editorial

French Students who fight against the CPE reform of a labour-market to which the kids from the suburbs, who rioted only few months before, had no access anyway;

Clashes between lefty squatters and street kids during an occupation in Cologne, which took place in midst of a public debate which tries to divide the 'good working-people' from the dangerous idle under-classes;

Greek students occupying universities and critising democracy, education and ideology.

Middle class kids in Indian call centres who earn ten times more than the local building worker, but lose their life time and energy working constant night-shifts, selling pre-paid electricity schemes to the poor in the UK...

These stories from the past few months show the various ways sections of the class deal with their realities - from outright confrontation, to antagonism ending in compromise, to accepting what capitalism seems to offer (at least at first glance).

What connects these stories? How can we understand them as fitting into the picture of global capitalism and global class struggle in all its complexities?

Class perspective first of all is the attempt to find and support the open and hidden tendencies, which question the fact that we produce the material conditions for our own exploitation and for the social relations, which imprisons us in our various identities.

Talking about class is not an un-historic call for unity and dignity, but a call to criticise all material divisions, privileges, ideologies, illusions, ethnical hierarchies, which are part of the working class.

The current dynamic of the class relations make fixed categories like 'workers aristocracy', 'precariat' or 'lumpen-proletariat' rather despained pigeonholes, which become obsolete and inaccurate the very minute they are used. In order to avoid these traps we try to make a collective and participating analysis of the various ongoing movements and proletarian situations.

CPE and labour contracts in France

Friends from France wrote a short summary about what the CPE is and how its attempted introduc-
tion differs from previous labour law reforms. It can serve as a background introduction to the following articles about the movement against the CPE which took place in spring 2006.

A lovely spring in France

Comrades from the French group Mouvement Communiste published a detailed and chronological article on the anti-CPE movement. They emphasise that the protagonists of this movements were not the usual suspects but a new generation of high school students.

It is as workers that we are attacked and not as students! and Why pass exams?

We include two leaflets, which were distributed by friends from Mouvement Communiste. The first was distributed during the week beginning 27 March, by some students in Jussieu to the building workers directly employed by this university in Paris. The second one was distributed in a student General Assembly, a little after the end of the movement.

The anti-CPE struggle

We summarise a text by Theorie Communiste which focusses on the internal contradictions and partly symblic democratic character of the movement. It questions the artificial generalisation of the movement by mass demonstrations organised by the official representative bodies which finally weakened the autonomous activities and demands to put the anti-CPE protests in context with the riots of suburban youth. “No comprehension of the anti-CPE movement is possible if one separates this struggle from the November riots. This is precisely where the problem lies. The middle class saw the social elevator being blocked, the ‘excluded’ know that they will never be able to climb in it and had announced in November that their own situation, in all its aspects, had become unbearable and was a target. The widening of the movement could not be the result of an addition of situations, but of their conflictive encounter”.

What remains of the anti CPE movement

A retrospective written by friends of Echanges et Mouvement. The text criticises the movement on a rather general level, e.g. of not being able to go beyond the boundaries of its student character and provides some overview of past student mobilisations in France.

A brief outline of the student movement in Greece

Friends from the group TPTG sent a short introduction on the students movement in Greece in June 2006. “The publication of the planned reform was the sparkle that ignited students mobilisations which started in the end of May and spread quickly all over the country. In the beginning of June, at the culmination of the movement, more than 2/3s of university departments were occupied and continuous mass protests and demos disrupted the city centres of Athens and Thessaloniki. The government was obliged to ‘freeze’ the reform, postponing it, possibly for next autumn”.

Occupation, not democracy!

This leaflet was written by the group Blaumachen from Thessaloniki together with other comrades during the early days of the students movement. “It was distributed during the second week of the occupations and in the 10,000 people demonstration in Thessaloniki. Its content was determined by what we saw then as the major weaknesses of the movement, i.e. the adherence to democratic procedures and generally to a democratist ideology along with the absence of any critique of schoolwork and of the media’s mediating role”.

Introduction to debate on the new ‘under-classes’

An article published in the German magazine wildcat in summer 2006. Having a historical look at labour migration and welfare policies in Germany the article criticises the current attempt of those in power to create the picture of the dangerous under-classes opposed to the good class of working people. “The income disparity in Germany aggravates, the rate of long-term and youth unemployment consolidates, the majority of
workers have to face real income losses, particularly in the low wage sector: the number of working poor increases, people who work but cannot make ends meet... “Of course there are underclasses in Germany”, says the conservative historian Paul Nolte and he refers to people who are “unwilling to work and integrate....” People who eat too much fast-food, they watch telly all day (and the wrong programmes!), make too many children to whom they cannot serve as role-models. These ‘underclasses’ themselves are responsible for their situation, therefore it is wrong for the welfare state to grant them a livelihood. This is the ideological background music for the enforcement of the Hartz IV welfare reform which first of all aims at extending the low wage sector. In order to do that the ‘superfluous’ and ‘delinquent’ parts of the working class are captured as caricatures and put on stage for public bashing. This picture of the ‘underclass’ is an offer to other parts of the working class to draw a clear line between them and those ‘on the bottom’ by showing self-initiative and proper behaviour. In times of social upheavels similar pictures served for the legitimation of ‘security’ measures and repression’.

Cologne: Barmer Block occupied; The feeling of great potentials...

Text published in wildcat in summer 2006 reporting on the internal dynamics of a major housing estate occupation in Cologne in Spring 2006. “For over three months in the Barmer Block housing estate an unusual squatting experiment took place. Unusual not only in its duration and size, but mainly because of its social composition. The space which had been opened by some lefties was taken over by ‘the street’. This created an explosive mixture which not only troubled the city council administration but also created major internal conflicts. Most lefties proved themselves to be unable or unwilling to deal with the contradictions of actual social movements’.

