues at the same pace.2

Until the end of the 1990s, migration dramatically changed the composition of Chinese labor. The mingong predominantly work in factories, on construction sites, in mines, in agriculture, in producer services (security guards, cleaners, couriers) and as small level self-employed (in shops, in markets, as scavengers). Of all mingong 37 percent work in manufacturing industries, the rest mostly in construction (14 percent), in restaurants (12 percent) and in other services (12 percent; Lee 2007: 39). They account for 57.5 percent of the industrial workforce, 37 percent in services, among them most of the 20 million domestic workers. In the textile industry they account for up to 70 to 80 percent of workers (Lee 2007: 6), in construction 80 percent (out of 30 million construction workers), and in the chemical industry and in mining 56 percent (China Daily, 28.11.2006). 47.5 percent of all migrant workers are women, but in the centers of world market production there are many more: in Shenzhen, for example, they constitute 65.6 percent.

The migration has many faces: short-term residence in small cities near the villages, employment on large infrastructure projects, shifting back and forth between world market factories and the family farm, constant migration from one construction site to the next, seasonal harvesting, and

1 Figures by Chen Xiwen, financial advisor to the Chinese central government, see China Daily, 25.10.2006. Chen writes that this is a transitional period, and the mingong will finally become regular city dwellers.

2 The governmental Department of Labor expects 50 million new city dwellers between 2006 and 2010, China Daily, 10.11.2006. On top of that, there are the millions who are losing their jobs in the wake of the reform of the state-owned enterprises.
working in mines. But there is also a rural exodus due to the loss or expropriation of the family land and the subsequent move to the city. Some mingong work elsewhere for a few months, but return home for farm work during the harvest. Others stay in the city for longer periods, two or three years, without ever visiting their family. Apart from the labor migrants from the countryside, there are also many with a "small city"-hukou who move to provincial centers or the metropolitan areas around Beijing/Tianjin, the Yangtze delta and the Pearl River delta, if they can get better jobs there. Not all migrant workers originate from the villages.

**Conditions and Problems**

The working and living conditions of the mingong are quite diverse, depending on the sector, their skills and their experience. Often their first job is precarious, low-paid or dangerous. And often they get it through people from their village who help them with their first steps in the city. Whether a mingong ends up on a construction site, in a factory or as a security guard partly depends on the sector where other people from their own region already work. After their first experiences the mingong try to find better jobs with a labor contract and a fixed income. Often the only way to do so is through (expensive) training programs. The China Daily gives some examples (20.1.2006): A 30-year old migrant worker from Henan started to work as a security guard in Beijing for banks and public buildings before he found a job in managing facilities. A 29-year old man from Shanxi also started as a security guard, then became an air conditioning technician and an express courier before he finally found something in marketing. A 25-year old woman from Shanxi worked as a domestic helper for an elderly woman and currently prepares for exams as a legal advisor. These situations do certainly not work out for everybody.

The mingong’s most important aim is earning money. They work in factories, on construction sites, in households and mines, because they earn more than in agriculture or casual work at home. But even if wages at home are more or less the same – which can happen, in particular in the eastern provinces – there are still other reasons to migrate: young people want to escape from home, they want to see the world, to make a change, and to escape family control, too.

The mingong’s working and living conditions in the city are precarious. Among the most important problems they face there are:

**Low and unpaid wages**

Wages have increased in the last few years, but barely keep up with inflation. In the world market factories and on construction sites the wage hovers around 1,000 Yuan (about 100 Euros) per month for unskilled workers working ten to twelve hours a day and having one or two days off per month. In suppliers’ factories and services wages are lower. Minimum wages were raised in the last few years, but many enterprises do not pay them. Officially the minimum wage is around 300 to 800 Yuan, depending on the region. Often the migrant workers have to pay fees to employment agents or a deposit to the employing enterprise, which keeps the deposit to prevent workers from suddenly leaving the job whenever they find a better one.

A big problem is non-payment of wages. An investigation by China’s National Statistic Bureau revealed that out of 30,000 workers questioned, 20 percent had received their wage late or had gotten only partial payment. On average the workers had to wait four months before getting paid (China Daily, 27.10.2006). Other research showed that three out of four mingong had problems getting their full wage. Often wages are not paid for months, and eventually many do not get the full sum (Lee 2007: 164). Wage non-payment is so widespread that in some sectors it is considered the norm. As long as enterprises supply them with a place to stay and food, the mingong do not stop working even if they are not paid. If they stop working, they do not eat. They can only survive because most of the time they have a place to stay through the enterprise and intermittently get par-

---

3 In some areas, especially in manufacturing in the Special Economic Zones, the wages actually increased by around 20 percent in real terms between 2005 and 2007. Since then inflation increased: May 2008, it was between 8 and 9 percent.

4 It was increased again in 2008 and currently (August 2008) is up to 1,000 Yuan, depending on the region. For the list of minimum wages see China Labor Watch: [http://www.chinalaborwatch.org/2007/wagestand.htm](http://www.chinalaborwatch.org/2007/wagestand.htm)
tial wage payments. Furthermore, the *mingong* know that if everything goes wrong they can still return to their home village where the family cultivates a piece of land.

**Bad working conditions**

Whether in the factory or on the constructions sites, workers often work ten to twelve hours or longer every day. Many workers want to do overtime, because otherwise the wages are too low to send a part back to the family. Workers can only endure that because they periodically escape to the countryside – without getting paid for those days –, or simply change jobs in order to get time to relax in between.

Someone who wants to earn as much as possible in a few years before returning to the countryside can risk handling his or her labor power much more casually compared with someone knowing that she or he has to spend the next decades in a factory. And the repressive factory regime with its degrading disciplinary measures for violations of the factory regulations – Lee calls it the "despotic" regime of production" (Lee 1998) – can only be endured for certain amount of time.

Long working hours, many sanctions, absent labor contracts and much more are violations of the Chinese Labor Law, but the local administrations in most cases do not act, not wanting to upset potential investors or endanger the bosses’ profits.

**Many accidents**

The grueling work pace, no breaks, lack of sleep and outdated and defective machines, missing or lacking instructions and maintenance or simply disregarding safety measures to reach production goals are reasons for the high number of accidents with personal injuries. The 5,000 deaths in mines (2006) are well known. Most of them are due to poor safety standards. The total number of deaths due to work accidents was around 100,000 in 2005 (*Der Spiegel*, 13.9.2006). Besides the overt injuries and casualties there also "hidden" forms, for instance those workers who constantly faint or even go crazy because they cannot stand the stress.

**Missing social protection**

Only 23 to 30 percent of all migrant workers in private companies have labor contracts (Lee 2007: 42; see above, too). The *China Daily* speaks of 40 percent out of 30,000 interviewees (*China Daily*, 27.10.2006). Accordingly, most do not have pension schemes or health insurance. In cases of illness or accidents the employers sometimes pay for the costs in minor cases, but do not want to take responsibility after major accidents and for chronic occupational diseases resulting from exposure to toxic chemicals. In those cases the migrant workers themselves have to bear the costs. Most of the time they cannot do so. All the family assets are spent – or the persons affected simply sicken and finally die. Migrant workers are also eligible for pensions if they have worked in the city for a while. When they return to the countryside they can ask to be paid their contributions but only if their employer has paid for social insurance according to the Labor Laws. A Guangdong survey revealed that 73.8 percent of 1,500 migrant workers had no social insurance at all (2001). That is connected to frequent job changes and the fact that local administrations allow companies to register only ten or twenty percent of their workforce for social insurances – and to not register all workers as required by the law (Lee 2007: 47).

**Poor living conditions**

Many migrant workers suffer from cramped living conditions without private space. Because of their rural *hukou* status, such workers are not entitled to get an apartment in the city. Private market apartments are too expensive, so they usually have to live in dormitories. During the establishment of the Special Economic Zones and other industrial areas city and local administrations built dormitory complexes that were leased to the factory managements. But many companies started building their own dormitories on company grounds. On construction sites brick-houses are built for construction workers – only to be demolished again when the construction project is finished. 75 to 80 percent of *mingong* live in dormitor-
ies, in rooms 26 square meters big and housing twelve people on average (Lee 2007: 57). The actual conditions in the dormitories are diverse, ranging from shacks without showers and hot water to clean buildings with common rooms. The dormitories supply housing for employees but have other functions too: Besides reducing reproduction costs – useful for the mingong as well – company managements can exercise control over the workers and also easily extend the working day because workers are constantly available. Furthermore, they can try to prevent dissatisfied workers from seeking jobs elsewhere. Pun and Smith call this the "dormitory labor regime" (Pun/Smith 2007).

**Isolation and discrimination**

Absence from home and their precarious situation in the city cause many migrant workers to feel isolated. Often their partners are still in the village or work in a different city. Until recently the children of mingong were kept out of urban schools and high fees still prevent them from entering schools, so most mingong leave their children at home in the countryside. They grow up there with grandparents or other relatives, often seeing their parents only once a year, during the Chinese New Year. Meanwhile in some cities like Beijing private and cheap mingong-schools have been set up. In the city the mingong still face state discrimination, even though the situation has improved slightly in recent years.

Until a few years ago mingong were only allowed to work certain manual jobs in the cities, one reason being that some better jobs were "reserved" for urban workers sacked by the state industries. Recently, these restrictions were officially abolished – but that does not mean that urban workers are not still privileged. Even now mingong in many cities face rejection by sections of the urban population. For a long time the media stirred up those sentiments by calling the migrant workers "blind drifters". Even though the reports have changed now and many newspapers emphasize the importance of the mingong for the construction of the "socialist market economy", this is not the end of their stigmatization and discrimination.

**Between city and village**

Despite the many problems the migrant workers continue to come to the cities, because for many staying in the villages is no longer an alternative. The village is and remains their home, their emotional place of identification, but you cannot earn enough money and there are no future prospects. As a result migrant workers swing back and forth between feeling homesick and their desire to get away, between a known and apparently orderly life in the village and the adventurous "modern" city life. This tension leads many young migrants to "commute", alternating between periods of employment in the city and returns to the village when they have no work (or have simply had enough of the city), lasting only until the village gets too boring and they leave once more. This dagong, wage labor for a boss in the city, is actually not constituting a final move there but a double existence between rural and urban worlds.

Three things play a major role in mingong’s thoughts and ideas (as in those of many peasants): 1. the poverty in the past (in the 1970s and early 1980s); 2. today’s harsh conditions, even though their material situation has improved; and 3. the dream of setting up a business or shop in the village to escape farm as well as factory work (Lee 2007: 221). Only a few reach that last goal. Given their memory of periods of poverty and their current material problems, mingong owning their own piece of land, land that any person with a rural hukou is entitled to, is particularly important.

For many mingong this piece of land still ensures subsistence. The village is their place of social reproduction of labor power. Here marriages take place, children are born and raised, and mingong come to recover and to earn a subsistence income in times of unemployment. The land is a kind of informal social insurance, another reason why they do not want to give it up and move to the

---

5 They called them mang liu, 盲流, literally: drifting blindly; when said it sounds similar to liu mang, 流氓: hoodlum.

6 That is also known in Europe: rural migrant workers who move to industrial areas think they would earn enough money within a few years so that they can, for instance, build a house at home or open a business. Only a few can realize these dreams.
city permanently (Pun/Li: 42). Others come back to take care of their children or parents.

Income levels in the countryside vary, particularly when comparing the coastal regions, central China and the West. The mingong’s money might be needed for a house, a better school or for food, and in most cases their wage makes up to two thirds of the household income (Lee 2007: 210). Peasants have to take additional jobs and seasonal work to earn some cash whenever possible, and still, for many rural families dagong is a pure necessity for meeting all living expenses.

The biggest costs are: 1. children’s education, so that the next generation has better chances for social advancement, 2. caring for ill family members and 3. building a house. Education and health belong to those goods that were commodified; for many people, especially in the countryside, they were becoming extremely expensive. There are several reasons for building a house. The old houses are cramped, inhospitable and easily fall apart, so that people want new ones made of bricks and concrete. But the new house is also an important symbol of the family’s economic advancement and a precondition for the male offspring to find a wife. And it is the place where the mingong want to live when they get old.

What nearly all migrant workers have in common is that they have this opportunity to retreat to the village. They are only half proletarianized, and their identity as peasants and workers is intermingled (Pun: 20). They do not see themselves as part of the working class or the workers (gong-ren) because these terms describe the old, urban working class and have an exclusionary character. They conceive of themselves as peasants (nong-min), worker peasants (nongmingong) or incoming workers (waailaigong). Many peasants and migrant workers think of themselves as still "backward" and "superstitious", as an obstacle to the construction of a socialist nation, because they have still internalized this picture of peasant inferiority.

Still, in contrast to urban workers who got sacked by state industries (see the article in this edition) the mingong are not desperate or quarrel with their fate in a past world. They see progress and believe in a better future – despite the bitter daily experiences, exploitation in the factories, the hollowing out of the villages and the cadre’s corruption and repression. These experiences anger them, and they want to fight discrimination.

Migrating and working in different regions, sectors and professions has created several subjects, like the construction workers, the domestic workers and the factory workers or dagongmei (see below). The migrant workers are still far from being a unified new working class, but that can change quickly through social struggles.

Social cohesion and struggles

The mingong organize their daily life and work through informal connections and cliques, with people from their home villages and later with newly found friends in the factory, on the construction site or in the dormitory. They use these networks to get financial help, emotional support and information on the labor market and to communicate with their families at home, sometimes also to organize cultural activities like music groups or private schools for their children. In the workplaces these connections play a role in daily conflicts, in fighting for breaks, in slow downs, in the resistance against factory despotism and the use of the so-called "weapons of the weak" (Pun: 195).

When mingong work on construction sites, often the whole crew is from the same village. The recruiters, foremen or sub contractors are often mingong, too. In the factories the composition is more fluid, the connections looser, quickly formed and quickly broken, in part due to frequent job hopping (Lee 2007: 196).

For organizing struggles these social structures based on the place of origin – whether based on the same family, village, province or as a mafia grouping – often are not sufficient enough to resist the bosses on the shop-floor or company level. The migrant workers, coming from different Chinese provinces, need to overcome the resentments and racisms among each other which are based on different origins, languages, skin colors, class backgrounds and culture.7

---

7 This is less about the ethnic minorities which constitute about ten percent of the population in China. Most of them live in western China (Xinjiang, Xizang...), in the South (Yunnan) and in the North (Neimenggu). Among the mingong the division into different groups of dialects and languages of Han-Chinese are more important.
The *mingong* wage many struggles. In 2005 there were 10,000 strikes in the Guangdong province alone (*New York Times*, 19.12.2006). Lee has analyzed struggles in Shenzhen, Guangdong, that lead to protests, mediation- and legal proceedings. Most involved four issues: 1. back wages, illegal wage reductions, and incomes below the minimum wage; together these grievances constituted about two thirds of all cases that ended up with the labor bureau: 2. disciplinary measures (or excesses) and offenses against (workers’) dignity; 3. redundancies (Lee 2007: 164).

The protests mainly arise on the company level, rarely on the local level. Sometimes workers start a struggle because they are encouraged by strikes in other companies. Information on struggles is spread through worker turnover, through personal contacts with employees in other companies (for instance, people from the same village), or because workers and activists meet each other while complaining at the union office or the labor bureau. The dormitories not only allow the control over workers, they are also the terrain where workers form cliques and networks, exchange information on the bosses’ tactics, discuss changes in the labor laws, the next steps to take and most effective forms of protest. Other places are canteens and hospital wards for industrial accidents.

Administrative and legal skirmishes at labor bureaus and courts play an ambivalent role between pacifying and radicalizing the conflicts. Some workers at first refer to the laws because the legal standards are often significantly better than workers’ actual conditions. The Chinese labor laws more or less meet Central European standards but are systematically ignored. So when workers learn about the legal situation, their own fate is not seen as “usual misery” or “bad luck” anymore but as an open legal offense. This might mobilize people to protest (Lee 2007: 174).

The protests are less about the formal “illegality” of the situation and more about the need for improving conditions. When workers later learn that local administrations, courts and arbitration committees only discriminate against, intimidate or make fools of them; when they experience the public officials’ sleaze, the intervention of the bosses and the corruption, all that can lead to a further escalation with sit-ins and strikes.

Often it does not get as far. Many struggles end beforehand for several reasons. On one hand the *mingong* cannot afford prolonged battles. Without any financial reserves they need to find a new job. In case they get a new job, they do not have opportunities to continue the collective fight for their demands with the old employer due to the long working hours and the barracking in the dormitories. If they do not land a new job they return to the village – often hundreds or thousand kilometers away – where they rely on family support, and cannot participate in the struggle anymore.

Furthermore, lasting connections or organizational structures that could back up a longer conflict only rarely develop in the struggles. In the moment of protest there is a commonality and solidarity that finishes with the end of the struggle (or the closure of a company) because everybody goes their separate ways. What remains are the village connections that help with finding a new job or organizing the return home. Many activists who otherwise would have continued the struggle give up. Noticeably, struggles of the state workers in the rust belt against the restructuring and redundancies often last longer because these workers are not as mobile and have a permanent place of residence, even after being laid off.

**State Reactions**

An important factor in a struggle’s ending is the reaction of the state or employer. Often police, security guards or hired thugs attack workers if they do not reach an agreement, if the employer has the right connections to the local administration or if the forms of the struggle are unacceptable to the state. Thugs and police usually single out the alleged “ringleaders”. If a local administration wants to get rid of activists, they can be shipped into labor camps for “re-education”, a simple bureaucratic act without a lawsuit and detention and forced labor for up to three years. More serious “offenses” lead to court hearings and imprisonment in state prisons. The few attempts to organize independent *mingong* unions were smashed in this way and organizers imprisoned or sent to labor camps.

The *mingong* struggles and those of the urban state workers (*gongren*) and unemployed (*xiangang*) share some similarities, like the reference to the laws, the fragmentation of the workers and the lo-
calized activism, their organization in their living communities and dormitories, the repression in case the struggle escapes company boundaries and the arrest of the activists. Underground organizations are brutally suppressed, but the demands of (isolated) struggles are met – at least formally; whether all the promises for improvements are actually met is a different question.

Most strikingly, in both cases – of mingong and state workers – we can witness the intervention of the local state and the central state, contradictory at a first glance but in fact complementary. Decentralization of the socialist planning state in the course of reforms, elevation of the local administrations to managing profit centers in the new socialist market economy and strengthening of the factories’ managing directors and owners, both with close links to the local party cadres and administrative leaders, have lead to the formation of a class of cadres and capitalists not only orchestrating the accumulation process but also appropriating a large part of the new wealth that the mingong produce with their labor. This creates massive social dislocation and provokes the specter of mass revolts against the new exploitative regime – particularly in China where this has happened before in history. The Communist Party’s and central government’s political strategists elevate concepts – some say they are only illusions – of the rule of law, social legislation, democratic control on the local level and more. Some of these concepts have already been molded into new legislation, celebrated by state propaganda as part of their “Harmonious Society”.

For angry proletarians and small peasants the laws and social concepts of the central state are an important reference point, while the local state is the most important target. The central state wants to keep this arrangement for a while since it can uphold its own legitimation without having to fully meet the masses’ demands for an improvement in their conditions. The central state seeks to increase its control over migration movements and to defuse the tense situation of the mingong in the cities.