Working life, Interviews and Leaflets in Delhi’s Call Centre Cluster

Longer report written after three months of work as foreign call centre worker in Delhi and collective political intervention in the area. The text looks at the composition of foreign workers in Indian call centres and documents interviews with workers from international companies such as HP or Citibank which relocated call centre work to the industrial outskirts of Delhi. It concludes “Like in Europe or the US the particularly labour force demanding boom time of call centres encourages rather individual solutions for dealing with problems: people change jobs frequently. The difference in India is the relatively high wage level and level of education of call centre workers on one hand and the additional alienation (night-shifts, racism, dead-end for academic career etc) on the other. Another big difference, which might have an impact on future conflicts or struggles is the fact that in India there is a kind of call centre workers’ culture and net which also organises the reproduction, e.g. the living arrangements. Connected with this culture is an erosion of certain gender roles or the hierarchical relation between generations. At least in and around Delhi the call centres are situated in areas of massive new industrialisation, with struggles of first generation factory workers in world market companies, which might influence potential conflicts. Call Centre workers who do not live at home anymore realise that the wages are only relatively high and not as glorious as promised. This material constraint, plus the dim outlook for finding other academic jobs, plus the daily alienation and first signs of the finite of the boom might trigger some outbreaks. Interesting would be if these outbreaks will happen while the struggles in call centres in the western world are still going on..”
CPE overview

CPE and labour contracts in France

This is a short overview of the CPE law, by Ni Patrie, Ni Frontier, serving as an introduction to the following articles focussing on the struggles that this law ignited.

1) What is this new law about youth employment called and what it is about.

The Contrat Première Embauche is a new contract voted in by the Parliament. It enables bosses to hire people under 26 for 2 years and during this period they can fire them without giving them any reason. In other terms it’s a first breach against the Labour Code. In France there are many kinds of contracts but the model, the norm, the ideal contract is called a CDI (Contrat à durée indéterminée, Undetermined length contract). During the last 30 years, the number of people enjoying a CDI has progressively diminished. In fact the people between 30 and 50 are the ones who ‘benefit’ from these contracts. Under 30, they have all sorts of temporary contracts justified by the difficulties of their ‘insertion in the labour market’. After 50 (years old) the mass of those who have temporary contracts are those who have been collectively sacked from companies which are bankrupt, externalize their production, merge and downsize their staff, etc.

To be accurate, you can find on the same work place:

• CDI
• CDI de chantier (ie your contract is linked to a project which can last from 6 months up to 3 or 5 years; when it’s over the boss can fire you or transform the CDI de chantier in a normal CDI)
• CDD contrat à durée déterminée (ie your contract has a fixed duration from 3 months to one or two years which can be renewed no more than twice)
• Interim (ie you’re hired by a temp agency to work in another place)
• stagiaire (ie you are not paid or low paid for a 3 or 6 months period (mainly for students finishing their university course)
• Alternance (ie you go on studying part time and work the other time; mainly spread among technical studies from Baccalauréat professionnel (exam at the end of a professional secondary school) to BTS (two-year diploma of the University Institutes of Technology), better paid and aside benefits)
• Subsidised contracts (ie low paid but State funds a part of the wage)
• Free lance (mainly in “intellectual work” but also has high qualified worker on construction site)

As Mouvement Communiste wrote in a leaflet (see later): ‘Precarity is now very common in the job market. The workers who had a CDI and were sacked during the last years have experienced it. In January 2006 alone, 16,000 employees with a CDI have been sacked for economic reasons and 53,600 for other reasons. Unemployment lasts at least 12 months, as an average. ‘Official’ precarity represents 14 % of the jobs if you count interim, state-funded jobs and CDD (short term contracts).

At the beginning of 2006, 471,256 people were following some form of professional training (called ‘dispositifs d’insertion’) and 624,500 had ‘alternance’ contracts (combining work and studies).

• In 2002, 16 % of the State employees had short term contracts, i.e. 860,000 persons.
• At the end of January 2006, the number of people working for temp agencies (intérim) was 624,500.
• Around 70 % of those who are less than 25 years old and have a job have a CDD (short term contract).

2) What are the differences between this new law and the old one they had tried to pass in 1994 and which had was confronted with demonstrations and riots?

35 different measures have been taken concerning youth unemployment during the last 30 years.
The CIP was presented by Prime minister Balladur in 1994. It was aimed at young people under 26 who had a 'baccalauréat' (end of the high school exam) or a two-year university diploma and had difficulties finding a job. The bosses were allowed to pay 20% less than the minimum wage if the employees had a baccalauréat or a 2-year university diploma, or even more than 20% of the minimum wage if the young employees had no diploma at all.

Recently the government has passed 2 new laws concerning the CPE (First Job contract) and the CNE (New Job contract). The CPE concerns the companies which have more than 20 employees, the CNE, the companies who have less than 20 employees. The CPE concerns people who are less than 26 and the CNE all wage earners. During the first 2 years those who have a CPE and a CNE can be fired very easily. The companies who hire people with a CNE or CPE wont pay taxes for 3 years. The training periods more than to 3 months will be payed a minimum of 360 euros (this is a fraud, as most young people who do a training period in a company work for less than 3 months... and for free).

Until the CPE and CNE the law was rather vague about the 'trial period' (the period during which you are tested by your employer and you don't know if you'll get the job). By extending the trial period to 24 months the government gives a lethal legal tool to the bosses. The CPE is clearly a way of installing the youth in precarity, both inside the company (to accept the bosses discipline, not to strike, to accept dangerous working conditions, to work very quick, etc.) and outside the company (it will be difficult during 2 years to leave his/her parents, probably impossible to rent a room or a flat, etc).

A lovely spring in France

A report on the unrest by Mouvement Communist, a Paris based collective. More at www.mouvement-communiste.com

The struggle against the CPE has mobilised youth in the education system, starting in higher education and then followed by the high schools, with the principal objective of forcing the withdrawal of Article 8 of the 'Equal Opportunities Law'. This article introduced a new punitive employment contract reserved for young workers. The objective of the struggle has been fully achieved.

It is a matter of a widespread and durable movement for demands, despite various, often clumsy, attempts to politicise it or to 'spiritually' attach it to the myth of May 68. But, like any defensive struggle independent of this quality, it involved the practical critique of competition between proletarians, in this instance between the younger ones and the others, and thus of the domination of the business and its corollary, the submission of the workers. This practical critique, carried out with determination by hundreds of thousands of young people, remained generally channelled towards the new legal mechanisms created by the government, without concerning itself with other aspects of work insecurity and discriminatory treatment towards young employees.

While we must remember this important limit, it is nevertheless a fact that the class struggle has seen the emergence of new elements of the proletariat, with a numerous and resolute active participation of very young proletarians from the suburbs, including a large number of young women, who have often played a leading role in conducting the struggles. This bodes well for the future.

The student agitation began at Rennes before the school holidays in February. It took on a national dimension from the beginning of March. A bit later the students were joined by the high school kids. The mobilisation of thousands of secondary
education establishments, in the centres of towns as well as in the suburbs, was the crucial element which tipped the balance of forces on to the side of the young people. The deep divisions existing within the ruling party because of the 2007 election allowed the movement to gather momentum. In addition, the timid reception given to the CPE project by the MEDEF, the party of French bosses, contributed to the deepening contradictions in the camp of the advocates of established order. It was different for the big union confederations. They didn’t even try to mobilise workers in workplaces. Only a minority of workers concretely mobilised themselves on the side of the youth. Among the rare episodes of real struggle in workplaces, we can mention the two-hour strike carried out on 28 March by almost 500 permanent and temporary workers in the Renault factory at Flins, in the Paris suburbs. But, as the famous proverb says, a few swallows don’t make a spring…

A rapid and steady rise

The determination of the French government to introduce the CPE, announced on 16 January 2006 and adopted on 10 February by the National Assembly by recourse to Article 49-3 of the Constitution, unleashed a long series of struggles in the great majority of the country’s universities and University Institutes of Technology (IUTs), as well as in several hundred high schools and colleges. This movement had several characteristics which are worth recalling:

• The university and high school agitation was immediately seen in a sympathetic light by the population. From the start of hostilities, at the beginning of February, the popularity ratings of the Prime Minister and the President of the Republic never ceased to fall. Symmetrically, opposition to the measure grew to the point of receiving the support of 70% of the French population.

• The movement was truly launched on 7 February by demonstrations called by the group of student, high school and employee trade union organisations. Around 300,000 people participated in the demos right across France.

• The adoption of the law by the Senate, on 1 March, marked the beginning of the movement taking root in the universities. Thirteen of the universities went on strike. Occupations and blockades of lessons grew. Voted on by often sparsely attended general assemblies in this early phase, these actions only mobilised small minorities of students and they were viewed with sympathy or indifference by the majority.

• On 10 March several hundred students from a few faculties in Paris occupied the Sorbonne during the night. They ‘played with’ the symbol of May ’68. The forces of repression did the same. That night the eviction took place without any major incidents. The myth of a new revolutionary spring was acted out by the pseudo-radical fringe, most often external to the student movement.

• Between 11 and 16 March, the movement progressively extended itself to the high schools and colleges. Local initiatives, often spontaneous, led to the blocking of roads, attempts to occupy regional administration buildings, invasions of local education offices etc. Younger people began to participate in student demonstrations. The ’68 myth was still acted out around the Sorbonne, where every night low intensity incidents broke out with the forces of repression who were more and more present in the Latin Quarter. On 16 March there was another proof of the strength of the movement: around 400,000 young people were in the streets. Brief confrontations with the forces of repression multiplied at the end of the demonstration, mostly carried out by younger people coming from the working class suburbs. Incidents around the Sorbonne became less and less common. The myth of ’68 doesn’t matter any more.

• On 18 March, a Saturday, the trade union organisations of workers, students and high school kids called demonstrations across the country for the repeal of the CPE. Around 700,000 to 800,000 people participated in total. There was a preponderance of young people, notably high school students. Large numbers of education staff and parents accompanied them. The parties and unions provided a minimal turnout. In the Paris demonstration of 80,000 to 100,000 people they represented barely a quarter of the total. A few more or less organised gangs from the suburbs devoted themselves to acts of robbery and gratuitous
violence against the demonstrators. Incidents at the end of the demonstration, in the Place de la Nation, between a few hundred individuals, many strangers to the movement, ended up with a postal worker trade unionist in a coma. The circumstances surrounding his injuries remain, to this day, rather obscure.

- The occupations of faculties and high schools continued. More people went to the assemblies and the demonstrations, but this didn’t necessarily mean that more youth took on the daily tasks of the struggle. The active people remained a small minority of from 100 to 200 per university, far fewer per high school or college. The national structure of the struggles was entirely driven by the student union organisations, with UNEF at its head. The FIDL and to a lesser extent the UNL, had overall control of the high school agitation, even if they didn’t direct the numerous local initiatives. Their official representation of the ‘high school world’ was never called into question. Some general assemblies, in the universities of Rennes, Toulouse, Paris, Montpellier and elsewhere, voted for lists of demands which largely went beyond the framework of the struggle against the CPE, but these remained a dead letter. The overwhelming majority of participants in the movement remained focused on the repeal of the CPE and, eventually, of the CNE (the father of the CPE, introduced for companies with less than 20 employees).

- On 23 March, university and high school students were in the streets once again. Around 300,000 young people participated in the demonstrations; 30,000 in Paris, where organised gangs invited themselves into the heart of the event. Hundreds of presumed ‘rioters’ from November 2005 (according to the language of the police) attached themselves to the marches. Robberies and violence against the demonstrators spread across the capital. A 21 year old student was in a coma, probably beaten by the vultures. Many youthful victims of violence were in tears. The march organisers claimed to be powerless and called for the intervention of the forces of repression. Other organised political forces, including some sectors of the anarchist current, said that they didn’t want to participate in the ‘criminalisation of suburban youth’. For sure the forces of repression let it happen. It’s in their interest that fear should reign among the demonstrators. The police balance sheet for the day: more than 600 people seized. The Minister of the Interior announced that the forces of repression would from now on act inside the marches so as to ‘defend the real demonstrators’. The next day, in Brussels, Chirac declared that the law must be put into effect.

- Workers’ unions called for a national day of action with strikes and demonstrations for 28 March. On Friday 24 March they met the Prime Minister and two of his ministers dealing with the matter. These ministers remained vague about the ‘concessions’ that they were willing to make so that the bitter pill of the CPE would go down more easily. The unions proved to be firm on the principle of its repeal (more likely its suspension) as a precondition of any negotiation. The student and high school union organisations, invited in their turn to Matignon on Saturday 25 March, declined the invitation. They demanded the prior repeal of the CPE. The Prime Minister said he supported “pursuing discussions with the union leaders in the next few days” and proposed that they “meet the following week”. The state put a brave face on it. The bosses, through their professional organisation, the MEDEF, supported the government but said they were ready to accept adjustments. Despite appearances, the game wasn’t over. A lot depended on the capacity of the workers to make their voice heard. At this stage, unfortunately, very few were calling for a strong mobilisation, particularly in the private sector. The Minister of the Interior and president of the UMP, Nicolas Sarkozy, invited himself to the ball with an appeal for “a compromise”. On 26 March, the student national coordination called for the resignation of the government as well as the repeal of the CPE. The next day, Villepin invited the five union confederations CGT, CFDT, FO, CFTC and CFE-CGC – as well as the student organisations to “discuss the adjustments to be made” to the CPE. The unions declined the invitation.