We can see attempts to better integrate migrant workers, for instance, by allowing the state union or NGOs to take care of them. They get attention and support in the official media, through labor rights groups, workers’ activists (mostly from Hong Kong) and even state offices. The high local government fees for mingong were abolished by the central government in 2001. In January 2003 it also eliminated the exclusion of mingong from certain urban jobs, criticized the back wages and illegal wage reductions and demanded better access of mingong-children to urban schools without discriminatory fees. Also in 2003 the vagrancy law changed, and illegal arrests were outlawed. Before then police had often charged migrant workers with vagrancy and sent them to labor camps. In Shanghai and Shenzhen new chip-cards were issued containing personal data and residency status. The cards can be used at local offices for social support, family planning, education etc. In state language that is called “population management” (Shenzhen Daily, 9.2.2007; China Daily, 27.12.2006).

The aim is to control migrants’ movements and their rights to use local public services. Some restrictions were loosened for migrant workers in order to release further social tensions resulting from poverty, lacking or missing medical treatment and expensive access to educational facilities.

Some cities, for instance Beijing, discussed the abolition of the hukou. According to the South China Morning Post the Public Security Bureau is working on a plan to phase out temporary residence permits in order to stop ”discrimination” against the migrants (SCMP, 21.1.2007). In the province of Yunnan abolishment of the old hukou-system was already announced. But that does not mean that the discrimination is over: The mingong still receive worse treatment, have to pay higher fees and experience the arrogance, unscrupulousness and corruption of the local administration.

What next?

First of all, that depends on the regime’s further crisis management. In order to ensure its own legitimation and survival the regime has to ”control” corruption and increase government efficiency. More formalized and institutionalized labor relations and strengthened courts and legal regulations could further lead social conflicts onto bureaucratic tracks. But will it work?

The mingong will continue to play a larger role in the cities. They are the most mobile and dynamic
part of Chinese society. In some cities they constitute one forth or more of the local population. In Shanghai seventeen million people have a local hukou, plus four to five million migrants (China Daily, 13.1.2007). In Shenzhen three million "permanent" inhabitants jostle six million mingong (Shenzhen Daily, 9.2.2007). It is unclear how long they can continue to commute back and forth between city and village or if they can settle down in the city permanently and win their social demands.

Chinese and foreign capitalists already complain about labor shortages and increasing wages. A scientist from the Academy of Social Sciences in Guangdong province writes that wages and working conditions of migrant workers have improved significantly there. The monthly wage for unskilled work has increased from 750 Yuan (2004) to 890 Yuan (2005), for skilled work from 1,600 Yuan to 2,000 Yuan. The standard of the company dormitories has also improved, for instance, with air-conditioned rooms and rooms for married couples. Employers who can not or do not want to pay for such improvements move to other, "less developed" areas. The minimum wage – in Guangdong between 780 Yuan in the capital Guangzhou down to 450 Yuan in rural regions – increased, too.

In the future we might see an escalation as well as a containment of the struggles of the mingong. On one hand, illegal land seizures shut-off the safety valve of rural subsistence and destroy the hinterland, the mingong’s retreat in times of exhaustion and unemployment. That could escalate the explosiveness of the struggles in the cities. In 2004 forty million peasants already had lost "their" land and the "enclosure"-movement had lead to expropriation of three percent of agricultural land, for "new development zones", "high-technology parks" and "university towns" (Lee 2007: 259). Meanwhile the number of conflicts around evictions from inner-city apartments continues to rise as long as the real estate "bubble" inflates and local cadres earn fortunes with business parks and shopping malls. This situation affects (former) urban state workers, stricken by unemployment and precarious jobs, by robbing them of the only social safeguard left after restructuring: the company flat (which they have bought by now or are still renting cheaply). But it affects many mingong as well who are pushed out of inner-city districts into the slums on the outskirts. Can that be the start of a new alliance?

The old working class, a minority in socialist China, was already decomposed. Although by now the majority of the population is proletarianized or, at least, semi-proletarianized, this did not lead to the formation of one but of many working classes. These separated classes have to face the alliance of cadres, bureaucrats and capitalists that was forged in the 1980s and 1990s. How will the struggles of each of these working classes develop? Will they get together? What level of explosive social power will they reach? It is too early to say.

mingong struggles
Source: www.umwaelzung.de – German website on social struggles in Asia

Construction
2007

* In July three hundred striking workers got attacked by goons. The workers were employed on a construction site of a hydropower plant in the province of Guangdong. The attack left many workers injured, one of them died in hospital later. The attacks continued even after the arrival of the police. The workers had put down their tools because their wages had not been paid for four months. In the end the police arrested the boss of the company’s security service and the construction site manager.

* In August the police prevented three hundred protesting mingong construction workers from marching to Tian’anmen Square in Beijing. The workers wanted to protest against wage fraud, since they had not been paid for a year. When they rallied for the demonstration the police arrived in buses. They forced the workers to get on the buses and drove them away.

8 Other sources speak of Shenzhen as a city with 10 million factory workers (migrants) in a city of 12 million inhabitants.
9 See footnote 3 for up-to-date numbers.
Factories

2004
* US-based client companies asked the Taiwanese shoe manufacturer Stella to reduce working hours, trying to avoid the criticism of anti-sweatshop organizations. The workers did not agree with the measure, given that it would have resulted in wage cuts. One of the managers commented later: "We did not know that for workers 100 Yuan is a significant sum of money". Thousands of workers employed in two Stella factories in Dongguan started strikes and riots. In the course of the unrest company property was destroyed and managers were injured. The police quelled the turmoil, and one hundred workers got arrested. Legal trials were launched against ten workers, accused of violence, destruction of property, physical assault and so on. In his pleadings, one of the lawyers explained the background of the incidents: The workers had been furious for a long time even before, dissatisfied with the unbearable conditions in the factories. Eleven hours of daily work, six days per week, the bad quality or lack of food, delayed payment of wages. The legal sentences were relatively moderate, and by end of 2004 all workers were released from prison. This is probably also due to the pressure of international NGOs and shoe manufacturers.
* Five hundred workers employed in a factory of Ricoh – a Japanese manufacturer of office machines – went on strike in Shenzhen after a Japanese manager offended female workers in an obscene way and called them mentally retarded. Only after the bastard apologized on the following day, was the strike called off.
* In Shenzhen hundreds of workers of a home appliance manufacturer protested against the planned re-location of the factory to the low-wage area of Zhuhai, demanding compensation and the payment of social security contributions. When the strikers wanted to rally in front of the gate scuffles started with the company security guards, who tried to prevent workers leaving the factory.

2005
* In Shenzhen 3,000 employees of Uniden Electronic (a manufacturer of wireless telephones) walked out spontaneously in solidarity with a dismissed workmate who had stood up for the right to form unions. Previously there had been several short strikes and discussions in the plant concerning the creation of a company union. Nearly all of the 10,000 workers joined the solidarity strike. They raised additional demands regarding working hours, wages, sanitary facilities and management behavior. But the focus was the demand for their own union. That was a novelty in China at the time. The administration reacted with repression: The strikers were locked in the factory and violence was used to prevent them from leaving. The strike lasted a week. After this week the workers were intimidated, the strike leaders had disappeared and many workers were sacked. Two month later the company announced the re-location of the factory from Shenzhen to it previous location in Laguna (in the Philippines), referring explicitly to the strike. Only two years before, the plant in Laguna had been closed and the production moved to Shenzhen, due to the lower labor costs in China.
* In Shenzhen 1,000 workers of a print-shop protested against long working-hours and wage cuts. The reason for the unrest was the management’s announcement to increase the daily working-time from eight to ten hours and wage reductions for food and accommodation. Up to that point food and accommodation had been free. The workers stopped the protest once the management withdrew the threat of working-time increase and promised the improvement of the food quality in the factory.
* In Dalian a series of strikes kicked off in seventeen Japanese companies (coinciding with anti-Japanese student protests in Beijing and other towns). The strikes concerned wages, accommodation and problems with the canteen. The workers went on strike at different times, each strike lasted several days. The police intervened and arrested ring-leaders.
* In Shenzhen 3,000 employees of a sofa factory walked out in protest against wage cuts and management’s racism. The factory belongs to the Italian manufacturer DeCoro. The wage payments had been lower than expected which lead ten workers to complain about it. They were
sacked, and when they tried to re-enter the factory they were beaten by foreign managers. The managers at DeCoro are obviously violence prone. At the beginning of 2007 hundreds of DeCoro workers went on strike after three of their work-mates had been beaten. The three workers had demanded higher compensations.

2006

* In Xiamen 300 female workers employed by NEC Tokin Electronics went on strike after they had learned that some of the applied chemicals are poisonous. They had suffered many health problems attributed to the chemicals. They demanded better working conditions and extra-payments for medication. The company agreed to the demands.

* In Dongguan workers employed by toy manufacturer Merton protested for two days against low wages and bad accommodation. The protest started in the company-owned dormitory and turned into a riot which was then joined by over 1,000 workers. Dozens got arrested. Their basic wage was on the level of the official minimum wage, but other legal standards (regarding overtime, pay slips, bank holidays, social security) were not met. The canteen food was bad, but the company still took a quarter of the workers' wages for food and accommodation.

* 3,000 workers of the furniture manufacturing plant Siu Fung in Shenzhen – with capital from Hong Kong – went on strike against long working hours and degrading treatment by the company. They had to work for twelve hours, but they did not receive an overtime bonus. In order to be allowed to go to the toilet they had to ask for a voucher. Security guards were accused of having beaten workers. The workers marched to the government's guest house, but they were blocked by the police and scuffles started.

* In Guangzhou more than 300 workers of a shoe manufacturer blocked the motorway in response to not having been paid for three months. On the previous day the management had done a runner and communicated via fax that the company was bankrupt. The police cleared the road blockade.

2007

* In Shenzhen more than 200 workers protested against the closure of Huangxing Light Manufacturing. The factory had been closed from one day to the other, 800 workers lost their jobs. The workers blocked the factory and asked the local administration for help, in order to get compensation from the company. They also tried to block a main road. Some got arrested, but they were released shortly after their workmates started to besiege the police station. Allegedly the closure of the factory was triggered by the fact that Walt Disney – the factories' main client – had withdrawn their orders after the factory had been accused of over-exploitation.

* Thousands of workers (most of them women) employed by the plastic Christmas-tree manufacturer Baoji Artefacts in Shenzhen took industrial action against long working-hours and against being sacked without compensation. For five hours the workers managed to resist the attempt of several hundred policemen to disperse them. Only heavy rain managed to dissolve the crowd. One female striker was beaten by the police, one hundred people were temporarily arrested.

* In August thousands of workers employed in two factories belonging to Feihuang Electronic in Shenzhen went on strike for several days and staged demonstrations outside the premises. Many workers got arrested. The factory is owned by the German company CEAG AG, manufacturing storage batteries and battery rechargers for mobile phones. Ninety percent of the employees are women from the inland provinces Sichuan, Hunan, Hubei. The factory management had asked them to produce ninety re-chargers more per hour. In case they would not meet the target they were supposed to assemble the missing pieces after their regular shift – otherwise their basic wage would be cut. The strikers put forward written demands addressing the management and the local labor bureau: wage increase, bonus for night-shift work, social security according to the law, clean drinking water in the factory. The labor commission intervened and the management offered negotiations. The negotiations turned out to be difficult, because the strikers did not want to send delegates,
fearing the repression these representatives would face.

dagongmei - Working Sisters

"In junior high school we read quite a bit about Marxist theory. When the teachers explained the contradiction between productive forces and relations of production in capitalist society they also mentioned the inhuman exploitation of workers. At the time we did not understand. But since I came to Shenzhen for work I have started to figure out how capitalists oppress and exploit workers." (Female migrant worker in Shenzhen, Pun/Li 2006)

Starting in the 1980s and 1990s, when China was becoming the 'workbench of the world', industrial clusters and special economic zones emerged in the provinces on the east coast. Over one hundred million mainly young people were pulled from the countryside into these new urban areas, or they pushed there, because they hoped for a higher income and better living conditions. Particularly in the regions around the southern metropolis of the Yangtze-delta around Shanghai and in the provinces Fujian and Guangdong towns developed into urban industrial zones, structured according to the needs of the factory system and the international commodity exchange.

In the factories young migrants from the countryside are employed. Their life differs significantly from the life of the old working class under socialism. These new workers are often called dagongmei (working sisters) and dagongzai (working sons). The gender neutral notion of gongren – the notion of the socialist worker sitting at the 'Iron Rice-Bowl' – was replaced by a gender specific notion which expresses their inferior status in a double sense. The dagong equates to the term 'doing a job'. It expresses the fluid and marginal character and refers to an inferior auxiliary job for a private capitalist, in contrast to gongzuo, which is the term for a proper employment in a state-owned company. The definition of persons as mei (little sister) and zai (son) indicates their status as young, inexperienced workers in a subordinate position. The terms combined describe young migrant workers as helping hands and unskilled workers, as informal and unprotected. At the same time these are the very same workers employed in world-market factories producing consumption goods for the entire world – ranging from electronics to toys and socks – and who have a central role within the international supply chains. So, what do the dagongmei and dagongzai themselves think about their life and future?

Two authors from Hong Kong have – through their research of and interviews with dagongmei – provided an insight view of their lives – as women, migrants and workers.

Ching Kwan Lee has published an analysis of two electronics manufacturing plants of one company, one situated in Hong Kong and one in Shenzhen. She describes how the dagongmei are subjected to a "despotic factory regime" in the production units in the Pearl River Delta, making use of the precarious life situation of the dagongmei (Lee Ching Kwan, 1998: Gender and the South China Miracle. Two Worlds of Factory Women. Berkeley/London).

In a later book she demonstrates how the dagongmei manage to unite and fight against exploitation and discrimination, despite the fact that since the 1990s their precarious position has hardly changed. In the book she examines both – the struggles of migrant workers in Shenzhen and the struggles of workers in the state-owned sector of the northern rust-belt Liaoning – and takes a look at origins of these two separated protests (Lee Ching Kwan, 2007: Against the Law. Labor Protests in China’s Rustbelt and Sunbelt. Berkeley/London).

Pun Ngai chose an electronics manufacturing factory in Shenzhen as the starting point of her research work, too, and describes the life of the newly arrived workers (Pun Ngai, 2005: Made in China. Women factory workers in a global workplace. Durham, NC). The relations of exploitation and power of the factory regime force these workers to have to cope with hard working conditions, endless working-days and dangerous or toxic production processes. They live in overcrowded dormitories in a hostile urban environment. Being newcomers they first have to make new friends and learn how to find their way around. Like other workers on the globe they slowly learn how to overcome the divisions among themselves and to
confront the attacks of the management, with slow-down strikes and walk-outs as the most advanced forms of resistance in the factory. However, this process of empowerment is a slow and contradictory one, characterized by many setbacks and only bearable, because the *dagongmei* often change factories when conditions become unacceptable.

Recently Pun Ngai published another book in cooperation with Li Wanwei, a collection of personal life stories of sixteen *dagongmei* based on interviews with these women (Pun Ngai/Li Wanwei, 2006: *Shiyu de husheng. Zhongguo dagongmei koushu*. Beijing; in German: *dagongmei – Arbeiterinnen aus Chinas Weltmarktfabriken erzählen*. Assoziation A, published 2008). The book retraces their biographies with all their contradictions: the necessity to leave the village, in order to earn money on one hand, and the urge to see more of this world and to take part in modern urban life on the other; the escape from the village and from the long arm of the patriarchal family, at the same time the hope to return to the family after some years of work in order to marry and have children. The young women want to find their own way, but they send considerable sums of their wages back home, an important contribution to the family income and the reason for their better status as women at home. They find forms of resistance against arranged marriages, despotic foremen and the ignorance and discrimination of local administrations. Despite being exploited and oppressed by both the socialist state and the new and old capitalists, they try to fight for their dream of an independent and secure life.

Both authors show how a new working class is in the making, how young women fight for new possibilities, hopefully preventing equally dreadful experiences their mothers and grandmothers had to go through. They share this with *dagongmei* in other Asian countries or in the maquiladoras in Latin America.

**Literature**


The generation of unhappy workers

Situation and protests of urban workers and unemployed

During the restructuring of the 1980s and 1990s the urban proletariat of the state-owned factories – the gongren – was the focus of the restructuring and experienced massive layoffs after 1997. Before the reforms the differences between the gongren and the peasants and migrant workers were all too obvious. A part of the gongren had a number of benefits, like a guaranteed work place and better health care, and were considered a strong pillar of the socialist regime. But after the reforms, the urban proletariat became the losers: The restructuring of the state combines led to de-qualification, wage cuts, precarity and the layoffs of millions of workers. They staged a number of militant struggles, especially since 1997, considered by the party leaders and the government as the biggest threat to social stability. They forced the regime to slow down the restructuring, but they were not able to stop it.

A big number of the new urban unemployed were forty years old and older, unable to step up the ladder in the new economic structures and simply ignored by the new/old class of Chinese and foreign world-market capitalist looking for young labor. 60 percent of factory workers laid-off in the 1980s and 1990s were women. After being laid-off most of them had just precarious work.

The pauperization of these urban workers was the last strike against the "unhappy generation". During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) they had no school education or spent only a few years in school, they were harassed by the Red Guards (or took part in the excesses themselves). They were sent to the countryside, where they had to live in poverty and work hard. After their return to the cities – sometimes after ten years and more – they were assigned to unskilled jobs in the combines since they had not learned anything before.

In the 1990s they were the first to be laid-off. Now as old people they experience poverty and have to to precarious jobs.

Whereas there is a discussion inside and outside China about the migrant "peasant-workers" (min-gong) who to sell their labor power in factories, sweatshops, on construction sites, in restaurants or as domestic workers, the fate of the urban workers gets less attention. A few years ago that was different. Waves of worker unrest took place in certain areas – e.g. the "rust-belt" in the North-East – against layoffs, back wages, bad working conditions, corruption and the non-payment of compensations and social aid.

Miniature society

The majority of urban workers were employed by a danwei, a work unit. At the beginning of the reforms, 42 percent of the industrial work force worked there. They produced 75 percent of the industrial output. Other industrial workers were those in urban collectives, those with limited contracts in state-owned combines and those in rural industries (Lee 2003: 72).

The danwei was not only an economic, but also a political and social organization. After finishing school, the urban youth was assigned to a danwei, which secured a life-long workplace, social security and retirement (the so called "Iron Rice-Bowl"). After marriage, the danwei also organized apartments and dormitory accommodation for single men and women. Because of the extensive regulation and control of workers’ lives the danwei were also called miniature society (xiao shehui).

To the outside, the danwei functioned as an executive organ of the state administration. In the socialist planned economy the state decided centrally about the production and the distribution of resources, and the danwei were not responsible for profits and losses, but just handed them over to the state which assigned necessary resources and labor power. Internally the danwei made sure that everybody worked and thereby contributed to the socialist accumulation of capital. Moreover, the danwei were units of state control over social processes. Economic decisions were politically motiv-
ated, e.g. decisions about hiring and promoting workers or the training of cadres. In co-operation with the danwei-level and regional institutions of the Communist Party, workers were trained, controlled and, if necessary, punished. For the workers, the danwei was the structure of their social protection, but also the organ of control and regulation of their whole lives.

In comparison to other parts of the proletariat, especially the agricultural workers, the workers in the collectives and the urban precarious workers, the danwei-workers did well economically. Their low wage was compensated by the social security. But the danwei-workers, owners of an urban hukou, was not a homogeneous group. Only a minority had the chance to get a full "Iron Rice-Bowl", particularly those in big danwei. There was also a hierarchy of the workers inside the danwei, first of all between cadres and workers. More differences were made between permanent, temporary and contract workers, between union members and non-union members, between men and women, between older workers with seniority and younger workers. That way the number of those who could claim social benefits and a life-long job was limited, and these divisions were also the base of the wage hierarchy.