- The assault of the movement was impressive: on 28 March, close to two million demonstrators took to the streets of France’s towns and cities. Villepin did not see reason. He refused a repeal of
the CPE while saying he was “open” to modifications providing they are “not of a legislative nature”. As for Sarkozy, he tried to outdo him by proposing the “suspension” of the CPE. On the 30th, as expected, the Constitutional Council recognised the Equal Opportunity Law, including Article 8 on the CPE.

- On 31 March, Chirac did an unusual institutional somersault: he promulgated the law but announced the modification of the CPE measures. Spontaneous occupations and railway and road blockades spread. The parties of the left of capital came out with a common declaration against the CPE.

- On 1 April, Villepin is de facto relieved of responsibility for the CPE. The presidents of the UMP groups in the National assembly and the Senate are put in charge of discussions aiming at a new text. The PS announces it will propose a law for the repeal of the CPE and CNE (‘Contrat nouvelle embauche’ – New Job Contract). The next day, when the law is published in the Official Journal, Jean-Louis Borloo, Minister for Social Cohesion, recommends that employers don’t sign the CPE.

- On 4 April, the movement gives it the death blow: as on 28 March, almost two million demonstrators take to the streets. Again many National Education employees and parents using the RTT, on holiday etc. join the marching youth. The mobilisation in workplaces remains very weak. On the 5th, consultations begin between UMP MPs and unions which demand the repeal of the CPE before 17 April. Chirac wants them to be “constructive”. The UNEF calls for the “intensification of the mobilisation” in the universities. Blockades of railways, roads and bridges follow on the 6th. Villepin says he is preparing “three new projects”: “making professional life more secure”, “the struggle against poverty and exclusion” and “reinforcing the links between university and employment”. The UNEF calls for a new national mobilisation on 11 April. The top-level consultations continue. On the 8th, thirteen university presidents call on the politicians to bury the CPE.

- On the 10th an announcement from the Elysée Palace says that it is to be replaced by “a measure to help with the professional integration of youth in difficulty”. Villepin admits that conditions are not favourable to the application of the CPE. The Student Confederation calls for the “lifting of the blockades”. Trade unions and left parties cry ‘victory’. The UNEF abstractly calls for keeping up the pressure. On the following days minorities of students try to prolong the conflict so as to win other objectives like the freeing of prisoners, the repeal of anti-immigrant laws and the abolition of the CNE. Without success. The movement folds rapidly. The last demonstrations called by the National Student and High School Coordination only attracted a few tens of thousands of young people.

A first big step against job insecurity

The fight against the CPE carried on by the school-going youth of France represents a not insignificant step in the process of recovery of the class struggle. The will expressed by these proletarians to not be further weakened at work crystallised itself in the refusal of this governmental measure. This is a measure which, as elsewhere, is perfectly in accord with those which have preceded it and which have made the Permanent Contract (CDI) into a myth and at the same time an inaccessible horizon for growing sectors of workers. Insecurity of work – and therefore of the wage – becomes more and more the rule, calling into question the model of a job for life. For those who benefit from it (still largely a majority), the CDI itself is attacked on all sides. In the non-agricultural commercial sector, the average length of permanent contract jobs is only 110 months. Those who benefit from the most stable jobs are more and more exposed to insecurity. Just in January and February 2006, 32,000 permanent workers were subjected to economic redundancies, 100,000 others were kicked out for various reasons (disciplinary, personal…). On average, the time spent unemployed is now 12 months.

The proliferation of contractual conditions founded on irregularity of income didn’t have to wait for the CPE. Half the job offers registered at the ANPE in January and February this year consist of
temporary (less than six months) or occasional (less than a month) employment. Of the other half, supposedly long-lasting jobs, the statisticians of the Ministry of Labour include those based on the CNE, the father of the CPE which is still in force. According to two liberal economists, Pierre Cahuc and Stéphane Carcillo, the first to evaluate the CPE and its precursor, the CNE, a little less than one CNE job in two survives the two year trial period.

Conclusion: roughly speaking, two thirds of the jobs offered by the ANPE network and actually taken are destined to be destroyed in the two years following their creation. In the first two months of every year, close to 200,000 fixed term contracts expire, along with 68,000 casual jobs. Some 66,500 ex-employees are registered at the ANPE for the first time and approximately 60,000 are removed from the list because they are sent on a training course. The flow of jobs is therefore largely dominated by insecurity. As for the overall stock of jobs, in 2005 close to 14% of employees in France did not have a permanent job (12% in the private sector). At the Flins factory, owned by Renault, in the Paris suburbs, half the assembly line workers are temps. In the post office, a third of the workers do not have the status of postal worker.

Even the legendary Civil Service, idolised by the unions, the left and the extreme left of capital, has become a huge receptacle of insecurity: 860,000 of its employees only have the right to ‘short contracts’, that’s 16% of the 5.4 million employed by the state. In 2004, there were 330,000 reintegration training courses and 164,000 ‘alternation’ contracts (combining work and training). But, in this world where wage labour comes with a more and more unstable contractual framework, youth, qualified or not, are the worst off. Around 70% of the under-25s with a job are on a fixed term contract. Students are among the sectors most affected by overt insecurity. Around half those enrolled at university worked in 2004. Only 15% of them managed to find a permanent job. It’s hardly surprising therefore that these youth should have mobilised massively against the CPE. One of the great qualities of their struggle lies in the fact that they were active on a terrain which was not specific to the university or the school. Although preceded by the one against the CIP in March 1994, the movement against the CPE was nothing less than the first independent incursion on this scale of school-going youth on the terrain of wage labour. It provides a striking confirmation that they are beginning to perceive their condition as allied to that of all of the workers.

The active population according to age and employment status:

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<th>Employment Status</th>
<th>2003</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15 to 29 years</td>
<td>15 to 29 years</td>
<td>15 to 29 years</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unwaged</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>3.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Waged</td>
<td>96.8</td>
<td>96.9</td>
<td>96.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Temporary</td>
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<td>5.2</td>
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<td>Apprentice</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>6.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fixed length contracts</td>
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<td>16.3</td>
<td>16.1</td>
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<tr>
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<td>4.6</td>
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<td>11.7</td>
<td>11.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trainees and supported contracts</td>
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<td>5.1</td>
<td>4.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Public sector</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Private sector</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>3.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Permanent contracts and others</td>
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<td>64.1</td>
<td>63.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Employed total (thousands)</td>
<td>4,905</td>
<td>4,833</td>
<td>4,854</td>
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Those younger than 26 in the various employment policy schemes (thousands)

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<td>381</td>
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<td>Qualification, counselling and adaptation contracts</td>
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<td>158</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>199</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>224</td>
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<td>1010</td>
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<td>963</td>
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<td>663</td>
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The small step for insecurity taken by the equal opportunity law and its old Article 8

This law was conceived for the majority of French workplaces, those constituted as small and medium sized companies. The government, conscious that the lower productivity of these companies creates more employment than the big outfits which conform to international standards, tried, by means of Article 8 which institutes the CPE, to introduce a further dose of flexibility and wage cutting for this category of companies. There were two objectives: to improve the statistics for job creation in the run up to the presidential election of 2007, and to rally the vast layer of small and medium sized company bosses to the existing parliamentary majority party, in particular the Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin, himself an undeclared candidate for President of the Republic.

The CPE was only the logical extension to all companies of the CNE, which was reserved for very small businesses employing less than 20 people. The clear success which the CNE achieved with the bosses is scarcely contestable: 7.6 % of all the jobs begun with these companies in April, 452,000 jobs intended to be under the CNE between September 2005 and April 2006. This encouraged the government to take a small additional step in favour of insecurity. The CPE was therefore not really anything new. It joins a long list of measures taken by successive governments of left and right aimed at making the workforce more flexible and more docile. Its specific elements made it into a tool with which the bosses – public and private – could make the passage from employment to unemployment and vice versa more 'fluid' and less
expensive. What’s more, it would encourage the newly hired workers to be more obedient.

“It is probable that the employers will try to massively substitute the new contracts for the old permanent contracts, allowing them to substantially lengthen the trial period and minimise the costs of making people redundant”, explained the two economists, Pierre Cahuc and Stéphane Carcillo, in the study mentioned above.

As for the CNE, the extension of the trial period to two years was the veritable culmination of the CPE. It allows companies to choose their workers under the threat of the sudden termination of contract and to better manage unforeseen events which might affect their business. For the workers, on the other hand, the increased pressure will reach a crescendo as the two years date approaches. In addition, there is the real threat that their permanent job of the CPE variety will end with a level of redundancy pay 20% less than they would have got for a fixed term contract for an equivalent period (8% of salary paid for the CPE/CNE against 10% for a fixed term contract).

“Because the CNE has a shorter duration than the permanent contract (CDI), their substitution for the CDI leads to an increased destruction of jobs. This destruction of jobs will be at its height on the two year horizon when the employers must choose between keeping the CNE employees or making them redundant and taking on other people”, the two economists confirm. As for the capacity of the CNE/CPE to create new jobs, it is very limited, if we believe the study already mentioned:

- 70,000 total additional jobs over 10 years (by enlarging the CNE to the whole of the private sector). [Assuming a constant ratio of activity (active population divided by the population of working age)]
- 95,000 fewer unemployed at the end of 15 years, for a fall of unemployment of 0.5%.

In total the two experts worked out that in the end, if the CPE had survived, around 18% of jobs would be under the CNE/CPE. The effect of substituting these new contracts would be particularly important for permanent jobs, where it represents a variant which is more attractive to the bosses and more degrading to the workers, and on the longest fixed term contracts. It doesn’t attack the hard core of insecurity: temp work and short-term contracts (less than six months), work experience and various integration contracts. On the contrary, the CNE/CPE was going to undermine even further the existing regulatory barriers between the various types of employment contract, making permanent jobs closer in statutory terms to the many forms of overt insecurity.

Despite the undeniable advantages of the CNE/CPE for capital, the party of the French bosses was divided because the struggle of the school-going youth seemed to threaten the social peace of the country more generally. While the CGPME (‘General Confederation of the Managers of Small and Medium Enterprises’) never ceased to defend the two new contracts, the MEDEF, the privileged political organ of the big businesses of France, dissociated itself from this government measure little by little and then advised the executive to take a step backwards on Article 8 of the equal opportunities law. The big bosses’ attitude wasn’t only down to political considerations. The MEDEF had often said that its principal problem was how to make redundancies less difficult and more rapid, above all for the central core of labour in France, constituted by the permanent contract (the CDI). On this precise point the CPE offered them no solution. Neither was this new contract a tool suitable for the management of seasonal peaks of activity, which were better handled with short-term contracts and temp work. As for their permanent objective of the evolution (i.e. reduction as far as they can) of the mass of wages, the biggest enterprises prefer to use traditional methods such as resorting to subcontracting, relocation and the growth of labour productivity by the introduction of new technologies. Hence the lack of enthusiasm expressed by the big bosses for the CPE and the CNE.

A partial snapshot of the organisation of the movement in the Parisian universities

On the ground, the movement against the CPE was split between various levels. On the level of each university, general assemblies (assemblées générales - AGs) had been organised by the stu-
dent organisations. Some universities also had a mobilisation committee in charge of organising practical initiatives. They were mostly composed of political and trade union militants of the left and far left of capital, or their close associates, as well as students radicalised by the struggle. In the absence of strong general assemblies, capable of exercising control over them, it was these committees which provided the real direction of the movement. They accepted the decisions of the AGs which they liked, demonstrating the most hypocritical inertia towards the rest. In the absence of these committees, it was the various political and trade union groups which took on this task.

On the national level, a coordination was set up on the initiative of the AG of Rennes University. In practice it only served as a battle ground between different small groups and organisations trying to take control of the movement. Despite the numerous motions voted on during whole days of debate, the coordination was incapable of doing anything more than calling days of action and regular demonstrations on Tuesday and Thursday. It was perceived by most of the students, even the most involved, as something far from them, having a purely formal existence. Apart from the militants of the official organisations, few of them had any interest in its life and its decisions.

Active participation in the movement only concerned a small minority. The AGs only attracted at most 10% (often less) of the students enrolled in each of the Paris universities. If we count only the minority within the AG who participated in actions and blockades of the universities, we end up with no more than a hundred or so active students on each site. In this framework of a lack of autonomous initiative from the students, the UNEF imposed itself as the only unified political leadership of the movement. Let’s see why.