**Crisis and new despotism**

The crisis and following reforms since 1978 had different origins, and we can only get into it briefly. The political and social transformations of the Cultural Revolution since the mid 1960s not only led to economic chaos, but also strengthened the workers influence on company-level decisions. The productivity of the danwei was low, because the workers refused accept an intensification of work and generally harder working conditions. After Mao's death in 1976 "pragmatists" and "technocrats" inside the Communist Party replaced the previous leaders, who had come to power during the Cultural Revolution, and started to "modernize" the Chinese economy. Their goal was to strengthen the position of the factory leaders and to weaken that of the workers in order to be able to increase productivity and to raise the general economic performance. They wanted to make an economic and social leap forward and at the same time ensure and protect the dominance of the Communist Party. But workers and peasants were also open for changes. They wanted to get rid of poverty, end the social standstill and improve their living conditions.

The reforms started in the late 1970s in the countryside and later moved to the cities. They were initiated by peasants, too, who started distributing land from the People's Commune to families. The CP-regime saw a chance to undermine the rigidity of the working class in the countryside and in the cities. Whereas everywhere in the countryside the private use of land by peasant families was introduced, in the cities different strategies were adopted: development of a new private sector of special economic zones with foreign capital, restructuring and rationalizing of the old state industries, closing or "privatization" of little and medium-size danwei, and preservation of big danwei in strategic sectors under state control.

The reforms were no shock-therapy and also did not follow a master plan, they were rather step-by-step and experimental measures, following the motto: "Crossing the river by feeling for stones" (mozhe shitou guo he). Economic, political and social principles were used depending on the circumstances. A "two tracks"-system was adopted to keep up the old structures while simultaneously creating new ones that would later displace the old ones. The crucial elements of the reforms were the strengthened authority of the local administration and companies, economic incentives to improve efficiency by leaving part of the profits to the companies, de-regulation of trade and strengthening of the market orientation, and above all the establishment of a new work regime, which no longer guaranteed life-long security (social contracts, Iron Rice-Bowl) and was built on contractual relationships between employees and 2 The reforms had more reasons, economic, political and geo-political: At the end of the 1970s the Asian Tigers were already making big advances and showed that a "national" economic development under an authoritarian regime could be possible. For China it was important that three out of four tigers were Chinese: Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore (the forth was South Korea). Especially the rise of Taiwan challenged the People's Republic. Whereas Japanese capital above all had invested in the Asian Tigers to use their cheap labor, at the end of the 1970s traders, bankers and enterprises of Chinese descent living in the tiger-states started pumping capital into the new industries of the People's Republic. China's adjustment to the world-market started during the internationalization of capital in the mid-70s, the beginning of the new phase of the so called "globalization". urban workers struggles
employers, in other words: a commodification of labor power. All measures were enforced step-by-step and in different paces. Some were not started before China’s entry into WTO, and some of the reforms are not finished, yet.

From the workers’ standpoint, the reform of the urban industries was the establishment of a “new despotism” inside the plants (Lee 2003: 74). The strengthening of the factory directors and the undermining of the authority of party structures, unions and workers’ councils as well as the cut-down of the social guarantees opened the door for a “hire and fire”—capitalism with a new class of managers on top, recruited from the old cadre structures of the army, party and state administration.

In the mid 1980s, there were already signs that the reforms could not be pushed through easily. The process was rather stagnant, as resistance came not only from the workers but also from the danwei leaders who opposed the splitting, shrinking or fusion of their work units. After 1997, with the intensifying of industrial restructuring and redundancies, the number of conflicts increased despite the government propaganda machine that tried to make workers believe that the restructuring was in the best interest of all in the long run.

"Release" of the urban proletariat

Of course the reforms affected everyone, the urban proletariat inside and outside of the danwei as well as the newly independent peasants. But here we are talking about the urban proletarians who worked in danwei. Before the reforms they were considered the elite of the working class and the backbone of socialist China. For the party, they were the “soldiers” of the state. The reforms changed the perspective. The former task of the regime, to provide for the urban proletariat, later became a “burden”. The restructuring led to a “systematic erosion of labor interests, as it has been accompanied by severe measures against workers, including collective layoffs, deprivation of benefits, ruthless labor rights abuses and brutal working conditions.” (Chen: 237/8). Hassard reports, that in 1997 39 percent of all urban households had a loss of income. This often meant misery, worries about health expenses, education costs and grocery bills (Hassard: 157/8). Many urban proletarians experienced their layoffs as a social degradation to "newborn marginals", felt "abandoned by society" and "excluded". (Solinger 2002: 304; 2004: 52, 55). Contrary to the majority of the migrant workers, the urban workers were "downwardly mobile" (Solinger 2004: 58).

Although the weakening and closure of danwei reduced the state control over the lives of urban workers, that did not result in a bigger self-determination of the people concerned. Their lives were now ruled by the necessity to find at least a small income to survive. Often they had to resort to different sources: state benefits, support of relatives, informal jobs (again often through family members), flexible or "hidden" employment. The only ray of hope was the apartment they got through the danwei where they could continue to live (Lee 2007: 130/1).³

The majority of laid-off workers were elderly, un-qualified and women. Most of them found jobs in informal sectors like street-selling, as messengers, security guards, on construction sites and so on, without work contracts, benefits and regular working hours. Often their bosses do not pay them their wages. Some of these jobs were previously only done by mingong, the rural migrants coming to the cities. Often the urban workers cannot compete with the migrant workers who are younger, more mobile and used used to learn and use different skills. They also have lower reproduction costs, because their families still live in the countryside, so they can work for lower wages. Moreover, many employers consider migrants as more assiduous and not spoiled. Many laid-off workers from danwei had and have a hard time finding new (dependable) sources of income.

To avoid collective resistance, the government split the laid-off workers in different groups. These were "official" categories, to which laid-off workers were assigned, one of which was the xia-gang⁴ (literally: laid-off from the position, released

³ According to Lee one reason for relative social stability despite the dramatic results of the restructuring in the rust-belts was the fact that many gongren were able to buy their apartments or rent them cheaply (Lee 2007: 125).

⁴ "Officially, a xia-gang worker is one who meets all of these conditions: (1) s/he began working before the contract system was instituted in 1986 and had a formal, permanent job in the state sector (plus those contract laborers whose contract term is not yet concluded); (2) because of his/her firm’s problems in business and operations, has been let go, but has not yet cut off
from the position). This xiagang-category had several sub-categories: the daigang (literally: to wait for a position), people who rotated between employment and non-employment; the tingxin liuzhi, who kept their position but got no wage; and the liangbuzhao who left their position with neither them nor the company trying to restore it. There was also the group of xiagang who were registered at so-called reemployment centers but could not find a job: They were finally registered as shiye, “unemployed”, and could get state unemployment benefits for two years.

Other groups of laid-off workers were the "internal pensioners" (neitui), workers who had only five to ten years until retirement. They kept the connection to the danwei and got a part of their wage, depending on the financial situation of the danwei; workers who got compensations (mai duan gongling), the amount depending on the sector and the danwei, but had to organize their own pension insurance and similar things afterwards; and a group of female workers who resorted to an extended maternity break, a method often used by women in the 1980s and the 1990s. Just a few of the mentioned groups got state social benefits, others did not get anything. Only the proper xiagang were counted in official statistics and had a (rather theoretical) entitlement to get support finding a new employment and to social benefits, but this still depended on the financial situation of the danwei. All in all, today the unemployment rate in the cities is estimated to be between ten to fifteen percent, but it is much higher in the cities of the rust-belt.

The state wanted to intercept the potential consequences of the layoffs, following the motto: "Make the channel before the water comes" (Hasssard: 156). The "private" labor market was supposed to absorb many unemployed, and the reemployment programs were supposed to channel the xiagang into new jobs in the state and the private sector – neither did really happen. Liquidation laws were not followed – due to corruption and embezzlement of company property by cadres and managers, and the laid-off workers could not find new jobs because of their lack of education, age and gender. The funds provided were too small or simply embezzled, and there were not enough jobs available for the xiagang. Sometimes the laid-off workers did not get the required documents (xiangangzheng), so they could not claim their benefits.

At the end of the 1990s, the government introduced the "three guarantees" for making up for the omitted danwei-services and benefits: "subsistence payments" for the xiagang (only until 2002), "unemployment benefits" for all unemployed including those whose danwei declared bankruptcy or was taken over by another company, and a "minimal living cost guarantee" of the local administration for the urban poor. Payments required advance public controls of the personal income, something a lot of people did not want. In the end, those forms were ineffective and only a few people got the benefits. Only a small fraction of the laid-off workers got compensation payments or benefits at all, and those benefits were small and only paid for a short period.

The regime’s long-term goal was to establish an insurance system with four columns: retirement, health care, work accidents and unemployment. But the replacement of the danwei-based social security system through one financed by public and private funds was getting of the ground very slowly, despite the implementation some kind of retirement and unemployment insurances in the mid-1980s. The whole procedure reminds one rather of the motto: "Draining the water before the tunnel is ready" (Cai 2002: 329).

Preparation and development of struggles

The loss of material resources and social security constitutes a break of the old "social contract" between the urban working class and the Communist Party and led to a crisis of the CP’s legitimacy. Since the 1990s the regime was trying to find a new basis for legitimacy, which they found in the new (old) urban middle class and the capitalist cadres. For many urban workers unrest seemed the only option. Even before the reforms, urban workers were not as tame and silent, as one could assume considering the strict organization and social control of the danwei (see Sheehan). In 1984, when the reformers turned towards urban industry, workers had big expectations. They wanted a clear improvement of their situation but were
afraid of a return to the conditions before 1949 with precarious jobs and unemployment. Most of the workers were not against the reforms, they considered them necessary in order to end the standstill and get rid of poverty. But they turned against corruption which followed the reforms – as in the "democracy" movements 1978 until 1981 and then 1989 –, against injustice during the execution of the reforms, against growing inequality and the new material hardships. While the regime and the party saw the "Iron Rice-Bowl" as the origin of the problems, for the workers it was the only achievement of socialism which was worth defending.

Although in the beginning the new labor contract law from 1985/6 did only affect few workers, some kind of "job security panic" broke out (Sheehan: 207). The feeling of insecurity, the corruption, the new power of the factory directors, the loss of forms of worker participation – which did not work well before either – and the inflation were reasons for a lot of workers to support the "democracy" movement in 1989. A lot of them had participated in protests earlier, and in spring and summer 1989 some founded independent workers organizations, not only to represent their interests in the companies but also to become active on the political level later on.

The protests in the 1990s, especially after 1997, were a continuation of these movements. At the beginning, most workers were "quiescent, passive, and powerless" (Chen: 238). Although the number of social struggles increased between 1992 and 1997, in the years 1995 and 1996, at the beginning of this new phase of industrial restructuring, not much happened because the workers hoped it would not affect them and the problems were temporary. But the occasional suffering lead to constant pain. Since 1997 the number of social conflicts has increased continuously. There were primarily three different kinds of resistance: 1. Struggles against the non-payment of wages and pensions; 2. Community-struggles against bad accommodation and disintegrating infrastructure; 3. Protests against bankruptcies and connected compensation payments, illegal sales or restructuring of state-owned companies and corruption of cadres. Most of the time these protests followed the same pattern: First, the workers went directly to the responsible danwei-leader or local authorities and made their demands. Usually they were about money or other concrete conditions, rarely political demands like the dismissal of a corrupt official or cadre. In case they did not get the reaction they expected, they went up the state hierarchy, most of the time by writing a petition, and demanded the abideance of the existing laws. Government petitions (and auditions) have a long tradition in China and are being accepted as long as the petitioners follow the rules and do not create chaos. When the authorities ignored the petition, the situation often escalated into street actions (Lee 2007: 112). So far the people involved usually avoid coordinated actions with other workers from other plants or regions or from different social groups because they know that the state would react with repression.

Divided actors

The regime's calculation that the creation of different "categories" of gongren could prevent them from getting together and resist has worked out so far. During the conflicts the gongren themselves made the distinction between retirees, laid-off workers (xiagang), unemployed and workers, who all fought their own struggles. The old danwei communities still function somehow, because many gongren bought their apartments in the 1990s, and these old quarters are the place where information circulates and where people discuss possible resistance. But since the different groups each have their own conditions and demands (about pensions, wages or social benefits, or keeping the jobs) the struggles are mostly separated. In this context, Lee uses the term "cellular activism" (Lee 2007: 5).

Each group has its own form of struggle. The xiagang, or unemployed, can not go on strike, just like the retirees. They are already out of the plant and their struggles against the measures that put them in a precarious position come "too late". Weston sees this as the weak point of the struggles: "Because most of those who are participating in the protests are either laid-off (xiagang) or formally employed workers, they have little ability to disrupt their factories' production schedules." (Weston: 70). Often they were fighting months and years after lay-offs or shut-downs because
they did not get financial support. They had to use other forms of "disruptive power", like rioting, camping outside of government buildings and blocking traffic junctions to force the authorities to act.

The danwei workers who were still in the plants fought against restructuring measures that threatened their interests. Their struggles were often "spontaneous" because of sudden grievances, against restructuring programs or planned layoffs. "Spontaneous" does not mean that there was no preparation or cohesion, but indicates the absence of formal organization or leadership (Lee 2007: 80). They fought the program and demanded participation or ownership. Starting points for the struggles of the danwei workers were labor contracts, wages, bonuses, pensions and compensation payments, but above all planned layoffs, bad working conditions, a despotic management, corruption and embezzlement. In the early 1990s some workers were still forced to buy shares of their ailing plants. A few years later the plants were closed and stripped by the managers, one reason for the tremendous rage against the factory directors and local cadres.

Here it is important to note that the danwei were officially still public property. Even though workers only ever spoke cynically about their ownership as "masters of enterprises", they are very much aware of their part in building up the factories. They had job security, but often also low wages. But then they faced losing their jobs and their pension rights – and also their social networks which were organized within the danwei. They saw their resistance against the restructuring as "rightful" (Chen: 248) and wanted participation in the execution of the reforms. Workers, who were threatened to be laid off used slogans like "Give the Factory Back to Me! (huan wo gongchang)" (Chen: 248). Sometimes they occupied the factory to prevent the restructuring. Strikes were no alternative, because plants were not producing according to their capacity during the restructuring. Sometimes the struggles had the form of "collective bargaining by riots" (Chen: 251), where the workers attacked administration buildings, city halls or those people responsible for their misery.

The disruptive power of the gongren

Many dissatisfied workers, still working or already unemployed, were "using the proletarian rhetoric of the Maoist period to press for social justice in the new economic environment, phrasing their demands in class terms that the authorities find uncomfortable to deal with." (Hassard: 138) The resistance of the danwei-workers against the layoffs was often also motivated by a form of "moral economy". They referred to rights of the past, and compared the suffered injustice with the standards of socialism or even the Cultural Revolution. They developed something like a collective action-frame, as they used the old "communist" rhetoric to fight illegitimate inequality and injustice. Sometimes there was a kind of illusionary Maoism, distorting the past into a period where the workers were happy and content. This was the case especially with older and already retired state workers. Some referred to the position of the cultural-revolutionary "rebels": "During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the idea of the CCP as a new, exploitative ruling class extracting surplus value from the working classes and passing on its privileges to its descendants became a common one among the more radical participants in the movement, and it was an idea that many of them carried over into the first stirrings of China’s democracy movement in the late 1970s and early 1980s." (Hassard: 161/2) An image of the Polish Solidarnosz-movement of the early 1980s that circulated among the state workers underlined the idea of exploitation through the a socialist bourgeoisie.

From the outside the struggles seemed to be "unorganized and leaderless" (Chen: 251). In fact, collective protests and demonstrations against local authorities were (and are) often coordinated by (former) foremen and cadres, which played their "traditional" leading role and demanded their "legitimate" rights. They functioned as workers militants and decided how to intervene. Sometimes they played the role of consultants because open or covered organization was too risky. Only a few

5 A difference between the workers in the private companies, which have no entitlement to "property".
6 Here, too, they could draw on historical parallels, namely the establishment of "workers guard teams" (gongren jiuchadui) against sabotage acts by the Guomindang shortly before the "liberation" in 1949.
people dared to organize actions that involved more than one plant.

Even if protests and forms of self-organization of workers were only regional and short-lived, their impact and power was a result of their frequent appearance and because of the regime which was afraid of the potential spread of the movement and that it would turn against the state or the role of the Communist Party as the only dominant political force. These concerns are justified, since the number of conflicts between the state and the workers’ movements have increased for a long time. "The working class is turning from a stabilizing force into a potentially disruptive force in Chinese society" (Cai 2006: 185). There are a number of reasons: Because of the lack of a functioning social system, the poor put their demands for social securities and benefits to the government; the local governments are directly involved in the reforms and the plant shut-downs; and the obvious corruption, embezzlement and theft of state property through CP-cadres, factory directors and government officials provokes people to ask for state intervention – or they attack the responsible people and institutions on their own.

Most of the mobilizations stayed rather small, with a few prominent exceptions. This is due to the fact that many big danwei were spared (and not closed) or had enough cash to pay the workers. But when peaceful and moderate methods did not help, the protests radicalized and lead to militant encounters. The struggles in 1997 slowed down the lay-offs of 20 to 50 million surplus workers so the restructuring could not proceed as quickly as planned. But if the lay-offs in some industries were delayed, the reforms were still carried out.

**The carrot and the stick**

Soon after 1997, during the restructuring of the state owned industries and the lay-offs, the regime had to take measures against the struggles. It used the decentralization of the political and economical decision-making, which gave local authorities more influence and power. The local authorities were the first target of farmers’, migrant workers’ and urban proletarians’ attacks. The central government in Beijing intervened only when the regional conflicts got out of control or became explosive. Even today, the central government orders the local authorities to deescalate "unexpected events" (tufa shijian). In private companies, the influence of the local government is usually small. There they can only intervene through unions and the local labor bureaus. But in state owned companies they play a big role and can put the management under pressure (if they want to). But nothing happens unless the workers take the initiative, stage open resistance and thereby raise the pressure.

So far the state used a "carrot and stick" strategy during the struggles. On one hand it tries to calm the workers down through compensation and social security payments to soften the effects of lay-offs and work releases. In this context, Lee talks about "safety valves", to enable the people involved in struggles to "let off steam" (Lee 2003: 83). After 1987 newly founded commissions for mediation have played a role in preventing an escalation of conflicts. The commissions are formed by labor bureau officials, union and employer representatives. Whether there is a chance to quickly pacify the situation also depends on the financial resources of the local state and the danwei that can be used to soften the social effects of lay-offs or to pay back wages. Local authorities and danwei in the prosperous coastal regions had enough financial means, but not those at the "third front", the provinces of the South West and North East. And of course, only the big danwei were able to pay, the middle and small danwei had no money and the majority of the struggles happened there.

The strategy to pay out only those workers who staged militant struggles also created problems. "Setting the precedent of only meeting the demands of those involved in the most severe outbreaks of unrest risks providing workers with the perfect excuse for disorder." (Hassard: 150) It is interesting to note that this is similar to what happened in the 1950s, when workers went on strike against the danwei managements, because they knew the managers "bullied the good, but feared the bad." (Sheehan: 74).

The "stick" was mainly used against the "organizers" of the protests. Insubordinate workers and
reputed "ring-leaders" were arrested (and still get arrested) and sent to jail or labor camps for a long time as a threat to the other workers who participate in strikes and demonstrations – in other words: "Kill the chicken to scare the monkey" (Weston: 78). The authorities' repression is particularly hard against mobilizations across several plants or regions and against independent unions.