It was necessary for the various parties of the left and the extreme left to regain credibility for the presidential elections of 2007. During the AGs you could hear appeals to vote which were almost a threat: “If that happens it will be because you didn’t go and vote (or you didn’t vote in the right way) in the last elections. You’ve got to make up for it next time.” For the trade union leaders, on the other hand, it was a question of consolidating and reinforcing their role as credible social partners in the face of a government which didn’t think it worth consulting them before launching the CPE.

Because of the eminently defensive and demand-oriented nature of the movement, it did not represent a threat to the official student union organisations. That is why they had no interest in holding back the struggle. What’s more, they had no problem controlling and channelling it.

Among these youth organisations, only the UNEF was sufficiently widespread, although numerically very weak, to be able to put itself at the head of what was going on. The presence within it of a fraction of activists, principally composed of Trotskyist militants from the JCR, worked in favour of this class collaborationist union by allowing it to show its more combative face. As for the majority of the UNEF (Socialist and Communist Party members), they were in charge of putting forward the necessary reservations so as not to frighten the more hesitant students. Let’s just note that the UNEF never took a position on the university blockades. Another important detail is that Bruno Julliard, its SP affiliated president, always took care to specify that, as a good democrat, he was not the leader of the struggle and that the UNEF only represented one of its components, so as not to run counter to a growing anti-union sentiment in the movement.

The inability of the most radicalised fractions of the movement – a small minority in fact – to give it a real articulate and credible strategy and an adequate structure left the field open to the class collaborators of the official organisations. So, despite a very strong diffuse mistrust towards the unions and parties, the movement, with the known exception of Poitiers, never even partially broke through the security cordon maintained by the official political and union organisations.

In addition the movement against the CPE in Paris was weakened by the spectacular initiatives erroneously taken by self-proclaimed radical elements who were generally exterior to the struggle. The impromptu occupation of the EHESS, that flash of
lightning at the Collège de France or the nocturnal attempts at confrontation around the Sorbonne with the aim of reviving an improbable phantom of May '68, represent the most striking bad examples. The end-of-demo professionals busied themselves with concentrating an indulgent media attention on them, and in that way filling up the empty abyss of their rantings with cheap war-like images. Happily, the vigour of the movement quickly pushed these episodes into the background.

More serious, in terms of its political implications for dividing and demoralising the movement, was the intrusion en masse of gangs of young racketeers from some of the working class estates in the Paris region. Hundreds of youths from these petty criminal groups came close, on several occasions, to breaking the collective solidarity by robbery and violence against the demonstrators. For a time they played the game of the forces of repression who hoped, by manipulating them from a distance, to allow them to spread fear amongst the demonstrators. But in that situation as well the movement showed itself to be very strong. Disappearing as quickly as they had appeared the gangs of robbers were quickly forgotten.

Of course, we don’t have to link all the violent incidents taking place during all the various actions to these two phenomena. Often these incidents were the deeds of angry young demonstrators, tempted to fight the cops despite the peaceful nature of most of the movement, or who were forced to defend themselves against violent charges by the forces of repression, like at Caen or Rouen. These acts are perfectly internal to the contradictory dynamic of the movement. The youth involved in these actions fully belonged to the movement. And this is so even when their violent response aroused incomprehension and even explicit criticism from the majority of participants in the struggle.

An attempt at a synthesis: a glass half full…

The movement against the CPE is over. After three months of strikes, blockades and demonstrations, it has won an important demand victory, the repeal of the CPE, which is to be replaced with the reinforcement of existing measures dealing with youth “who are difficult to professionally integrate”, and a political half-victory with the weakening of the existing executive and the growth of its internal divisions. The results won by hundreds of thousands of high school and college students mobilised all over France correspond perfectly to the exceptional strength of their struggle and to the weaknesses of their movement.

The essential element of the agitation against the CPE is its massive, durable and widespread character. Impressive masses of the school-going and proletarianised youth of France, previously completely absent from the class struggle, made their mobilisation into the most significant one that had taken place in France since the movement of November-December 1995 against the abolition of special retirement schemes.

The movement started out in the universities with a significant but still minority participation and was then progressively reinforced by the influx of high school students, who were both numerous and combative, particularly those from the working class neighbourhoods of French cities. The sympathy which they immediately received from large sections of the population allowed them to gather workers in large numbers, particularly from the national education system but from other sectors as well. Generally the parents were on the side of their sons and daughters in the struggle, indirectly contributing to its development. Every once in a while, the family isn’t a factor of conformity and order…

The thousands of young people arrested, the severe sentences and the threats from the education minister relayed by numerous university principals and head teachers, as well as the violence and robbery against the demonstrators carried out by organised gangs, did not succeed in demoralising the youth and spreading fear. This result is one of the most positive characteristics of the struggle and an unmistakable sign of its massive and determined character.

But the central political quality of this season of demand struggles is the capacity of school-going youth to leave the narrow and illusory confines of the school and situate themselves immediately on
the terrain of the fight for better conditions of work. The direct practical critique of the present organisation of the labour market, of the contractual relation in its most insecure and discriminatory forms for young people as well as the fierce contestation of the most extreme expressions of submission to the commands of the workplace, above all to the extension to two years of the trial period under the CPE/CNE, has been at the heart of the movement. The school-going youth have gone beyond the restricted dimension of the school, the key institution for diffusing the ideology of effort and success through work as well as a veritable reservoir and hiding place for masses of unemployed and ‘intermittent’ workers.

So, we can bet that this important episode in the class struggle in France won’t be forgotten too soon, whether in the camp of the proletariat or in that of the dominant classes. Its worst fate, however, would be to suffer the same end as that of the movement of November-December 1995, that is to say for it to become an inoffensive myth for capital, only good for giving legitimacy to the unions and capital’s left parties.

… a glass half empty

But this joyful moment of class antagonism must not make us forget its limits. These limits have been adroitly exploited by the government and the dominant classes with the aim of putting an end to it and, above all, preventing the demand struggle becoming part of a political fight for a fuller practical critique of the existing social order.

Indeed the clear victory over the CPE was not extended to the withdrawal of its precursor contract, the CNE, still in force. Even more so, because at no moment did the movement against the CPE/CNE transform itself into a movement against the numerous forms of insecurity and flexibility of labour, despite some timid attempts in this direction. Finally, in terms of the strict balance sheet of demands, the objective of freeing imprisoned comrades was not achieved, and very few participants were concerned about their fate after the movement was over.

As for the chances, certainly weak, of the generalisation of the struggle to other fractions of the proletariat, they were annihilated by, amongst other things, the succession of national days of action and demonstrations followed by long series of high school and university blockades. At the end of the party various ‘official’ political and trade union components of the movement called on young people to take part in its actions at the gates of various work places, with the objective of “pushing the union confederations to put forward the slogan of the general strike”. The search for a symbolic, generic solidarity took precedence over the precise identification of common interests. So, the management of relations between high school and university students in struggle and workers was entirely delegated to the respective union organisations, traditionally hostile to any real undermining of category divisions. But even this toned-down version of an attempt to extend the struggle from the youth to the work places failed. And this was, quite simply, because of the lack of interest shown by most university and high school students in this kind of action.

Also, there was no significant attempt to bring together the most insecure sectors of wage earners in the movement against the CPE/CNE. Although, as we often said in our leaflets and interventions, the high schools and universities affected by the struggle could have become extraordinary gathering places for the most dispersed and vulnerable proletarians. If it had been initiated this process of contact could have marked the beginning of the transformation of the movement against the CPE/CNE into a much bigger political fight by substantial sections of the proletariat against exploitation and the dominant social relations. Because this tendency did not express itself (or very little), we define this agitation as an episode – certainly on a high level – of the demand struggles of the exploited class against a specific aspect of its condition.

Another demonstration of how well-founded this approach is is the incapacity of the movement to give itself an organisation independent of the unions and the parties on the left of capital. If the forms of struggle which it adopted fitted in perfectly with the historic tradition of working class combat against capital, without big concessions to class compromise and collaboration, the
autonomy of the movement did not generate self-organisation. In reality, the democratic practices apparent in the general assemblies assured the domination of the budding bureaucrats of the high school and university unions as well as the political militants of numerous formations of the statist left (social democrats, Stalinists and Trotskyists).

The movement provided itself with the weapons of theoretical critique even less. Without doubt the poverty of its ideas represents a trait strongly inhibiting its independent political potential. The numerous criticisms of the reformist political leadership did not get to the heart of the problem: how to go beyond the purely ‘economic’ dimension of the struggle – the immediate withdrawal of the CPE/CNE – towards a larger and deeper critique of the worker’s condition and of the relations of exploitation through the expansion of the struggle to some of the other most striking expressions of insecurity and flexibility at work. As with the movement of November-December 1995, there is therefore considerable doubt that the struggle against the CPE/CNE has the capacity to generate a new generation of revolutionary militants.

**The French bourgeoisie and the state got out of the crisis rather well**

These various contradictory and complex characteristics of the movement against the CPE/CNE were relatively well understood by the government and the representatives of the French bosses. Even though they paid a price for their bungling, the decision to give in on the point of the CPE, which had become too much of a “rock of national discord”, was a good one for capital in France.

The political organisation of the bosses in France, the MEDEF, itself encouraged the government to give up on this contract, judging it to be of little use to business. “It is never good to treat a whole category of the population in one specific way”, declared Laurence Parisot, president of the MEDEF. Many times they called for a “rapid” way out of the crisis, considering the demonstrations against the CPE as putting the economy and the good image of France “in danger”. The bosses’ organisations, with the exception of the CGPME, didn’t shed many tears at the burial of the CPE. The Prime Minister himself, Dominique de Villepin, admitted that even the MEDEF hadn’t asked for the new contract.

The acute dialectic of conflict within the government between the Prime Minister and the Minister of the Interior, Nicolas Sarkozy, has not yet been settled by the resignation of one premier and the nomination of a second. Here there is an essential difference with November-December 1995, when, at the end of the long strike in transport, the then Prime Minister, Alain Juppé, had to resign. The difference, as far as we are concerned, comes entirely from the fact that the railway workers really succeeded in bringing capital accumulation to its knees in this country. By comparison, the struggles against the CPE/CNE, as even the governor of the Bank of France, Christian Noyer, and the Minister of the Economy, Thierry Breton, confessed, at no point had any impact on the economy.

An unintended spin-off from the movement against the CPE/CNE has been the reinforcement of various candidates for the presidential election of 2007 (Nicolas Sarkozy and Ségolène Royal above all) against the candidate preferred by Jacques Chirac, Dominique de Villepin. That is to say, absolutely nothing of interest for the future of the class struggle in France. Neither was the party in power shaken by the struggle. It skillfully played its role as the party of Nicolas Sarkozy, the internal enemy of the Chirac fraction. Finally, this battle has allowed the Socialist Party to recover itself as the party capable of “carrying” into parliament the demands of the street, a function which the French CP would have preferred to keep for itself.

The outcome entirely played out in negotiations between the ruling party MPs and the union leaders certainly did not promote the class nature and political independence of the movement. The unions successfully put themselves forward as the irreplaceable institutional relay needed for the success of negotiations. This did not come about by chance. It demonstrates the vitality of bourgeois democracy and the French capitalist state and their capacity, clearly confirmed in 1968, to master unexpected, strong and vast class movements. The
state and its defenders therefore have good reason to rejoice at what’s come out of the ‘CPE crisis’.

The initial political interpretation of the movement against the CPE/CNE given by Dominique de Villepin reveals the formidable capacity of the French state for integrating the class struggle into capital’s social and political democracy. The Prime Minister in effect linked his personal destiny and, on a larger scale, the outcome of the coming electoral battle for the presidency to the management of that ‘social crisis’. His assessment was easily shared by his opponents on all sides, a sure sign of a high level of consciousness among the political representatives of the bourgeoisie in this country.

Anti-CPE leaflets

Here we present two texts from leaflets. The first was distributed during the week beginning 27 March, by some students in Jussieu to the building workers directly employed by this university in Paris. The second one was distributed in a student General Assembly, a little after the end of the movement.

It is as workers that we are attacked and not as students!

For around two weeks, there has not been much expansion of the anti-CPE/CNE movement, principally driven by the students and high school kids. If it has not already run out of steam, it is stagnating. This morning, Jussieu was blockaded by less than 200 students and the general assemblies attract at most 1000 people – sometimes less – from the tens of thousands enrolled in the two faculties of Jussieu. Of all those who vote at each general assembly for the renewal of the blockade, only a minority actively participate in it each morning.