The state propaganda continues, asking workers to accept the hardships so that the reforms turn out successful: They should sacrifice themselves for the collective, for the state, and they should put aside their own interests. But the regime also reacted to the struggles: It slowed down the restructuring, extended the envisioned periods for lay-offs (from 2000 to 2003), and started new welfare programs. In 2002/3, the new government finally put social stability center stage. The reform of the state unions and the (formal) establishment of a system of collective bargaining is supposed to help avoid an explosion of social struggles – similar to the Central European "Social Partnership". The party slogan of the setup of a "Harmonious Society" has to be understood as a threat against all who dare to use "disharmonious" means to fight for their interests. The state tries to avoid bigger confrontations and bloodletting. But how long will this work? The restructuring of the unprofitable danwei is not finished yet, and will continue to ignite social explosives.

The Protests in 2002

The North-East of China used to be the center of heavy industries and is known today as the Chinese "rust-belt". In 2002 the towns of Liaoyang (province of Liaoning) and Daqing (Heilongjiang) were shaken by a series of workers' revolts, probably the biggest independent workers' actions in the history of the People's Republic of China. Nearly the nation's entire oil- and gas production is in the hands of the state-owned company PetroChina. End of 2000 the oil fields of Daqing were re-structured. The workers were told that the company is close to bankruptcy and that they have to face the threat of mass redundancies without being paid compensation. After this an-

Literature

nouncement about 50,000 workers (out of 260,000) agreed on taking the offered compensation and left the job. Only a minority of them later found new jobs, and having taken the compensation they were subsequently excluded from the social security benefits provided by the oil administration. At least the company continued to pay for heating the workers’ homes. But the trigger of the 2002 protests was the announcement to stop paying for that, too. In Heilongjiang the winters are long and cold.

The demonstrations started on the 1st of March, with only a few thousand people participating in the beginning. Their number increased to 50,000 during the following days. People demonstrated on every working-day, and sit-downs were organized in front of the oil administration. Supposedly some workers who had kept their jobs joined in because the administration had asked them to pay higher dues into the pension fund, while at the same time managers cashed in horrendously high compensation payments. Production was not obstructed.

The protests were organized by the "Provisional Union Committee of Workers sacked by the Oil Administration". At the beginning they were mostly peaceful. Then the administration changed tactics, because – amongst other reasons – they felt threatened by the possible spreading of the unrest.

On the 19th of March 19 several demonstrators were injured during clashes with the police. On the 22nd of March a large armada of police and army occupied the protest’s meeting points; dozens of activists were arrested. Nevertheless the actions continued. The demonstrators ceased to shout slogans, though, because everyone who started to do so ran the risk of getting arrested or disappearing. The oil administration promised a wage increase to those workers who were still employed. On the 27th of May, thirteen weeks after the first protest, more than 10,000 people gathered again.

Lioyang is hit particularly hard by the reform of state-owned companies: up to 80 percent of the work-force are said to be "released from work". Allegedly there had been an informal underground organization running for a long time before the protests started. The core of this organization is formed by workers from the FerroAlloy plant. They had organized bigger actions in 2000 and 2001, targeting delayed wages and plant closures.

The reason for the first demonstration on the 11th of March was this: The town mayor had announced on television that there are no unemployed people living in his town. Responding to his speech several thousand workers from several – partly from bankrupt – companies demonstrated and demanded his dismissal. In the following days these demonstrations gained in size, and up to 30,000 people took part. Again, the administration reacted by applying the "carrot and stick"-strategy: Some delayed wages were paid, some people were promised that their unemployment benefit would be paid soon, an inquiry following the corruption charges against managers of the metal plant was announced.

On the 17th of March Yao Fuxin, a worker of the metal plant, was arrested. This incident further fueled the protests, which then had only one demand: "Free Yao Fuxin!". Later on more arrests followed.

As in Daqing, two tactics of repression were used: Firstly, a strong visible presence of security forces in town in order to intimidate the workers, and secondly, the hunt for the "ring-leaders", the activists of the underground organization.

The movements of Daqing and Lioyang inspired the miners in the coal areas of Fushun and Fuxin (Liaoning). In mid-March thousands of them blocked railway-lines in order to protest against announced conditions of mass lay-offs. To hinder the arrest of activists – like in Daqing and Lioyang – banners and signs were put up, announcing the time and place of the upcoming actions. On the demonstrations themselves there were neither signs nor slogans.

In 2002 the government implemented a new welfare program to boost domestic demand and soften the worst impacts of the xiagang-problem: By fostering the establishment of state-controlled job centers (these centers are supposed to pay out the wages of the employees who are "released from work" and to find new jobs for unemployed), by increasing the wages of employees in the state sector, etc..

In 2007 the wife of Yao Fuxin, who had been sentenced to seven years imprisonment, addressed a
petition to the National People’s Congress, asking for the release of her husband. His conditions in jail are extraordinary hard, his health has been destroyed. The petition has been signed by more than 900 of his former workmates.

Struggles in (former) state owned companies

Source: [www.umwaelzung.de](http://www.umwaelzung.de) – German website on social struggles in Asia

**Textile factory:** Since mid-September 2004, thousands of textile workers (most of them women) went on a 7-week-strike and blocked the factory in Xianyang. Although the former state owned cotton factory was the property of the employees – the workers had to buy shares – it was sold to a company from Hong Kong. This company demanded that the workers sign a redundancy agreement with a small compensation payment, and wanted to treat them as newly hired afterwards, with a probation time, limited work contracts and lower wages. The strikers did not appoint any speakers in order to avoid state repression against "ring-leaders". Hence the authorities could not find anybody to negotiate with. The strike ended when the management announced to skip the probation time and extend the limited contracts. After months, 20 arrested strikers were released without prosecution.

**Steelworks:** In August and October 2005, laid-off workers protested in Chongqing for a few weeks. The plant had declared bankruptcy in July. The workers held the management responsible for the crash and demanded a modest compensation payment. When the workers staged a sit-in in front of the city hall, some men attacked the cops – probably agent provocateurs of the police. During the following struggle two women died.

**Military factory:** In January 2006, workers of a military factory fought against the police for three days in Chengdu. The factory was bankrupt and was supposed to be sold below value. The workers did not get the announced compensation payment. Hence they occupied the factory and took the director hostage. When military police tried to free the manager, a struggle broke out and people got injured.

**Public transportation:** Since 2001, the city administration of Qingyang had tried to privatize public transportation, but the workers council had denied it five times. In September 2006, the company was sold to a private enterprise after the workers council was forcefully closed by the city authorities. The administration coerced 1448 workers to sign a cancellation agreement. It was a payment of roughly 80 Euros per year of staff membership. But some workers did not get it, because there was not enough money on the company’s bank-account to cover the pay-out. Hereupon the workers went to the responsible board and demanded a solution within two days. When they did not get an answer, the workers besieged the company’s administration building and took the management hostage, until the police stopped the action. After January 2007, there had been constant protests in front of the administration building, but in August 2007 they were stopped by the riot police.

**Bank:** For years there were occasional protests by hundreds of former employees of the Industry and Trade Bank of China (ICBC). When the ICBC was privatized, 100,000 employees were laid off with a low compensation payment and without pension or health insurance. The bank said they had voluntarily abstained from the job and therefore no legitimate entitlement to full legal compensation. The demonstrations mostly took place in Beijing, especially in front of the bank headquarters and the central union office. People from other cities involved in this conflict also came to Beijing, despite police attempts to prevent them from doing so.

**Coal mine:** In August 2007, workers of the Tanjiashan coal mine went on strike against planned lay-offs and small compensation payments. They had also discovered that the management had stolen money which had been provided by the government to pay compensations. The management hired 200 private security agents to quell the strike.
Female Workers under Maoist Patriarchy

One may think socialism wiped out the Chinese form of "feudalistic" patriarchy. At least, Maoism improved the women's situation in comparison to the time before "liberation", in the cities as well as on the countryside. After "liberation" in 1949 most urban women did wage labor in state-owned factories or other businesses, while rural women were drawn into the people's communes' labor service. That changed their position in the family, also because due to the low wages in the Mao-era the women's wage was an important part of the family income (Wang: 159). But even though the women were not to the same extent locked up in the house and new laws treated them more or less the same as men, their life took still place in a patriarchal framework. On top of the "traditional" household work they had to do wage work – mostly outside the family or the community of women in which they grew up (McLaren: 171). The socialist regime adopted changed forms of "feudalistic" patriarchy and integrated them into the new forms of social organization.

In her book "Gender and Work in Urban China. Women workers of the unlucky generation" author Liu Jieyu follows the fate of some urban female workers of the generation of the Cultural Revolution (age-group born about 1945 to 1960). Women were hit harder than men by the redundancies following the restructuring of the state industries after the mid-1990s. 62.8 per cent of those laid-off were women, but they only constituted 39 per cent of the urban workers (Wang: 161). Liu wanted to find out which factors played a role here and how the women's life under socialism was dictated by the patriarchal structures and social norms.

The author, today a lecturer of sociology at the University of Glasgow, grew up in Nanjing, and her mother belongs to those who were fired by their danwei (work unit) in the 1990s. Liu talked to more than thirty women from her mother's generation, nearly all of them unskilled workers, about their experiences and their life situation. Whether during the "egalitarian collectivism" of the Mao-era or in today's "socialist market economy", the interviews show that the women were disadvantaged and discriminated in each phase of their life.

History of Discrimination

The urban Cultural Revolution-generation – the first one born under "socialism" – saw the central turning points in the history of the People's Republic of China: the "Great Leap Forward" and the following famine at the end of the 1950s and in the early 60s, the "Cultural Revolution" in the 1960s and 70s, the beginning of the reforms and the "One-Child-Policy" in the 1980s, the repression if the "Tian'anmen Movement" at the end of the 1980s and the drastic restructuring of the 1990s.

Those women who remember the campaigns of the 1950s and the "Great Leap Forward" have seen the extent of the subsequent famine catastrophe. Their accounts are infused with the contemporary state rhetoric, the official version: The wage labor of women, their breaking out of the households was seen as a sign of liberation and shapes their memory until today. The term housewife (jiating funü) still has a bad tone for them. Liu writes: "Although their mothers went out to work, they were not as liberated as official history would have us to believe. In the workplace, these women's mothers only performed the lower paid jobs in the service, textile and caring industries. Inside the family, the traditional patriarchal pattern still persisted. Interviewees reported that their mothers, sometimes with help from themselves, were in charge of domestic affairs while fathers were mainly breadwinners and decision-makers." (Liu: 27)

The women react with bitterness when they remember the preferential treatment of sons (zhongnan qingnü). In the early 1950s the regime still encouraged women to have as many children as possible. The correspondent term for "adults" is nanzun nübei, roughly: Women are inferior to men. These sexist slogans are part of the (neo-)Confucian pulp that still gums up many social discourses in China.
sible. That added to an enormous population growth. In the families the boys were treated better than girls, and they were more likely to be chosen to receive (higher) education. The girls had to do the housework, including taking care of smaller siblings and the grandparents. That in turn affected their school education. "The women themselves attributed the neglect of their education to traditional 'feudal' attitudes. However, in a labor market biased against girls, investment in a son's education is a rational decision." (Liu: 29) So due to the gendered division of labor and the "traditional" privileging of boys, the women had less chances in life, in getting education – and later on the labor market.

During the Cultural Revolution from the mid-1960s onwards there were slogans like "Now the times have changed, men and women are the same", at the same time all feminist demands or references to the special problems of women were denounced. They were seen as "bourgeois" (Honig: 255). The class origin was the decisive factor which determined whether someone was attacked and re-educated or not. For women the main criteria for the class assignment were the (father's) origin and the marriage (the origin of the husband).

The children of so-called "class enemies" had to deal not only with the attacks on their parents, but they themselves had problems in school and were excluded from many activities – or they did not want to take part because they were sick of all the attacks and apologies. Elite families that were attacked during the Cultural Revolution could still use their connections to make sure their children received an education or job training, while workers' children – with or (allegedly) without "good family background" – could not finish their education because the schools were closed and the children sent to the countryside.

The first wave of children being sent to the countryside took place between 1966 and 1968. The school education or job training of those youth was interrupted or stopped for good. Until today Chinese people say that generation has "learned nothing". The official reason was that the "intellectual youth" (zhishi qingnian) had to be re-educated on the countryside. Actually, there were also other reasons behind it, for instance, the lowering of urban unemployment. But not all children were sent to the countryside. Students at professional schools could stay in the city as well as a small quota from each school class. Parents with good connections also had the chance to keep their children in the city.

A second wave was sent away between 1974 and 1976. This time the main criterion was how many children each family had kept in the city and how many were already sent to the countryside. Families with more kids in the city had to send some to the countryside.

On the countryside men and women worked in different production teams. Men had to do the allegedly "harder" work. For instance, they had to carry the bags with rice seedlings, while the women had to plant them – often in a squatting position for hours. The hardship of a task was valued by "work points" (gongfen). One woman recalls: "In our place, men's labor was worth 10 points. The worst of them got 8.5 points. The best got 10 points. As for women's labor, the highest was 5.5 points." Another woman says: "We were only worth half labor." (Liu: 34)

The women interviewed nevertheless talk about their tough labor and the hardships they endured on the countryside with pride. They use the term "chi ku", literally: eating bitterness. "All of them had no doubt that work was an inevitable part of their life. In this sense, the state campaign positively shaped their gendered identities by enforcing their identity as a worker; but, at the same time, despite the official rhetoric, they had experienced a gendered division of labor at work which rendered them inferior to men." (Liu: 35)

In the interviews the women avoid speaking about their own participation in the Cultural Revolution's Red Guards. They underline the chaos, a result of the political attacks and the interruption of school education, but when their own involvement is concerned they appear as "outsider, follower or silent sympathizer" (Liu: 36).

"This common avoidance of the label 'Red Guard' in women's memories of the Cultural Revolution is related to the post-Mao depiction of Red Guards as perpetrators of violence, unjustified attacks, and it shows how the women's memories of the past were reconstructed accord-
ing to the present through a publicly available account." (Liu: 37)

Even though the Red Guards' violence was directed against the "class enemies", it was still often "sexualized" and "gendered". Many young women were exposed to sexual assault, on the countryside by local cadres, in the cities by Red Guards and other gangs (Honig: 256, also see Xinran: 160, 185). During the Cultural Revolution women were attacked because they wore fashionable clothes or looked "feminine". The female Red Guards dressed like men. Whoever behaved like a woman could be seen as a "backward element" (luohou fenzi). There were cases where women were attacked under the pretense of "sexual immorality". One woman says: "At that time, people were attacked for bad class origin. To women, at that time, people would say, you had 'lifestyle problems' [a euphemism for sexual immorality]. Such lifestyle problems would be a huge blow to you. When they had no reasons to attack you, they would say that you had lifestyle problems. I remembered during the Cultural Revolution, those women who were said to have lifestyle problems wore a string of worn shoes around their shoulders, parading through the streets, being tainted as 'broken shoes' [a euphemism for a loose woman]." (Liu: 38)

This kind of "morality" also played a role for the control and surveillance of women and their sexuality in the danwei. The first generation of those sent to the countryside returned to the cities after Mao's death in 1976, the second generation after 1978. The year before the high schools' entrance exams were taken up again. Most women did not apply anymore, though. They had missed too many years of education.

The first generation was assigned work in the danwei. The second generation finished middle school in the early 1980s. Because of unemployment they did not get work assigned, but were taken over by their parent's (often mother's) danwei.

---

2 Until today many Chinese use this term. For instance, divorced women, in particular those with children, often have problems finding a new partner, because they are seen as "worn shoes". Getting a divorce in China today does not promise (new) independence but loneliness, economic insecurity and gossip (see Jaschok: 119).

3 It was not just the patriarchal feudalistic structures that were adopted (something that happened in other Asian countries, too). New versions of the imperial governmental units in China, from the mandarins down to the village heads, can also be found in the socialist structures.

#### Work in the state combines

According to Liu the danwei-leaders played the role of the traditional family patriarch. The Confucian family, theoretically obsolete under socialism, was transformed into different forms of everyday control and discrimination. The danwei’s family culture – the combination of public and private spheres – added to the strengthening of the gender segregation at the workplace and the gender division in society. "The mobilization of women into the workplace did not bring about the liberation in the way socialist rhetoric claimed. The socialist work unit operated as an arbiter of women's careers and personal lives and continued the patriarchal function of pre-socialist institutions. As a result, women workers were put at a greater social disadvantage than their male counterparts, and lost out in the economic restructuring." (Liu: 86)

The "danwei was not gender-neutral; instead, gender was a complex component of processes of control." (Liu: 64) The assignment of work-places always followed the gender lines (without openly expressing this). The gender specific segregation of work was horizontal and vertical. The horizontal segregation describes the difference between "heavy" and "light" industries. Women made up 70 percent in the "light" industries, 20 percent in the "heavy" ones. The workplaces were also separated in "heavy" and "light". Women took the allegedly "light" jobs, but the distinction was arbitrary. 'This division of labor took the 'natural' difference between men and women for granted and suggested the underlying assumption that women's 'weak' physique was best suited to 'light' work.' (Liu: 42) Men were also rather assigned to jobs that demanded "skills" while women took less skilled jobs. Referring to the cases of two state companies in Guangzhou, Wang writes: "Men were overwhelmingly assigned to technical jobs and women to non-technical, auxiliary, and service jobs, regardless of educational level. This gendered employment hierarchy established women's subordinate position and shaped women's self-
definition." (Wang: 159, see also: 168/9) Already in the 1980s there was a trend initiated by the state to transfer women workers to "auxiliary sections" (departments such as cleaning, the canteen, the factory clinic) in order to reduce the labor surplus (Liu: 43).

The vertical segregation describes the chances for promotion. In Chinas danwei all employees were either workers (gongren) or cadres (ganbu). Among those who could become cadres were: 1. Ex-soldiers, at least in the rank of platoon leader; 2. graduates from vocational schools or colleges; 3. workers who were promoted. Very few of the soldiers were women. Women were disadvantaged in receiving higher education or professional training. So there was only the last option left. There were three hierarchical levels of cadres, junior cadres, middle-level cadre and senior cadre. Women usually only reached the first level. And those who made it had rather symbolic positions (for instance leader of the Youth League). Another precondition for promotions and for avoiding being laid-off in the 1990s was party membership, and women were also disadvantaged here.

The fact that women worked in the low-wage industries and segments was due to this horizontal and vertical segregation. Two aspects played a role: biaoxian, literally performance or conduct, here more precisely work performance and politically correct behavior, as judged by the superiors; and guanxi, the contacts and connections with higher employees or functionaries and the delivery of favors. Both are connected since they include forms of pressure, obedience, good conduct and "emotional work". The allocation of wages, benefits and promotions were based on the assessment of biaoxian. Apart from the work performance the social behavior was controlled, so that there was also a moral aspect, that is whether a woman behaves in a proper according to her status, sex and role (for instance as a mother). The guanxi were and are the base for getting the courtesy of the superiors and functionaries. They play a role in all aspects of social life in China, for instance in getting a job or flat, or for promotions. Since women in the danwei had an inferior status, male and female workers tried to build up good contacts mainly to men in higher positions. Women often only had connections to lower cadres, cadres with low influence, "bad guanxi".

All in all, women could not pay as much attention to biaoxian and guanxi because they had to deal not only with wage labor but also domestic labor. Furthermore, they often lived in their husband’s danwei (or worked there in lower positions), so they often had no network of their own but had to rely on their husband’s guanxi. Whenever women could establish good guanxi they often got the reputation – even amongst female colleagues – of trading in sexual services. Men in higher positions, on the other hand, used their status and put sexual pressure on women or molested them. Women had to develop strategies to avoid those situations without finally having male superiors as their enemies, and without gaining a bad reputation among other workers. "The golden rule for women to maintain a good reputation is to avoid close contact with men, which comes into tension with those practices of biaoxian and guanxi." (Liu: 64) Women had limited space to evade that pressure. They stayed ordinary workers until they were sacked.

According to Liu, life in the danwei was determined by forms of familiarism. She highlights four aspects: the arrangement of marriages (matchmaking for young people), the allocation of housing (an incentive to marry), the surveillance of family life (to stabilize the marriages) and family planning (i.e. population control).

In China the arrangement of marriages (matchmaking) is seen as an honorable and virtuous undertaking. Often many people, cadres and ordinary workers, are involved in arranging marriages for the youngsters. Under Maoism it was also seen as a task of the danwei. Difficulties occurred when a proposed person was turned down or when there were problems during the marriage, because that concerned the relation to the matchmaker who arranged the marriage as well. Women who did not want to marry were seen as "strange". Some married just to escape the social pressure

4 Still, Wang points out that one reason for the acceptance of the gendered assignment of low-skilled jobs to women lies in the fact that the difference in wages and benefits in a danwei was rather small – in accordance with the egalitarianism of the Maoists. Another factor was that the situation of the urban women working in a danwei was far better than those of rural women. (Wang: 160).
and discrimination. Many Chinese are more tolerant where single men are concerned. The acceptable upper limit for getting married is an age of 25 for women and 35 for men.

The allocation of housing (an incentive to marry) was a general problem. Flats were rare and had to be allocated by the danwei. Male workers were privileged. Often only men could apply for a flat. Single men got a place in the dormitory; single women had to stay with their family. The traditional form continued: The woman became part of the family (here: danwei) of her husband. "This housing arrangement in the danwei further reinforced the traditional idea of female dependency in marriage and family life". (Liu: 69) Mothers passed this ideology over to their daughters. They took care of them, until they found work and married. Then they expected the daughter's husband's family to provide a flat (and money for the wedding). In case of marital problems the women had to cope with the living situation. Since they had no flat of their own, they might have to move back to their parents. But even earlier they had problems, for instance because of the long times of commuting to work (in another danwei) or because they had to take their kids to their danwei's kindergarten. Today there is a market for rented flats but the rents are so high that most women cannot afford them.

The surveillance of family life (to stabilize marriages) happened within the danwei. The cadres had an interest in keeping up good relations among workers and other residents. In case of conflicts a "reconciliation committee" or "neighborhood committee" intervened. "Whatever justifications the committees provided to people with grievances, they tried to persuade women to comply with gendered social expectations and to make compromises in order to maintain family harmony." (Liu: 71) For instance, they advised women whose men had extramarital affairs to ask themselves what they had done wrong. Despite all the socialist rhetoric about equal rights in the family, in reality the traditional ideology of gender roles prevailed. In the danwei-housing units women were also controlled by the neighbors, who reported to the committees.

Family planning (i.e. population control) in China went through different phases. From the 1950s until the 1970s China saw – supported by government propaganda – high birth rates. The only exception was the period of the "Great Leap Forward" in the early 1960s when the immense work pressure, the precarious supply situation and famines reduced the birth rate. After 1979 public birth control started with the One-Child-Policy. The danwei-leadership controlled the reproductive performances of the female workers. "It is women's bodies that undergo all the processes imposed like close examination, forced abortion, use of obstetric health services." (Liu: 74) Women were supposed to have just one child and to renounce having more for the benefit of the "nation", but paradoxically women could also partially use the One-Child-Policy for their own benefit: Some refused to have more children in order to have more freedom. Others thought (and think) of the One-Child-Policy as just "another sacrifice" they had to make for the state (Liu: 76). In the case of the first child being a girl, women were put under pressure. Socialist and traditional patriarchy clashed here: The family expected a boy to continue the family line, the state only allowed one child. Women took the big part of the burden, and their behavior was controlled.6

Liu also discusses the control over time from the perspective of the gendered division of labor. Since the definition of time distinct from wage work time is a manifestation of gender discrimination, she starts with distinguishing four kinds of time: necessary, contracted, committed and free time.7 "Necessary time refers to the time needed to satisfy basic physiological needs such as sleep, meals, personal health and hygiene and sex. Contracted time refers to regular paid work. Time for traveling to work is included here... Committed time encompasses housework, help, care and assistance of all kinds, particularly pertaining to

5 On the Confucian and nationalist-socialist background of the notion of sacrifice (for the emperor, the state, the party, the family) see Zuo: 16.
6 China today has far more males than females because many parents make a sex test before birth – and if it is a girl they abort the fetus. The relation between men and women is around 117 males to 100 females.
children, shopping, etc. Free time is the time left when the other time activities are removed." (Liu: 76/7) "Time wealth" depends on having appropriate amounts of time, control over time and in having similar time rhythms as other family members. Liu calls that "personal time sovereignty". (Liu: 83).

For the women the organization of the danwei again and again created time crises and played a role in upholding the gendered hierarchy. Although the women were doing wage labor and, therefore, had to spend time at work ("contracted time") they were not relieved of the "traditional" task of a "good wife and mother". The majority of the women Liu interviewed had to do machine work in a three-shift system. They were subordinated to the machine time, while men in their workplaces took over jobs that allowed more control over time (day shifts, maintenance, office work...). Women constantly had to solve time crises, caused by the three-shift system with its blurring of day and night, and by the conflicts between "contracted" (work, commuting) and "committed" time (domestic work or "household management", children) (Liu: 79). That usually led to a constant conflict between wage labor and family task, and to exhaustion. Many women changed their work places – regardless of biaoxian and guanxi – often to inferior, lower paid jobs that still gave the women more time.

Even though the danwei partially helped the women workers to do both, wage labor and domestic work, these arrangements also meant that women were not seen as "proper" workers. The "family distractions" were one factor in the decision to sack woman first (Liu: 81).

Women were also disadvantaged regarding the non-work time (non-contracted time). In the danwei all workers, male or female, had to attend meetings outside of working time, for instance political study sessions. In the 1980s assessment tests were introduced that had to be passed before promotions. Preparing for the tests had to be done in non-work time. Women had more problems to invest time because they were busy with domestic work when not doing wage work. According to a study of the Chinese Women's Federation, women spent 260 minutes a day doing domestic work, men did 130 minutes (Liu: 82).

Women did not have much time for social activities either. Due to the traditional gender discrimination, the possibilities for married women to socialize with other people were limited. They "virtuously" stayed at home, and they found social relations predominantly during working hours. That is where they exchanged information and formed social networks. However, the main topics of conversation circled around the traditional roles as wives and mothers, further enforcing these roles.

**Return to house and home**

In the reform phase after 1978 the income gap widened and the gendered segregation of the new labor market increased. Already from the early 1980s on there were campaigns for the "return home" (hui jia) of urban women. At that time more than ten million "returned youth from the countryside" added to an increasing urban unemployment, and the return of the women to house and home was supposed to reduce it. The women should leave the danwei to increase productivity in the socialist planned economy, too. They were asked to sacrifice themselves again for the "nation" (Wang: 163/4).

When with the restructuring in the 1990s, increasingly after 1997, 85 percent of the redundancies were happening in the industrial danwei, the women were hit harder. There are several reasons: Their percentage in the workforce of the industrial danwei was especially high. Sex and age were the critical factors in choosing the workers who were then laid off, not so much education and skill. Many women were just 40 years old when they had to retire and leave their job, men often 50 and older. That was backed up by the idea that men can perform better when old than women. When the situation of the company changed (because it

---

8 Lipinsky writes that in 2001, 85 per cent of all families the women were “responsible for cooking, washing clothes, washing up dishes, tidy up, cleaning and other domestic tasks”. Women spent 4 hours a day on domestic work, men 2.7 hours. This average number includes countryside and cities. Looking at cities alone men do just 1.7 hours domestic work per day (Lipinsky: 224).

9 Sometimes the age was 45 and 55; the official retirement age is 50 (women) and 60 (men).
got new orders...) men were more likely to be called back or "hired", even when they had to retire earlier. Furthermore, the auxiliary and service departments – where women worked – were the first to be dismantled.

The guanxi (connections/contacts) played an important role here. Men had more opportunities to prevent forced retirements, and the financial burdens they brought with them, by using their contacts and connections or asking to be transferred to another department. But Liu also describes how the women she interviewed did not just accept being laid off or retired but searched for ways to defend their interests. They asked to be transferred, called in sick, used their husband's guanxi or went just for the best form of redundancy or retirement. Some women also accepted the dismantlement because afterwards they had more time for their family tasks – as long as it was financially sustainable. In that case their husbands supported it, too. Both, wife and husband, saw the women's work as a source of an additional income, the domestic work was seen as the main responsibility of the wife. But this "choice" was limited.

Wang cites a manager who made clear, that they sacked women first because they expected less resistance. He said: "If you lay off men, they will get drunk and make trouble. But if you lay off women, they will just go home and take it quietly by themselves." (Wang: 162) This hints to a strategy of party cadres and factory directors whose main aim was to avoid social conflicts. They calculated that it creates less unrest to fire a woman of a family and not the man.

After being laid off the people kept their flat, but not other benefits like medical care. That was especially hard for those women who were "bought out", i.e. who got compensation and whose connection to the danwei was completely cut off afterwards. One former female worker said about that: "We have no connection with our former danwei, they treated us like thrown away rotten meat." (Liu: 107)

The laid-off women found little support in the newly adopted forms of the "three guarantees", the small benefit payments for sacked workers. Due to the financial crisis of the danwei and corruption, the "guarantees" did not work. Cut off from state financial support the women had to resort to informal ways that were on the rise since the transformation to a market economy had begun. The decay of the danwei or the women's cutting-off reinforced the family connections the women now had to rely on.

In some cases the laid-off women supported each other. The pressure to find a new job was big – partly due to the financial problems after their redundancy, partly because the children were in puberty and the rising costs of education and job training had to be covered. While looking for a job the guanxi again played a major role, the connections to people of power and influence, but also certain forms of "social capital", the women's own networks, for instance with former female colleagues, resources the women could draw on.

Women found mainly jobs in the lower segments of the labor market or as precarious street sellers, result of their former low social status and comparably bad guanxi.10 “Women with poor social capital were trapped in a vicious circle of low-paid, unskilled part-time work providing only further poor social capital. Former cadres were able to maintain their social positions; the workers were vulnerable to downward mobility” (Liu: 115). The gendered networking reproduces the segregation of the labor market. The laid-off women were too old for the newly created job in "private" services, their skills were too low, and they weren't young and charming enough. Young and attractive women who pushed onto the labor market from the countryside or just after finishing school got these jobs. While women, considering all the problems, often accepted low paid jobs, men often refused them because they saw it as undignified to do lower jobs with a bad reputation. In some cases women did not search for new jobs because of their duties and domestic work. "She became a full-time family servant", writes Liu about one woman. (Liu: 115). Most women had to take care not just of their own family but were also used as an unpaid laborer by members of the extensive family.

The women Liu interviewed were for the most

10 They worked, for instance, as domestic helpers or taxi drivers. See the article on domestic helpers in China on the website http://www.wildcat-www.de/dossiers/china and the review of the film "The Taxi-sisters of Xi'an" in the German edition of "Unruhen in China", page 77.

prol-position news #10 |10/2008 36 women under maoism
part doing wage labor, but none of those working in the private economy had a work contract or regulated working hours doing part time work. Many were molested and insulted by their bosses. Those self-employed lost money and were harassed by the authorities. That produced a kind of nostalgia for the former situation in the danwei, especially for the social "security" at that time. Only those few who had started a successful career considered the restructuring and social transformation positive because they appreciated the new "liberties".

The following generation

Liu interviewed the women's daughters, too. Most of them were born after the beginning of the One-Child-Policy. Different from the experience of their mothers, they were the center of attention in their families. The "traditional" Chinese family was parent-centered, that is, the needs of the parents stand above those of the children. Children should pay respect and honor their parents. When the first One-Child-generation grew up this old constellation bit by bit collapsed.11

In the danwei the One-Child-Policy was strictly imposed,12 so that many families could have just one daughter. Subsequently the educational gap between boys and girls was partly closed. Many women from the "unhappy generation" who had enjoyed little education and experienced many setbacks in their lives invested a lot in the development and training of their daughters "to realize vicariously their unfulfilled dreams" (Liu: 126).

The work around the children still lay on the mothers' shoulders, the fathers stayed away from it. In some families the mother dealt with all aspects of life, the father just with educational questions. Mothers tried to adapt their own labor to the needs of the child, for instance by changing from rotating shifts to day shifts in order to have more time for the child – even if that involved accepting disadvantages at work.

The "unhappy generation" of women suffered from three burdens: They had to "pay honor" to their own parents and care for their needs, they did everything for their child(ren), and they had to answer to the demands of their husbands. After being laid-off by the danwei – their "return home" – they temporarily or ultimately became full-time mothers. The daughters liked that because their mothers had more time for them and cooked regularly. The daughters accepted that their mothers were sacked as unskilled workers. They considered that as a necessary sacrifice of the old generation during the transformation to a market economy. For them the "society" with its interests stood above the "individuals". They supported the reforms although they were responsible for the fact that their mothers lost their job and the security of the danwei. And they accepted to the official slogans and explanations that justified the social hardships that accompanied the reforms: stimulation of self-initiative, support of young employed people by domestic helpers from the danwei, make space for the young workers.

The daughters know what the mothers hoped for and expected from them, and they are very ambitious themselves. "The daughters’ desire for success reflects the values of competition and efficiency which have been highly promoted in the changeover to the market economy." (Liu: 133) The daughters by no means want to repeat the past of their mothers. While for the mothers, their wage labor was just a job, and promotion and career was not important, the daughters are different. They think about their personal development. They do not want to sacrifice themselves for the family, they do not want to live for their children (or their parents) ( Jaschok: 122). Nevertheless, the daughters partly use the services of their mothers who take care of their grand-child while the daughters lead their own life and use their time in a different manner. The daughters do not want to sacrifice themselves for the family, but they leave their mother in exactly that position.13

While only few mothers recognized gender dis-

11 In the public discourse – which is dominated by the party and the older generation – there are still many allusions to the obedience towards the parents, the past few years even with an open reference to reactionary Confucian doctrines.

12 That was not and is not the case in all areas and social groups in China.

13 That attitude of children of workers who by no means want to become workers themselves, but also of parents who want something "better" for their children, can be found anywhere on the planet. Whether the children manage to escape the "dirty" jobs is a different question.
discrimination as the reason for their lay-off and linked disadvantages to biological differences, the daughters were rather conscious about gender disparities. The daughters experience discrimination on the labor market, sexual harassment and violence that limit their space and opportunities. "The wider social constraints on woman are pervasive in post-Mao China" (Liu: 135) The young women have their own goals, they plan their careers. They emphasize their independence – but at the same time they expect a future with a "bread-winner" husband for their nuclear family. Liu refers to Maria Jaschok here: "Jaschok interpreted the 'awakening desires [of young women] to change and adapt' more as 'a modernization of established patterns than as an experimentation with alternative life-styles'" (Liu: 135/6; Jaschok: 126). And Liu adds: "The daughters seemed to hold dual values, which were infused by past and present, tradition and modernity; the contradictions in their values were representative of the tensions and frictions arising from these oppositional ideologies" (Liu: 136). They have to bring together individualist and collectivist orientations. They want a modern and independent life without sexist discrimination, but they hold on to the "promise of happiness" through marriage and having children.14

Liu's research shows that proletarian women – especially the older ones – had (and still have) to pay a big part of the costs of the economic reforms in China. The lay-redundancies of women from the danwei was the result of "the culmination of a lifetime of gender inequalities" (Liu: 143), from the Great Leap Forward until today. Worse educational opportunities, more burdens in the households and families, more pressure in everyday life, stricter surveillance of personal behavior, close control of sexuality and reproduction, less chances for promotion at work, a limited social network, lower wages: the list of results of structural and personal discrimination of women is long. Still, the women of the "unhappy generation" hold on to beliefs of the "natural difference between men and women" and the "feminine" readiness to make sacrifices. They cannot just get rid of the patriarchal heritage of Confucianism, patrilineality15 and the strict control of chastity and monogamy of women. And even though their daughters are trying to find their own way, they have not broken completely with the "traditional" concepts. However, what is left is the hope that the young women will successfully fight for more control over their own life.

**Literature**


---

14 The dagongmei, young women who migrate from the countryside to the cities to work in the factories, hold similar attitudes (see Pun/Li 2006).

15 The term for a patriarchal system in which one belongs to one’s father’s lineage; involving the inheritance of property, names or titles through the male line.
Article translated from wildcat #81, May 2008

More Noise, More Self-Respect, More Daring

Strike at the Dacia-Renault plant in Romania: a turning point

On March 24, 2008, about 8,000 of the 13,000 workers at the Dacia car factory in Romania went on an open-ended strike. One of their demands was a wage increase of 50 to 70 percent. For the first time in a strike in Romania, the strikers did not base their demands on standard wages in Romania but compared themselves to Renault workers in Turkey or France, who earn between 900 and 2,000 Euros for the same work (the workers at Dacia earn about 300 Euros). This strike at Dacia is the most significant struggle in the Romanian private sector since 1989 and could be the beginning of a wave of strikes for better living conditions across the country.

Three days on site

For many days the Internet was our only source of information about the strike. An article in the German daily newspaper "Der Tagesspiegel" states that the Dacia workers had been impressed by the strike of German train drivers which took place in winter 2007/2008. We decided spontaneously to go to Romania and find out what is actually going on there. After a two-day journey we finally reached the city of Pitesti at 1 a.m.. During the trip we were stuck without any recent news: yesterday’s newspaper, nothing about the strike on the radio. Maybe it had ended before we had even arrived. Finally on the evening news: the Dacia management made a new offer to the workers; the union leaders were to discuss the offer with the strikers the next morning and hold a vote on whether to accept it. We did not want to loose any time and drove on to Mioveni, a smaller town next to Pitesti, where the Dacia factory stretches out over a hill. There were only few cars on the huge parking lot and it is very quiet. Some security workers stood around but no sign of any picket lines.

On the next morning, a Wednesday and the 17th day of the strike, we went back up the hill towards the plant. The parking lot was full of cars and company buses. The early shift was at their workplace. But there was no work going on, the assembly lines were not running. Some workers were emerging from the main entrance. When we asked one for an update he said: "The offer is bad. Everybody is against it. The strike will continue." As he was speaking, a secret ballot was being held inside.

"Something happened inside our heads"

The most important demand of the striking workers was a wage rise of 550 Ron (148 Euros) per month. They also wanted a 5 to 10 percent share of profits, an increase in their Christmas and Easter bonuses (in both cases half of one month’s wage) as well as holiday pay (one month’s wage) and an increase in extra pay for heavy work of 200 Ron per year; they also demanded a 15 percent discount when buying Renault products. As we were talking with the workers we realized that these demands were really the absolute minimum for them and that they would not give in on them. They expressed anger about the stressful work, the assembly-lines never stopping, the foremen at their backs endlessly controlling and pushing. Management wanted to introduce weekend shifts, the so-called four shift system with only one free weekend in the month.


Later we spoke to a group of older workers who were standing around in the parking lot, drinking home-made wine from plastic cups and arguing loudly. They were happy to tell us about their working conditions and what was happening with the strike: "We’ve let them fuck us around for too long. Something happened inside our heads! We understood that we are doing the same work here as the Renault workers in France yet our wages are so low. We are not second or third world anymore."

The factory on the hill

After 1968 for many years the plant on the hill in Mioveni produced the Dacia 1300 under license from Renault. The plant was the pride of Dictator Ceausescu. Renault finally took the plant over in 1999 and dismissed half of the 27,000 people employed at that time. Since 2004, the cheap Dacia Logan car has been built here. Originally this car was intended for the Eastern-European market and is built accordingly – e.g. an entire pig can fit into the back of the station wagon version. Then, because of the decreasing incomes of people in Western Europe, the car became very popular there as well. In Germany one can buy it for 7,200 Euros.

Today the factory complex, the only place where the Logan is produced, consists of a mechanics section (motor and gear construction) and a section for car body assembly (pressing plant, body shell, paint finishing, assembly). Apart from that Dacia-Renault has its local development division for the Logan model with about 300 engineers. The workers told us that they are already working on new, modern CNC machines in the motor and gear construction section. In the car body assembly section work is mostly done manually with low level technology.

There are also factories of supply firms on the site with a further few thousand employees. For example Johnson Controls makes the seats for the Logan, while Valeo makes the cables. During the strike some information about other suppliers appeared in the media. The company Elba in Timisoara, which makes the reflectors for the cars, announced that they had to shut down production because of the strike in Dacia. Another supplier, Borla Romcat, located near Pitesti, said they had to dismiss 60 percent of their employees because of the long-term strike in Mioveni, as Dacia is their main client. Borla Romcat produces exhaust pipes for the Logan.

There is an export center at the bottom of the hill, opposite the Mioveni prison. In the center the finished Logan cars are taken apart again (CKD, completely knocked down), put in boxes and sent to other assembly factories in Russia, India and Morocco. This way the high customs for complete cars are avoided.

Old and young muncitori

During the rally in Pitesti the next day we got to know Rodica. She was hanging out with an older colleague, a neighbor from Mioveni. I asked how many women were working in the factory. They said that half of the crew are women. They are doing the same work as the men and are paid the same. Most of them started to work in the factory directly after finishing school. Many of the Dacia muncitori (Romanian for ‘workers’), both men and women, already have 20 to 30 years of work at the assembly-line behind them. Rodica has worked here for 31 years and earns 253 Euros before tax, which means she ends up with 157 Euros per month in her pocket. Her husband used to work at Dacia, too, but was given a redundancy payment in 2002. Since then he has been working on construction sites and earns less than his wife. Both their children are grown up, and both had no choice but to start to work straight after school. The daughter is 28 years old and still lives with her parents in the flat they own in a 1960s socialist-block-style building in Mioveni. In order to be able to buy a new Logan, Rodica and her husband stopped to go on holidays by the Black Sea. As a worker at Dacia it takes Rodica seven years to pay off the installments on the car, which are half her monthly wage. Only 30 percent of her colleagues own a car.

While the "old ones" make up about two thirds of the production workers, more than 3,500 young people have been employed in the past year. Skills are not important. They take anybody. On the buses which transport most of the workers to the factory every day there is a big advertisement: "We are hiring!" The new contracts are limited to 3 or 6 months. Lay-offs and new recruitments hap-
pen daily. However, young workers are also resigning: "When somebody stays at Dacia, it means that she/he has family, or debts, or could not find anything better in other countries", said Radu, who works in the assembly sector. The "young ones" earn the minimum wage of 200 Euros before tax. Constantin already has an unlimited contract even though he hasn’t been working at Dacia for long. "We were laid off in 2006 after three months of work, because they did not need us anymore. There were about 500 of us and we were very angry. Some brand new cars standing in the yard got scratched. At the same time, it was clear that the human resources department would ask us sooner or later to come back to work. We discussed this and when they called us the following month, we told them collectively that we will only start working again if they give us unlimited contracts. It worked."

**Striking within the legal framework**

In 2003 there was already a wildcat strike in Dacia but it stopped after a few days. The activists were fired. We could not find anybody who could tell us anything more specific about this particular confrontation. Only one worker from the engine section remembers that the wildcat strike was defeated because the workers did not coordinate themselves enough. About the ongoing strike he says: "Here the workers in one section have no idea what the workers in the other sections are doing or deciding on!"

In order for the strike not to be declared illegal and thus be stopped by a court order, the trade union has to make sure that the striking workers stick to certain rules. For example, striking workers are not allowed to move between the production sections. Everybody has to remain at his/her work place, just that nobody works. It is also forbidden to stage actions outside the production halls or in front of the factory gate. Constantin told us that at the beginning they had the idea to block the entrance for transporters, so that the products that were produced before the strike started could not leave the factory, but the majority agreed that the strike should not leave the legal framework.

In spite of the inspiring determination we found among the workers, this strike had its limits. There was a lack of co-ordination between the workers and a lack of collective actions with which they could increase pressure. The decision processes were taking place within the hierarchical framework of trade union structures and the striking workers depended on the union’s information channels. Striking workers told us various times that during similar strikes in France things break and there is sabotage. They also asked what it looks like where we are from. The idea of undertaking such kind of activities seemed to be present in the minds of some workers but in the end they were not being put into action.

**Toiling right through the weekends**

At the second large rally after the strike began, which took place on Thursday, the 18th day of the strike, "We are not giving up!" was the common message of the union leaders on the stage and of the shouting choirs of striking workers, accompanied by whistles and drums.

On the next morning, Friday April 11, the 19th day of the strike, there was confusion. A new offer had been made, not much better than the previous one, in some points even worse and far from the demands of the striking workers. It included a 300 Ron wage increase starting from January 2008 (thus including back payments) and another 60 Ron more from September 2008; additionally, there was to be a single bonus as part of the profit of 2007, consisting of one month’s pay, assured to be at least 900 Ron. On average that amounted to a 30 to 40 percent wage increase. Unskilled workers (cleaners) and TESA functionaries (these sectors were not on strike) would get a 15 percent wage increase.

At 1 p.m. the union signed the agreement and declared the strike to be over. The press was told that 70 percent of the striking workers voted to accept the new offer. Nobody knew where this number came from. Certainly there was no written vote at this time and many of the striking workers did not take part in any voting. Numerous buses arrived with workers from the surrounding areas for the second shift in the afternoon (their only way of getting to the factory is the bus), but by that time the decision had already been made. The regional newspaper "Societatea" wrote the next day: "Many of the striking workers were unhappy
with the decision to end the strike. There were some very tense moments. Many of the strikers started booing the union leaders." The mood at shift-change was low on this day, nobody gave the impression of having won a struggle. Many believe that the union leadership was bribed and betrayed the strikers. One woman from the morning shift asked us if we knew whether they could take their own functionaries to court. We discussed how the struggle could be continued. Rodica was laughing when we talked about the option of collectively taking an extended sick leave. "Oh, I understand what you mean. But we are still scared to do such things. There would have to be some changes in our mentality before we could do something like that."

Shortly after the end of the strike the workers were told in an assembly that they would have to work weekends to make up for the losses incurred by the strike.

How and if management will be able to enforce this remains unclear. The plan to introduce a four shift system with production continuing over the weekends was withdrawn during the strike. The mere thought of only one weekend off per month created serious anger amongst the workers.

Another strike!

The strike at Dacia had only just ended when on April 14, 2008 we heard about a strike of 3,000 workers in the steel plant of Arcelor Mittal, the world's biggest steel producer, in Galati, Romania.

There are 13,000 workers employed at the steel plant. In the early hours, 700 of the strikers wanted to enter the factory through the main gate but were stopped by security guards who also started to film the striking workers. In response there was a riot in front of the main entrance to the factory. Stones and bottles were thrown. One of the guard points got smashed. The Solidaritate, one of the four trade unions operating at Arcelor Mittal, had refused to sign the labor contract. They actually demanded that wages be doubled, with a minimum wage increase of 25 percent. The management of the steel plant only offered a 9.5 percent wage rise. Because of the strike nobody was working in some work sections, and the management said they could not guarantee safety at the ovens because of the danger of an explosion. In order not to have to switch off the ovens and to avoid stopping production, management went to court and demanded an injunction to halt the strike. On Tuesday, April 15, the court ruled in their favor: the strike was declared illegal and had to be stopped immediately because of the danger to people in and around the factory. Solidaritate ended the strike. Further negotiations were pending.

The following two reports appeared in German and English on www.labournet.de

DP World - Europe 's Eastern gateway blocked: Strike in the docks of Constanta

[24. July 2008] In Romania the strike wave continues: on Thursday morning, 17th of July 2008, five hundred dock workers at the Agigea Sud terminal went on indefinite strike. The terminal belongs to the container port of Constanta, a town at the Romanian coast of the Black Sea. Their main demands: a wage increase of 700 Ron (about 200 Euros), a bonus for seniority, extra-payment for overtime and a clear regulation of the working-time.

The author of this article was in Constanta and talked to the workers.

The first day of strike

At the main gate of the container port Constanta Agigea Sud a wind-torn leaflet announces an indefinite strike, starting at 7 am, 17th of July 2008. On the port premises no movements can be seen, the cranes remain silent and unused. The company has locked out the strikers. About 150 workers on picket-line have gathered at the gate, shouting slogans: "We work, and we want to be paid for it!", "Thieves, thieves" and "We won't be slaves in our own country!". The Constanta South Terminal is run by DP World, well equipped with modern facilities. 85 percent of the total container turn-
over of Romania’s biggest port happens here. According to their own figures last year the company made twelve Million Euros profit.

Five years ago the terminal ran its first shift. When hired people were promised that the work would be done according to European standards and that soon (western-)European wages will be paid. To this day the latter had not happened. The port workers earn an equivalent to about 400 Euros per month. There was an increase: an increase in work pressure, in numbers of containers, which had to be shipped or unloaded per shift and an increase in overtime, which is still paid without any bonus payments.

The demand of 700 Ron is not that high if you take the current inflation in Romania into account. The price for (cooking and heating) gas has hiked by 20 percent since the beginning of June 2008. The food prices are comparable to those discounter supermarket like Aldi and Lidl in Western Europe. Many dockers had to take out loans in order to buy a car or a flat. The inflation means it becomes increasingly difficult to pay the installments demanded.

It is not only the wage issue which triggers the dock workers’ anger. One of their most important demands is the adherence to the standard working-time. The terminal runs on a 12/24-hours shift-scheme, which means that a single shift is twelve hours long, after that the worker has got a 24-hours break. After each fourth shift there is a break of 48 hours. The workers have to switch constantly between day- and night-shift. The management does not stick to this scheme, workers are often called to work on their day off; they are supposed to start work within an hour. They have to be available on their mobile phones at all times. If they do not answer the phone the management puts it as ‘unmotivated attitude’, meaning that in the ‘cartea de munca’, the employee’s record book, the remark ‘absent without valid excuse’ will be entered. After three of these ‘unauthorized absences’ you get the sack. The striking workers tell that due to being permanently ‘on call’ they are not able to make plans for their free time with their families. Or as a docker puts it straight: "The work fucks you up and you are not even paid properly for it".

There is a cheerful and lively atmosphere at the picket-line. The sun blasts down, there is no shade in front of the head office. In an hourly routine the strikers gather in order to shout their slogans and make some noise with horns and whistles. "The strike won’t go on for too long, they have to fulfill our demands. We blockade the freight traffic of the whole country, even of some of the neighboring countries. The big industrial areas depend on us!", states an older dock worker.

Suddenly an enormous chorus of car horns can be heard. On the other side of the terminal hundreds of lorries have queued up, waiting for their load. The strike has a heavy impact on the truck drivers, they are paid by kilometers, not by the hour. But most of them see the strike as a justifiable act, even though they have to return empty for today.

The strike is union lead. In the terminal two small unions are registered; both are affiliated to the FNSP - the National Trade Union Congress for Dock Workers. During conversations with the dockers it becomes clear that it was not the unions who had called for a strike, but that the workers had put pressure on them. "Last year they negotiated and signed a contract without asking us, and the contract was shit. They are in process of negotiating for five months now, but this time we are watching them closely!" - "To walk out is the only way to enforce our demands."

For the following day at 3 p.m. the management of WP World has staged a new round of negotiations. There are lively debates amongst the workers, because the negotiations are supposed to take place in Hotel Ibis, which is in twelve kilometer distance from the picket-line. One of the strikers thinks that it was wrong to have given in to the managements’ proposal for the venue. "We are hundreds of strikers here, they should come here and negotiate with us. They have the space here to do that. Not behind our backs at some far away location".

At 7 p.m. the night-shift takes over the picket-line. According to the workers the company

1 In Romania only few flats are rented out. The rents are very high. People who have been lucky own their home, house prices were low before 1989.

2 A kind of income tax form containing remarks about the employee’s performance.
wouldn’t find any scabs anyway, because the qualified workers have all gone abroad.

**The second day of strike**

Five big container ships lie off the terminal, waiting for the dispute to be solved. DP World tries to send some of the cargo work to be done by the ports in Odessa, Ukraine.

In the national television news there is hardly any information about the strike. Only a local channel broadcast some news. But one of the dockers said convincingly: “It doesn’t really bother us, if they do not report about us anyway. What is important is that here everything keeps being at stand-still. In the end the country will take notice of the blockade.”

It’s late afternoon. On the square in front of the main office 150 strikers have gathered again. Their faces display tense emotions.

The talks have failed. The management pretended to be unmoved and did not change their initial offer even one tiny bit. They even threatened to withdraw their current offer of about 100 Euros wage increase. A union leader and member of the negotiation table - he himself a dock worker in the port - reports in details to his fellow workers: "At some point the management all left the table saying 'Right, we will meet again in front of the court. We will check whether the strike is legal at all. That's it for us now, we do not want to waste our time.' They said that they have made plans for the weekend, that they will take a trip to the delta of river Danube, go fishing." Many questions come up and long discussions start amongst the striking workers: what would be the result of a legal suspension of the strike, would the union pay strike money if the struggle carries on for a longer period of time? There isn’t much hesitation about the main question: The strike will be continued. We do not give in! "Do you know what, guys, on Monday we will turn up and change our demands. We will keep up the demand of a 700 hike, but not 700 Ron, we talk about 700 Euros!"

While hundred thousands of holiday-makers lay around choc-a-bloc sunbathing on the beach of the Black Sea, only few kilometers away the strikers prepare for a longer struggle. The union head-organization FNSP has announced a solidarity strike in the entire port of Constanta for Monday.³

The cranes are still silent. The lorries have returned. The ships are waiting.

**DP World Constanta South Container Terminal: The strike has ended**

[02. August 2008] After thirteen days of the strike at the DP WORLD Container-Terminal in the port of Constanta, the union and management reached an agreement on July 29th. The workers at the port have been able to wrench some concessions from management: a wage rise amounting to 650 Ron (180 Euros) overall, to be awarded in two stages (see box), one more day of holiday, a 30 percent increase in Easter and Christmas bonuses and the promise to respect statutory work and rest periods. But management is not willing to grant the seniority bonus which is a mandatory part of the labor law. This issue is due to be inspected by the regulatory agency for labor issues (inspectia muncii).

Although not all the strikers’ demands were met, the majority decided to accept the offer and end the strike. Yet some workers are unhappy.

"If we had continued the strike for one or two more days they would have faltered and eventually given in to all our demands. But what can you do, there were only about fifty of us willing to continue. The others got scared or maybe did not believe any more that we could win", said one of the strikers, a truck driver, after the decision to take up work again. He is pissed off: "We could have got more. But in the last few days we were lacking cohesion. Too many were satisfied with the result."

Last Saturday there was another 7-hour round of negotiations. Management adjusted its offer three times. The bargaining committee (mostly workers from the terminal) and the strikers who had come along refused three times. The port workers initially agreed to a wage rise in two stages (the first from July 1st 2008, the second from January 1st

³ According to the Federatia Nationale a Sindicatelor Portuale (FNSP) the port of Constanta employs about 9,000 workers. In total thirty unions are affiliated to the FNSP, representing 6,000 members.
2009, shortly after which a new round of negotiations would start). But many thought this was a trick by management, intended to delay long-term wage rises. There were heated discussions amongst the strikers and disappointment at the fact that several of their fellow workers did not show up even though they had all been informed of the ongoing negotiations. No agreement was reached on that Saturday. In its last offer that day, management reduced the previously proposed wage rise by 50 Ron, offering monthly gift vouchers over a value of 100 Ron instead. These do not have the same status as a wage rise, and this strategic move newly angered the strikers. They decided to continue striking.

**A strike against the transition to flexible working hours**

Despite the concessions, one important point remains open: work stress and the availability of port workers at all times. The strikers had repeatedly told us that they receive calls on their mobile phones in their free time telling them to get to work within the hour. Conversely, if there is not enough work their shifts are canceled on short notice and they do not get paid for the lost shift. Accordingly, they had demanded adherence to the statutory rest periods of 24 and/or 48 hours, as well as 100 percent extra pay on short-notice shifts – which the workers would be free to take or leave. Additionally, the company would have to pay 75 percent of the full pay in case of a lost shift.

With this demand the strikers were ultimately not able to prevail. It was only noted down that the shift system of 12/24 and 12/48 (i.e. twelve hours work, 24 hours break, 12 hours work, 48 hours break) must be adhered to. Also, a list is currently being compiled of all the workers generally willing to work overtime, thus making themselves available to the company at all times. Refusing overtime will apparently not be penalized. Extra pay for overtime was not arranged. And shift cancellations during low periods will still not be paid.

**Gruelling day-to-day life on strike**

Management’s strategy of (officially) ignoring the strike and thereby bullying the strikers was partly successful. The workers’ insecurity increased with every day of the strike. They did not know whether they would achieve anything by stopping work. And the media was hardly reporting the strike. The strikers felt isolated. Day-to-day life on strike consisted mainly of a grueling wait. Some bloggers attacked the strikers on the web because of their comparatively high wages. Numerous truck drivers who work for shippers across the country lost almost two weeks’ pay because of the strike, as the goods they were supposed to drive had been blocked at the port for so long. There were fights in the strikers’ families because of the pay lost through the strike.

But the strikers were aware that they were working in a modern and highly productive part of the port which they keep running day and night, 365 days a year. Container transport at the port of Constanta is booming. The volume of container traffic has increased more than tenfold between 2001 and 2007, which is mostly due to the completed DP World terminal, where 85 percent of all the containers are handled or unloaded. The goods blocked there through strike action remained blocked. It was impossible to use scabs, because there are not enough qualified workers in the region.

"We could have got more"

The strikers showed their teeth and were able to win some of their demands. But the concessions they won mainly relate to wage rises. They only got a vague assurance regarding availability around the clock and adherence to the statutory work times. They have not been able to change anything about the stress at work, the pressure which they are subject to because of the intensity of the work, the few breaks (only 30 minutes break in a 12 hour shift), and the increased risk of accident because of exhaustion.

Or, as a port worker pointedly put it during the strike: "What use is a higher wage if I do the work of two men and then die in an accident?"

---

**Wage development**

The new labor contract provides for a wage rise in two stages: an increase of 475 Ron (132 Euros) from the July 1st and another of 175 Ron (48 Euros)
ros) from January 1st. Altogether 650 Ron (180 Euros). The workers had demanded a 700 Ron wage rise with immediate effect. Compared to the wages before the strike the increase amounts to 30-45 percent, depending on the workers’ qualifications and the relevant pay-scales. Up till now the wages at the DP World Container-Terminal were 350 Euros for skilled workers such as metal-workers, turners and electricians, 400-500 Euros for truck drivers and 600-650 Euros for crane operators. With the first wage rise from July 2008 those on the lowest pay scale will now get 500 Euros, those on the highest scale 800 Euros.

The workers at the Dacia-Renault car factory were able to push through a wage rise of 30-50 percent with their strike this spring. Since then they have been earning 300-400 Euros per month. Textile workers and shop assistants earn a monthly wage of about 150-200 Euros, depending on the region.

Romania’s legally determined minimum wage was raised from 139 to 150 Euros last week. (All wage details refer to gross pay).

filipina in romania

The following two reports appeared in German and English on www.labournet.de (27. August 2008)

"We have to work like horses!"
Filipina Textile Workers in Sibiu, Romania

Like many other companies in the Romanian textile and construction sectors, textiles firm Mondostar has had to struggle with a persistent labor shortage for several years. Amongst the local workers hardly anyone is willing to work for the low wages paid in the textile industries. Since three months ago Mondostar has employed 95 women from the Philippines in order to counteract the shrinking supply of labor. Hoping for a good job in Europe, the workers from the Philippines borrowed money while still in their home country. They needed the money in order to be able to pay the high fees of the recruitment agency in Manila. The agency recruited them for Mondostar, signing a contract which entitled the workers to a basic wage of 400 US-Dollars and 100 percent extra for overtime. In fact the women were never paid this wage. The following report is based on conversations with some of the Filipina workers.

The labor shortage worsens

Only three years ago the Romanian company still employed about 1,500 local workers – male and female – manufacturing suits for export to Germany and Switzerland. Now there are only 400 local workers left. Most of these are older women whose wage is a contribution to the family income. Apart from them hardly anyone is willing to do factory work for a monthly wage of 250 US-Dollars.1 Young people move abroad or look for jobs in different sectors. Many former Mondostar employees have shifted to the automobile parts manufacturer Takata, producing air-bags. The newly opened green-field plant in the west of town offers higher wages and better working conditions.2 According to a union representative at Mondostar, the textiles company recently tried to hire more people from the countryside, but failed. People from the countryside engaged in subsistence farming are less dependent on a factory job. The company would have difficulties with their unmotivated attitude to work, a high rate of people on sick-leave, absenteeism and an ongoing high rate of staff turnover.

Mondostar still has many open orders, the machinery is ready for use, but the people are missing. On their search for productive workers and a way out of crisis the company finally signed a contract with the Eastwind International Agency in Manila, which recruited qualified women textile workers for them.

Namibia, Taiwan, Brunei ... Romania

At the end of May 2008 the Filipinas came to Sibiu. A precondition for their employment was work experience as seamstress. Each of them had to pay 120,000 Philippine Pesos (about 2,500 US-

---

1 Currently the legal minimum wage in Romania is 150 Euros or 220 US-Dollars. In the textile industries the wages are only just above the minimum wage (220 to 280 US-Dollars).
2 The car industry suppliers usually pay slightly higher wages in order to attract qualified workers in times of lack of work-force.
Dollars) to the agency, for recruitment and the flight to eastern Europe. In order to be able to pay the money the women had to take out a bank loan or a mortgage secured on the property of relatives. The work contract signed in the Philippines entitled them to a basic wage of 400 US-Dollars and 100 percent extra for overtime. Many of the women, aged 26 to 52, had already worked overseas as seamstresses in textile factories, e.g. in Namibia, Taiwan and Brunei. The women say it is common in the industry to work overtime and to be paid extra accordingly. According to their own calculation Mondostar would have to pay them 600 to 700 US-Dollars including overtime, after reductions for food and accommodation.

However after a short time the Filipina workers realized that the Romanian company would not stick to the contract. Quite the contrary, the company would try to extract the maximum work at lowest cost.

After arriving in Sibiu the women had to sign a second contract, which was written in Romanian and which apparently codified wage deductions and other details. During the first two months the women worked daily from 6:30 a.m. till 6:00 p.m., including Saturdays. At the end of the month the pay slip showed 570 Ron (about 235 US-Dollars). For the second month they were only paid the same amount. Each month 165 US-Dollars for food and accommodation was cut from the basic wage. Given a weekly working time of 60 hours, the pay for the overtime alone would have amounted to additional 400 US-Dollars – actually the overtime was not paid at all.

In the dormitory, which is situated right on the factory premises, eight women have to share a room. Breakfast and lunch are provided, but the women have to sort out dinner themselves. The canteen food is miserable. "Sometimes it's so bad that we'd rather not eat lunch at all". Inside the factory the women from the Philippines are seated separately from the local workers. Their forewomen are Romanian. "They are always on our backs and force us to work harder. We have to work like horses!"

Overtime boycott

The women are disappointed by the management’s behavior and angry about earning so little. They are not even able to pay back the loans at home let alone to support their families. They decided to fight back and in the third month they refused to do overtime. They announced an ultimatum to the management: by mid-August the full wages and 100 percent bonus should be paid. At the beginning of August they filed an official complaint at the Philippines Embassy in Bucharest. Consequently the embassy stopped any further recruitment of seamstresses for Mondostar. A setback for the company given that they wanted to hire 180 more workers. The Inspectorat Teritorial de Munca (ITM) was informed, as well. The ITM is a Romanian state institution which monitors compliance with legal labor standards. The results of the inspection and further measures are not known yet.

The Filipina workers find themselves stuck between a rock and a hard place. Their permission to stay in Romania is bound to the one-year work contract with Mondostar. If they leave the contract early they would lack the money for the flight back home and in Manila they would face huge debts. It would take a long time to claim the money by suing the agency for false pretenses. If they continue to work in Sibiu under the given conditions they will not be able to save money. After all they would earn less than back home in Manila.

Meanwhile the management demonstrates how they plan to treat rebellious workers. In response to the protest of the Filipina workers, their four spokeswomen, whom the women had chosen amongst themselves, were sacked along with two others. Consequently they lost their legal permission to stay in Romania and had to fly back to Manila. The Philippines embassy in Bucharest organized this 'deportation'. In the factory the remaining workers have already elected four new spokeswomen.

The management now wants to pay according to performance, but the targets are absurdly high. About 50 workers are supposed to tailor 500 pairs of trousers in an eight-hour shift. They just about manage to tailor 280 to 300, even after seven Romanian workers have been allocated to work with them. In other factories where the women had worked before the corresponding target was about 250.
The women like to be in Sibiu and they would like to stay. People are friendly towards them. "It’s only the situation at Mondostar which is unbearable for us." They have often seen local people wrinkle their nose when they hear that the women work at Mondostar. In the region the company is unpopular and well known for bad wages.

**Experimental phase**

So far there are not many companies in Romania employing a foreign workforce. The few existing attempts at exploiting foreign workers are often accompanied by conflicts and actions of resistance by the migrant workers (see contribution below: "Open letter - Indian Workers in Marsa/Sibiu").

For companies in Romania employing foreign workers means an additional bureaucratic effort and higher costs. In return they hope for a motivated work-force which is always available and more easily controlled than others would be. The fact that legal permission to stay is tied to the work contract provides the employer with a significant tool to put pressure on the workers. Employers increase the workload and try to extort overtime without paying for it. Moreover, actual expenditure for food and accommodation is reduced to lowest level, while a considerable part of the wages is deducted.

But it’s not possible to make the ‘industrious and docile’ Asian workers drudge like horses just like that, to give them numbers and keep them under control. They won’t put up with everything. The intimidation by employers has only a limited impact on them. Many of the Filipina workers have years of experience of working overseas, they are able to compare conditions, they know how to organize themselves and try to enforce their own interests.

---

**Indian Workers in Marsa (Sibiu)**

**Open letter**

Half a year ago in a metal factory in Marsa, a town neighboring Sibiu, there was a conflict similar to the current one at Mondostar. Since May 2007 the factory had employed 43 workers from India, paying them 568 US-Dollars before tax. The boss of Grande Mecanica Marsa allocated numbers to the Indian workers, because he wasn’t able or willing to pronounce their names. He just called the men Sorin 1, Sorin 2, ... Sorin 24.

At the beginning of January 2008 the contracts of 30 Indian workers were terminated. According to newspaper articles the men were dismissed because they had not turned up for work since December 20 2007. The same sources state that during that time the company was shut down for a company holiday. The workers had complained that they were forced to work overtime, which they did not get paid for. "According to our contract our working times are ten hours per day, six days per week. The company did not adhere to the contract and made us work 115 to 130 hours per week." As early as October 2007 the Indian workers had addressed the media through an open letter, declaring that the management treats them like slaves: "Day in day out we are tortured psychologically. It seems like the management wants to get back at us for complaining at the Indian embassy. For example before shift starts, when we want to put on our protective clothing, the supervisor eggs us on saying there is no time for putting on the clothing. All the time the management turns up at our work stations telling us: ‘faster, faster! And bear in mind that you are constantly filmed by the surveillance cameras.”

**Sources:**

3 Sources: [Realitatea.net](http://www.realitatea.net) (January 23 2008), Sibiu Standard (January 15 2008), Ziarul de Sibiu (October 8 2007) and Ziarul de Sibiu (May 25 2007)

4 Quoted from the Indian workers’ open letter published in a newspaper article of October 8 2007 at [www.ziaruldesibiu.ro](http://www.ziaruldesibiu.ro)
The following two reports appeared in German and English on www.labournet.de (10. September 2008)

Factory or Prison

Textile workers from Bangladesh are kept behind locked gates and exploited in Bacau in Romania

In January 2007 the BBC reported on a strike involving 400 Chinese female textile workers of the Wear Company in Bacau in Eastern Romania. During the strike, Sorin Nicolescu, director of the firm, was physically attacked by about 100 angry women. "Instead of working, they threw themselves at me with forks and spoons. I called the police and security. It's just not acceptable to be attacked in my own country, in my factory, by female workers, to whom I have made every concession!" said Nicolescu in a statement to the press at the time.

After the strike, through which the workers aimed to impose higher wages and better working conditions, significant numbers of women handed in their notice and returned to China.¹

Beset by the shortage of labor-power in Romania, Wear Company has again hired labor-power from Asia, this time 500 contract-workers from Bangladesh.

The following report is based on personal conversations with some workers.

Locked in for two months

The first workers from Bangladesh that we meet in the town-center of Bacau belong to the 74 construction-workers who have been employed for three months by the firm Rombet S.A. They are working with local construction-workers on the large construction-site for a new shopping mall. They cannot complain about the food and accommodation. "But the wages are much too low! We have a contract for 500 US-Dollars on 8 hours a day. But we work 10 hours each day, including Saturday, and we only get 375 US-Dollars!"

They know some of their compatriots at Wear Company. In Dhaka, Bangladesh, they were all signed up to the Al Abas International agency which arranged their employment in Romania. The fees that the agency charges, which the workers must raise themselves, are enormous: about 3,500 US-Dollars per person. In order to raise this large sum, many have taken out a bank-loan or a mortgage on the family-house. The installments plus the interest have to be paid off out of their wages.

It is Sunday, the only free day in the week, on which the textile-workers from Bangladesh usually take the bus into the town-center and go for walks in groups in the park. In the last weeks none of them was allowed to leave the factory-premises. The gate was locked and security did not allow anyone out. "The workers of Wear Company have been locked in for two months. They cannot leave the factory. That's like prison!" one of the construction-workers from Rombet tells us. But we are lucky: on this Sunday the textile-workers are allowed out again and we are able to talk with them about their situation.

They say that the company-management had told them that there were problems with Immigration Police, and for that reason they could not leave the factory. The workers suspect that the company took these measures because 20 of their colleagues had disappeared. These had possibly crossed the border into other European countries in order to find better work there.

The overtime trick

The workers from Bangladesh² are seamsters and have a contract for 8-hour days, 40-hour weeks, for which they are supposed to receive 400 US-Dollars. In fact they regularly work 60-hour weeks and are paid 640 Ron (253 US-Dollars). "That is much too little! Our families rely on our money. On top of that come the installments and the interest on the loans that we have taken out." In addition a part of the money that they transfer to Bangladesh is retained as processing fees by the money-transfer companies such as Western Union;

¹ BBC report on the strike: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/6286617.stm

² Unlike the Philippines, which "exports" female labor-power, in Bangladesh it is primarily men who go abroad to work.
on small sums these amount to approximately 10 percent of the total sum!

The employer deducts 147 US-Dollars each month from the contractually agreed 400 US-Dollars. This is for accommodation in a dormitory on the factory premises, where at any one time 9 men have to sleep in three-story bunk-beds. On top of that comes the food which the company provides, but which isn’t enough. The workers are often still hungry after meals.

According to Romanian employment legislation workers can rack up 38 hours of overtime, which must be balanced out in the time-sheets of the following months. Each additional hour of overtime has to be paid at double the rate. To complete the sums: on 20 hours overtime a week, Wear Company steals from each single worker 400 US-Dollars a month that he should be entitled to.

This trick with the overtime is well-known. In Sibiu, a couple of hundred kilometers to the West of Bacau in Romania, female textile workers from the Philippines started a overtime-boycott against the Mondostar company at the beginning of August, after they received no wages at all for overtime.³


It has to be worth it for the Asian workers to take on the high agency fees. They see the contractually determined basic wage and count on the corresponding increased rates for overtime. When the workers are then in Romania the companies attempt to undercut the contract by paying lower wages and squeezing more work out of them.

"If it doesn't suit you, go back to Bangladesh"

The residence permit for workers from Bangladesh is tied to their year-long work contract. Their passports and all their important documents are retained by the company, which only hands out copies of these. The company-management can easily fire undesirable workers and then get them deported. 30 workers just got fired. "As soon as we complain, they say: ‘If it doesn’t suit you, then we’ll send you back to Bangladesh.’" In view of the large debts that await in Bangladesh, this is a threatening proposition.

Unlike the Filipina women at Mondostar, only a few of the workers from Bangladesh already have been able to acquire experience abroad. Many have left their country for the first time. For the workers of Wear Company the step from Bangladesh to Europe is bound up with the hope for better living conditions.⁴

Relying on the workers

The Wear Company in Bacau relies on foreign labor-power. According to a study by the temporary work agency Manpower, Romania is currently the country with the biggest shortage in labor-power in the world. 73 percent of companies questioned indicated that they could not find enough labor-power.⁵ The textile and construction industries and the service sector are particularly heavily affected.

According to estimates 10 percent of the Romanian population are working permanently or temporarily abroad, mainly in Spain and Italy, where they receive five to seven times the wages that they would get in Romania. The daily propaganda in the Romanian media about the worsening working conditions for Romanians abroad, the catastrophic social effects of ongoing emigration for family-members left behind – children who grow up without care, old people that no-one takes care of – and the threatened "flooding" of the national labor-market by Asian workers does not alter the situation in the slightest.

Bacau is in the Romanian province of Moldova, a region in which the rate of emigration of the local workforce is well above the average. The city of 185,000 inhabitants offers six direct flights each week and ten bus departures each day to Italy.

⁴Repeated strikes and violent protests are occurring in the new centers of production of the textile industry in Bangladesh against low wages and the constant price-rises for foodstuffs. The basic wage of a textile worker in Bangladesh – the large majority of the 2 million workers employed in the clothing industry are women – is around 45 US-Dollars a month. The state is trying to repress these protests violently; police and paramilitaries are playing a decisive role in this.

Publicize the case

In our conversations with the workers from Bangladesh a pressing concern is soon expressed: "We want our situation here to be reported on. Something has to change."

In early September a worker tells us by telephone that they are being locked in again. "Last Sunday 16 of our colleagues did not come back. Now the company is forbidding us to leave the factory premises. We do not know yet if we will be let out next Sunday.

Sonoma and Wear Company

Wear Company and Sonoma – two large textile factories in Bacau which produce sports clothing for export – are both owned by the Italian Antonello Gamba. Gamba was the first entrepreneur in Romania who applied for a license for the employment of over 1,000 foreign workers from China.

Since the strike at Wear Company in January 2007 the remaining Chinese workers from the Wear factory in the Southern industrial zone of Bacau were “transferred” to the Sonoma factory on the North-Western edge of town. They work in the Sonoma factory together with some hundred local workers. Since this year 500 workers exclusively from Bangladesh are employed in the Wear factory; even their foremen are Bangladeshi.

Less is known on the current situation of the total of 250 Chinese workers at Sonoma. A month ago a case was covered in the local press: a Chinese worker from Sonoma had gone into the center of Bacau on the 5th August and drawn attention to his situation with a placard. His contract was about to run out, he would have to go back to China, but the company refused to pay him the wages he was due. He said repeatedly: "No money, no China, no tomorrow.”

You can reach the author of the articles on the situation in Romania at: ana.cosel [at] web.de

workplace report


Bad vibrations at China’s extended workbench

Report from Brandenburg, Germany

“Of course, I am able to order three pints in Chinese! The only problem was when there were four of us. Well, we first went up north, the factories are really run-down there. Then we went to the special export zones in the south, to the Mazda plant. They have rather splendid avenues and palm-trees in front of the factories”.

Winter 2008. Lunch break at MOB, a special machine manufacturing company in Luckenwalde, 60 kilometers south of Berlin, an industrial dormitory town, high unemployment, and the home town of Rudi Dutschke, the 1968 SDS student leader. China and the international supply chains reverberate in this German small town proletarian daily life. The 80 workmates are from the hinterland of Brandenburg and Saxony, mostly village types, but they have assembled giant engine washing-machines in car factories around the globe: for VW in Poznan, Poland, Chery in China, Daimler in Western Germany, Volvo in Sweden, BMW in the USA, Conti in Japan or for wheel rim manufacturing plants in Tijuana, Mexico.

The washing-machines are the size of a bedsit flat. They remove burs from engine blocs and clean them. It takes about six weeks to assemble such a machine. You have to weld the huge frame, assemble the conveyor system and the actual washing drums, you have to wire the whole thing up and program the control system. Currently people work on six of these machines, half of them will be de-assembled again and shipped to China. Some of the workers will be sent with them for re-assembling.

MOB used to belong to an Eastern German state-owned industrial complex. It was taken over by
the Western German engineering company MTM GmbH in 1991. Officially MOB is in the debt, which means that the company can cash in subsidies from the state. The machines are sold by MTM, a booming company.

MOB is one of the many backbones of the German "export world-champion", a German role-model: a special machine manufacturer for the world market, a small-scale company, with a Chinese interpreter amongst the permanent staff. The order books are full, the skilled mechanics and electricians have been working for the company for years, they are hardly replaceable: despite all this their working-conditions and wages are shockingly bad. They work loads of over-time and weekend-shifts, often 55 to 60 hours per week. Many of them have to commute 60 or more kilometers to work, which then adds up to a 12 to 13 hours working-day. MOB does not belong to any union collective contract, the permanent electricians and mechanics – family fathers in their mid-40s – get 8,50 to 9,50 Euros before tax. The temp workers – many of them work with MOB for over a year – get 7 Euros before tax. The turnover of temp workers at MOB is high, which is also due to the patriarchal attitude of some of the foremen. If you earn less than 8 Euros and work more than ten hours a day, you shouldn’t have to put up with remarks like: "Oy, you got nothing to do right now?! Why don’t you wash my car?!" The permanent workers are fed up with having to deal with new faces every week, with having to explain where certain tools are stashed and where the coffee-machine is situated. The work is demanding, you have to improvise a lot, it takes time for newcomers to get to grips with it.

MOB wants to extend production to a two-shift system and therefore the company wants to hire more people. The management approaches a temp worker who has worked for MOB for over a year, they offer him a permanent employment. The workmate gets out his calculator: the temp agency pays travel money, the company would not. Including this travel money he earns more than the permanents. If the company won’t pay travel money, he would have to earn 14,50 Euros before tax in order to improve his current wage. The company offers 8 Euros, he refuses. Thanks, but no thanks. Finally a foreman turns up and asks him to hand in his application anyway.

For most of the other temps the situation is similar: "I first worked at MOB hired through a different temp agency, but they did not pay for the travel expenses. At the end of the month I was left with 800 Euros, which is 200 Euros less than my former dole money. So I went to a different temp agency and told them: 'Look, I am already working with this company MOB, I offer you the connection with this company and my own workforce, you just have to hire me and pay me more than the current temp agency'. They then phoned up MOB and the deal was done. I changed agencies. My next problem was to fill up my work-time account with the new agency: with this agency, you have to gather 150 hours of overtime before they pay them out in cash. At MOB I have no problems to get these hours together". This workmate is very fond of the ongoing train-drivers' strike: "They just have to be aware, they cannot go on strike for too long, otherwise they will be replaced by other drivers". This fear of "being replaced" is deeply ingrained, even when talking about a quite "irreplaceable" workforce like train drivers.

Workers’ discontent simmers on a low flame at MOB. The management takes any order, they continuously shrink the time-frame for production and delivery, they have to increase the pressure on the workers. Previously the different professions worked one after the other: first the welders, then the mechanics, then guys for the pneumatics, then the electricians etc.. Now people step on each others toes, they are under time pressure, often there is a lack of certain spare parts, so people have to work on three different machines at the same time. Confusion. Workmates see it rather as 'mismanagement' than a logical consequence of global competition. The management announced the two-shift system and the cut of the Saturday bonus-payment at the same time. Some workers individually enforce that they do not have to work every Saturday. They threaten the company that they will leave the job. Instead of paying the common Christmas bonus this year the company paid out 80 hours of overtime, without bonus. Many colleagues have accumulated 300 and more hours on their work-time accounts. People are fed up...
with being send abroad or on site assembly from one day to the next, sometimes over the weekend. For the time on site assembly – usually in Western Germany - they get 24 Euros per day for accommodation. You can hardly pay the food with that money. You are only able to make more money by going on site assembly, because you will work even longer hours.

Why do the workmates accept these conditions? The answer to this question seems to be given when a worker tells that some of the machine parts have been assembled in the MOB plant in Poland. Things seem to be clear: yet another example of threatening re-location of production to low wage regions further east. But the colleague demystifies the common assumption by saying: "They shut down the plant for the time being, because the guys there left the plant in droves. Most of the Polish welders went to Sweden, they now earn more than we do. MOB then found a workshop in Magdeburg (a nearby Eastern German town) which does the welding work even cheaper the Polish plant used to do. This is how things are these days."

People talk quite openly about the "strikes" at MOB in autumn 2007. In September 2007 the agreement between the works council and management ran out. The management then delayed the new agreement, which was supposed to limit the overtime account to 150 hours. During this time the workers refused to work on Saturdays and the works council organized so-called "information meetings". In Germany the works council – the representation of workers in a single company – is not allowed to call for strikes. The works council has the legal right to call all workers for a certain numbers of "information meetings", a right which is often used as a way of putting pressure on the management. A new agreement was forged, but the overtime craze continues, with the future two-shift scheme things will get even worse. Workers accuse their reps of being company friendly. If you ask them why they take all the shit despite the company running on full steam and despite their status as senior skilled workers they say: "Because 9 Euros before tax is quite good money in ghost-town Luckenwalde".

---

**critique on organizing**

_In the last newsletter we documented a first critique on organizing (The unions on new grounds: When the work-mate becomes a client, wildcat #78, Winter 2006/07: [http://www.prol-position.net/nl/2007/09/organizing](http://www.prol-position.net/nl/2007/09/organizing) This is the second part of the critique from wildcat #80, Winter 2007/08_

"New Labor - New Unions”¹

**Critique on Organizing, Part Two**

(Former) left radicals and unions work together – not only in political alliances, e.g. when organizing certain campaigns (clean clothes, campaigns for global social rights etc.). In wildcat #78 we explained and criticized the "organizing"-approach which has created illusions concerning a "new type of union". The illusions prevail mainly amongst those lefties who got engaged in the debate about 'precarity' during the last years. If we start from the general critique of unions as organizations of representation of workers then we have to state that 'organizing' is not better than the traditional union work, but rather its continuation. ‘Organizing’ certainly does not stand for a rupture neither with the traditional claim to represent and nor with social partnership.

This kind of critique remains without impact as long as there aren’t any current examples of workers’ autonomy at hand. On this background any initiative ‘within the unions’ seems to be better than nothing. Confronted with the usual superficial criticism of unions – which only questions the bureaucratic, slow-moving and un-spontaneous apparatus – the "organizing” promises free spaces for new forms of actions.

It is surprising that after a very short time a gulf has opened between the way "organizing” is presented in the public and how the organizers perceive their own reality. A high rate of people leaving that job indicates that they notice and feel the contradictions they got into. The reason these contradictions have not yet been articulated, may be the fact that the political engagement with

---

¹ Original title "New Labor" – "New Gewerkschaft".
"work" is a relative novelty for this part of the left. Within the realm of their precarious jobs in the service sector these lefties had very little experience of the mechanisms of representation of the unions. Self-chosen individualized ‘precarity’ does not allow any perspective of collective activities.

How do "organizers" react when confronted with the contradiction that on one hand they do a job, which aims at collective activity, but on the other hand they have to put up with working conditions, which they themselves describe as precarious, and "neoliberal"? At first they react individually: they either quit or make a step up the ladder. The mechanisms of selection work well: most of the people quit – and some of them experience this as a (result of) personal incapability – others become "lead organizers", meaning they become bosses. Parallels to jobs with similar characteristics in other social sectors are obvious (see the article "Working for the Job center?" in Wildcat #79). Meanwhile first steps of a collective recapitulation of the individualized job situation have been made and seeds of self-organization have emerged. A critique of the principle "union" will develop once the (former) organizers take their roles as agents seriously. Let’s see how things continue and how we can support this process. We made the following interview with A., who worked for the ver.di (service sector union) organizing-project in the security sector for a year.

---

**Interview**

**Before you took the job with ver.di, did you deal with the question of your “material reproduction” politically?**

For me politics in general took part outside of wage labor. That might be due to the kind of jobs I used to do, most of them in the social sector, always on time-limited contracts. Because if I know that I will leave the job within the next half a year, why should I get engaged in a committed way? But the whole topic was never completely alien to me. Unlike most of the radical lefties I come from a rather "workers’ background" family-wise. Most of the radical left don’t know much about it, e.g. they don’t know what it means to study and to have to sustain yourself financially at the same time.

Did the offer of the union come at a time when the question of wage labor was on your political agenda? Or was it more that they made an interesting offer and you needed a job anyway?

Both. Our group Hamburg Umsonst (Hamburg For Free) and other groups organized the Hamburg Euromayday. The issue of "precarious work" was in the center of this action. In the course of this process we debated the historical experiences of militant inquiry and organizing. In this regard I thought it was interesting to be active in a sector where precarious workers are employed under bad conditions and where only minor forms of organizing exist. I took the job as a chance to experiment and see what the union offers in these sectors. And I actually needed a new job at the time, which came in handy.

**What was your work contract like?**

Ver.di has not hired people directly for a while now. We did not have a contract with ver.di, but a "contract for work and services" with the ver.di subsidiary "ver.di-innotec". I heard that the works council of the ver.di employees was against this set-up, because it attacks the working-conditions of the union employees. But what could we have done about it? At first the project was scheduled for a period of six months – this was the duration of the contract. The official work content was rather vaguely defined: "Organizing of security guards in Hamburg". The initial monthly remuneration was fixed at 2,000 Euros. But the team – which had formed before the contracts were officially agreed - did not want to do the work for that money. Finally we agreed on 2,200 Euros – plus six weeks of annual holiday and a standard weekly working time of 40 hours. I think the annual holiday was fixed in the contract while the limitation of the weekly working hours was guaranteed verbally. Particularly the fear of exceeding working-times was a problem for many, although all in all it was clear that it was impossible to define and limit the boundaries of this type of work. The flexibility – meaning having to work at the
How did your working-day look like?

On average we were out with the security guards half of the working time, the other half we were in the ver.di office. We had team assemblies, meetings of activists, appointments with individual workers or qualification courses, e.g. in order to learn about the labor law. We didn’t know much about the legal framework before this.

Please describe a typical working week.

On Monday usually we had a team assembly. We first re-assessed the last week and then planned the coming working week, e.g. prepare a public action. How many people have to come to the action in order to make it a success? Then everyone made themselves an individual plan for the week and talked this through with the team-leader. The team-leader might give some additional tasks in some cases and she noted down each individual plan for herself. The following week she would draw a balance – for the whole team, but also for each one of us individually. This could result in quite a pressure. Sometimes directly, and in some cases loudly by the team-leader, but pressure was also built up amongst ourselves. Even if you do not want it: pressure builds up once you see that others always recruit new people but you don’t! In this case a kind of latent rivalry can develop, which at the end of the day is wanted. In certain ways the internal dynamics of organizing work is like that: the carrot is always put a little too far ahead, so that you cannot reach it. When it comes to the outer dynamics and the political aims of the campaign it works exactly the opposite way: the carrot is hung so low that even the smallest can get it.

Did you have to fear any sanctions in case you did not meet the target?

No, not in that sense. Sometimes a little shouting, but that was it. Well, it could happen that it turned out that you are not really made for certain tasks, then a solution had to be found in “mutual agreement”, something you could do instead.

Did a division of labor exist within the team?

Yes, given that we partly worked separate from each other. Everyone arranged a chart on “their” main contact persons. This chart you partly took over from your predecessor, partly you re-worked it continually yourself. Your weekly plan might consist of the task to get at least 20 of your main contacts to the next action. Or it could mean that people with a 2nd-ranking mobilize fellow workers themselves.

What kind of “ranking” are you talking about?

Every contact is put into a chart and is then evaluated. 1st-rating means that it is a “top leader”, who is highly motivated, can work independently and can agitate people, a kind of alpha-animal. 2nd-ranking are people who you can rely on, but who haven’t got any leading skills. From 3rd-ranking onwards it became increasingly uninteresting for us. 5th-ranking are people who work actively against us, who are on the side of the company. One aim was of course to improve the ranking continuously, to turn a “2nd” into a “1st”. It happened that people slid down the ranking-ladder, then you had to explain to the team, why a “2nd”, who had always been a regular on the meetings, suddenly did not take part anymore.

Did the “top-leaders” demand to become part of the “organizing team”?

No. Only towards the end it became clear that the project was running out and that some kind of “self-sustainable” structures were required. We contacted the top-leaders and gave them a methodical training. We slowly handed the project over to them. But their own attitude was not a demanding one.

What kind of function did the team-leader have?

The team/project leader had the function of an instructor... a teacher. She was supposed to teach us how to “organize” methodically. We were sup-
posed to learn from her how to do things and it was then up to us to do it well or badly, depending on our "personal capabilities".

**Did the project leader give you space to act like you wanted or did she take part in all meetings?**

She was always present. And in the end it was she who made the final decisions. Organizing does not mean autonomy to decide. Each work step we did was discussed in the meeting. And like in most of the working relations: a team is not just a team, but there is a boss and the boss finally decides what to do.

**What was the cooperation with the collective contract commission (Tarifkommission) responsible for the security sector like? Who mediated between your organizing team and the commission?**

We had an "activist meeting" which met once a month. The collective contract commission on the other hand consisted of people who usually form such a body: works council members and professional union reps. Before our project started they had already organized themselves in a "Working Group Security". We tried to shift the balance in favor of the "activist meeting", which would have diminished the influence of the "Working Group", meaning the works council members. To us the "activist meeting" seemed to be the legitimate body of the rank-and-file members, and therefore should decide how to go about the collective contracts. Actually a lot of security guards were unhappy with the work of "their" works council members. This meant that we discussed the position of the collective contract commission during the "activist meetings".

**Apart from the project leader and the collective contract commission, did you have to deal with any other bodies of the union structure?**

No, we were not integrated in the union structure; we were rather "free floating". I had the feeling that we had our team, our two rooms and that we do our thing. But the stuff we were doing was mediated on a different level. We were always a bit detached; we never went to the official union rep meetings. A sort of detached playing field...

**Did this playing field have defined borders?**

Yes, e.g. when the issue of a more confrontational action against single companies came up. In those cases every leaflet had to be given the legal and political blessing from the ver.di head-quarter in Berlin. Then you noticed: "Right, here we actually reached a boundary". At this point they clearly indicated the limits of our activities. But I wouldn't say that it was a clear "rupture" between the officials and us – there was no protest, no "upheaval" from our side. We didn’t discuss collectively about how to deal with this situation. When we talked about the autonomy of the team, then we talked about autonomy within the framework of the organizing-model.

**You interviewed security guards about their problems and needs. Would it have been possible that the outcome – the mentioned problems and needs – could not have been turned into official demands for the next collective bargaining? Meaning: To which extend were the content of the questions and the interview process pre-defined?**

I have to say, apart from the core aim concerning the collective contract the activists had the freedom to say what was important to them and to put it into practice. The issues could be simple daily problems, which might have been the end of the acceptance and continuation of our project by the union. Finally we – the activists – succeeded and managed to gain a few cents wage hike. Some members of the CCC took part in an activist meeting for the first time just as the final contract was about to be signed. They had realized that they had to attend the meeting – and be it only in order to present the outcome of their negotiations in the possibly best way."

---

2 Note on the conflict with the collective contract commission (CCC): "The activists (organizers and active workers) refused a draft for a collective contract, which the CCC initially wanted to accept. Inside the union this caused a lot of turmoil and a debate whether the refusal of the activists should be recognized. A lot of union officials – amongst them our project-leader – were very concerned about the possibility that the employers' association would suspend the negotiations with ver.di and continue the process with the Christian Union instead. This was the presented threat in case of defeat – defeat not only regarding the collective bargaining, but also regarding its possible outcome: the
pletely irrelevant from the union’s point of view. Only because of the fact that someone works somewhere does not mean that they come up with the important demands, important at least from our perspective. Anyhow, the demands are justified, of course. We tried to take up these demands and to make them become an issue in the collective contract negotiations. But honestly, we did not have the clout to enforce them; the relation of power was not in our favor. No doubt, the new collective contract and a wage rise were of central importance – for the union, and for the security guards, as well. Too much work for too little money, that was the main problem mentioned. In addition to that people often complained about repression at the work-place and a generally worker-hostile environment in the security sector. We took this issue up, e.g. during the campaign with security guards employed in commuter trains (S-Bahn).3

Did you see yourself as a kind of “service provider” or did you act as your political self, applying your political views – for example by criticizing the function of security guards?

The activists who were up for talking to us were the kind of people who had a critical opinion regarding their job anyway. Their work is a job to them, which pays the bill and which can be done in different shades of obedience to the official rule. For example we asked people about their opinion and feelings regarding their work, people of whom we knew that they had previously worked as security guards in a detention prison. They were not anti-immigrant, but they did not really reflect their job either, they rather had a neutral attitude of “doing a job”. Occasionally there have been people taking part in the activist meeting who displayed right-wing ideas. We then raised this issue. It wasn’t always a contradiction to have racist ideas and to feel the need for union organizing at the same time.

Did the activists (the organizers and active workers) see the organizing-project as a kind of “democratic promise”, which would give them the right to negotiate (the collective contract) themselves?

Maybe some of them perceived it that way, but most of them saw hardly anything new in the organizing-project. Up to that point a lot of them didn’t have any experience of union work. Others had previously worked in, for example, metal factories where they had dealt with similar union structures. No, I couldn’t say that they saw a kind of right to claim involvement in the decision-making. Most of them came to the meetings to wait and see. It was new to them to sit in a room with 30 people and to discuss in a structured manner together. Often we had to introduce such kinds of ideas, I mean we had to introduce them practically, we had to facilitate the discussion etc.

But what kind of motivation did the workers have to participate in the activist meetings?

They wanted to meet work mates and talk about their job... – and, if necessary, they wanted to find a new job there, e.g. because they had just been kicked out from somewhere else. This actually happened.4 Apart from that they had a fairly good idea of what they wanted or didn’t want, and they were able to articulate that clearly.

What are the positive experiences you draw from your collaboration in the organizing project?

4 On a conflict due to works council election: “In one of the companies, people tried to set up a works council and they all got the sack. We tried to question the dismissals in legal terms and we tried to put pressure on the security company by organizing public actions. These actions also targeted the client companies of the security firm. In this case we succeeded, because the works council of one of the client companies – a big publishing house – had a strong position. Well, we have to add that the security company finally accepted the works council election, but undermined our efforts by setting up their own list of candidates. In the end their ballot list was more successful than the ver.di list. Some dismissals were withdrawn, some people left the company with severance pay.”

3 Conflict in the commuter trains (S-Bahn): “In response to the cut of certain bonuses we did some actions which usually do not belong to the union’s repertoire, e.g. we leafleted inside the commuter trains, something which officially you are not allowed to do and which caused a lot of disgruntlement on the side of the employer towards the union ver.di. After this action we had to get the blessing from the upper hierarchy, be it for an action or leaflet.”
Without a doubt it was an exciting work. I got in touch with these sectors. In my daily life I normally would not get in touch with them. This is very interesting. First of all this is a valuable personal experience. Politically I learned that it is possible to successfully organize people, even in sectors where people are hardly organized, where they work very isolated from each other and where they are “invisible”. On another level my picture of the union has changed. Within the union there are some people who do a mighty job, but they are isolated, as well. But they do exist.

**Why did you quit? What were the negative experiences?**

For a while, before I quit, I had been feeling rather uncomfortable about the organizing concept, e.g. about the very neoliberal character of my working conditions and of the way we worked. Meaning the evaluation and control of targets, the listing of achieved figures etc. A lot of elements you usually find in normal business, e.g. the way that teamwork is structured or how success is controlled. For me and also for others this resulted in a lot of stress. How do I define success? In your normal political work there are hardly any indicators or parameters for "success". We should not forget that we talk about wage work here, so you have to deal with the fact that people are personally held responsible for success or failure and that pressure is built up. After a while, if you do not perform accordingly, you are singled out and sooner or later you get the sack. And your money to make ends meet depends on this job. They do burn people out – after one year of employment I was already the senior. The pressure was passed on down the ladder, the hierarchy existed within our group. Often it was difficult to discuss even within the team, because the project leader was always present – after all she was part of the team. I have a very critical view on that issue: a method is presented as the right one – if anything goes wrong then it must be the failure of performing person. The person has failed to put the method into practice. With some methods you are not able to do the right or wrong thing, the method itself is wrong. This is how I see the organizing approach.

This is a method which I don’t want to see as part of the union.

---

**Additional Notes**

- "In cooperation with the employees of the union SEIU we created the professional position ‘apprentice organizer’, as the initial stage of an official employment category. Only after one year of apprenticeship people can become an organizer and permanent employees of the union. At least half of the hired people did not succeed in finishing the training. Some of them left the union voluntarily, because they could not get used to the working hours and the workload. Others were asked to leave the program, because they could not meet the demands put forward by the new work” – Tom Woodruff in Peter Bremme: Never work alone, Organizing – ein Zukunftsmodell für Gewerkschaften (A future model for the unions). Hamburg, VSA, 2007, S. 101.

- "Our benchmarks: ver.di-innotec creates stable bridges for humane work relations, bridges between: innovation and humanitarianism, technology and human beings, science and practical activities, company and employees’ representation, those who seek and those who give advice, share holders and society. In a work-sphere which is transformed by innovation, technology and new work techniques, ver.di-innotec advocates for security, participation, employment, professional qualification, sustainability, protection of personal rights, increase of individual chances and strengthening of gender democracy."
  [www.verdi-innotec.de](http://www.verdi-innotec.de)