- To get rid of the CPE/CNE, the movement must go beyond the stage it is at. A struggle confined only to the university milieu, cannot reach this stage.
- Contrary to the marginal attempts at pseudo-radicalisation which place themselves outside the movement and which do not take any account of the movement’s realities, and contrary to the days of action called by the unions, the extension of the movement will only take place if, at the very least, the workers are convinced of the need to take an active part in it.
- For the student’s part, half of whom are working – do we have to say it again? –, it is necessary to go and meet other workers, particularly in the area around the faculties.
- At Jussieu the strikers have already occupied the university restaurant and established initial contact with the employees there. What’s more, in the Javelot annex, the lecturers have gone on strike with their students.
- Even if they are heading in the right direction, these actions have never addressed themselves to the construction workers of Jussieu. The workers of the BTP (‘bâtiment et travaux publics’, Buildings and Public Works) also experience job insecurity. For example the BTP is the sector which most makes use of the new contract with 24.2% of new jobs since September 2005 being CNE. Employment in the BTP also makes use of job insecurity
- The BTP sector is booming, particularly because of the construction of new housing (363,400 housing units under construction in 2004 and more than 400,000 in 2005) but also because of big public works.
- This dynamism is accompanied by a strong demand for labour and consequently there has been a net creation of close to 200,000 jobs between 1998 and 2005. Be it in public works or buildings more and more companies cannot increase their production because of lack of staff (39% in October 2005). Even though this shortage of workers pushes up wages, the BTP sector continues to employ a significant number of insecure workers. In 2005, about 135,000 people were temp workers and 70,000 were permanent of the 1,736,000 employees in the sector. Let’s note that temp work allows them to deal with the uneven recruitment needs of the big sites, by definition temporary, to cope with the 'high season’ of activ-
ity, but also to recruit for the permanent workers required after that. So it is estimated that a quarter of assignments end with the offer of a job. We can therefore presume that here temp work constitutes a first stage filter for removing the workers most resistant to the harsh conditions of exploitation in construction, even in a situation of high permanent employment.

- Finally, to compensate for the number of workers expected to retire between now and 2010, the sector must take on no less than 100,000 newly qualified young people, providing an opportunity for the massive use of the CNE and the future CPE. Market conditions in the BTP are favourable to struggle.

- The labour market conditions today are favourable to the BTP workers: the present shortage of labour, combined with the necessity of replacing retired workers and the growth of the sector, can give considerable advantages to the workers’ eventual struggles.

- We can’t easily imagine a boss beginning to lay off workers if he is not certain of being able to take them on afterwards, above all on a site which can’t easily afford to take them on late.

- In the restoration sector, where labour market conditions are similar to those of the BTP, employers are already forced to only offer permanent contracts to attract employees.

Because of this:

- The students and construction workers must get together so as to understand their respective conditions of work.

- When we meet a second time it will be a question of elaborating common perspectives of struggle, not only against the CPE/CNE, but also against all the forms of job insecurity which preceded them.

Obviously these proposals are open to all interested workers, from around Jussieu or not.

Meet on Thursday 30 March from 16.30 to 17.30 in front of the main entrance to Jussieu, to get together with all interested workers and students.

### Why pass exams?

It seems that some of the students are worried, in this lovely spring, about the practical details of the exams at the end of the year. To begin by calming things down a bit, let’s propose a first basis for discussion: university selection will not be any more severe than in previous years. The administrations of the various university departments know very well how many repeat years they can allow themselves each year, and how many places they have at their disposal the following year. What’s more, we can even say that the blockade of the university for several months will have very little effect on the result of the exams. The same proportion as usual will go on to the next year.

Also as usual, it will not be a question of the students having gained knowledge or not, but of passing their exams. It is not necessary to be good. It is sufficient just to be better than that proportion of students that the administration intends to hold back. If all the students succeeded in passing their exams, this poor university institution would actually have problems making the diplomas which it issues seem attractive.

We can ask ourselves why students bother to pass exams, when, for most of them, it means having to take courses that they don’t really give a shit about and risking a repeat year. Above all it means that even amongst those who manage to land a diploma, one year after getting it, 28.6% alternate between unemployment, inactivity and temporary work. Only 67.6% land a permanent job. By comparison, those who have no diploma (not even a Certificate of General Education) have a 42.7% chance of finding a permanent job after a year. The difference is not as great as they would have us believe.

Businesses know very well that a diploma isn’t proof of any competence. The profusion of work experience courses, fixed term contracts and temp work (even for those who leave engineering schools) as prerequisites to getting a less precarious job, show without any doubt how important an aptitude for the work is for selection. This is more rigorous than obtaining a university diploma.
For society a student is maybe a future employee or a future unemployed person, but above all an employee or unemployed right now (45.5% of students work during their studies). Many people are in higher education for a longer time now, meaning an ever increasing gap between leaving high school and entering the labour market. If the two million students signed on at the ANPE (job-centre) rather than answer the call of courses, the poor government would have serious difficulty holding the level of unemployment at less than 10%.

This is why one of the strong points of the movement against the CPE has been the direct attack on the terrain of work, against a law affecting students, amongst others, not only as youth but above all, as workers. This collective movement, with the aim of defending our interests as employees, shows once again that it is possible for us to collectively take our destiny in our own hands. If we end up unconditionally defending university competition, by accepting that selection which is only one of the forms of social selection, it would be a defeat on the same scale as what we have already won. It would be a brutal return to the barbarism of the war of all against all, just at the moment when a door for leaving it together seems to be appearing over the horizon.

If we can make the all-powerful state back down, there is no reason why we shouldn’t be capable of not only deciding the manner in which education takes place in the universities, but also of making it what we want it to be.

CPE report from Theorie Communist

The anti-CPE struggle

Extracts of an analysis by Theorie Communist, http://theoriecommuniste.org/neoTC/

Contrary to what happened over the pensions in 2003, the anti-CPE movement never formulated an 'alternative policy' to the government’s proposals. When Laurence Parisot, president of the Medef (the bosses union), drew the lessons of the anti-CPE movement for the employers, she found it very positive because the theme of 'precariousness had been debated'. She was right, the class struggle takes place now on this base, precariousness is now an established fact.

(...) The main forces

At first sight, the anti-CPE struggle, which lasted three months, depended on six main forces:

- The mass of the wage-earners, favourable to the withdrawal of the CPE, but who participated in the struggle only 'to voice their opinion'; expressing themselves by two strike days a week apart, and who accompanied the big union parades. They were primarily public sector workers and their views always coincided with their trade-union representatives.

- The mass of the students, favourable only to the CPE withdrawal and opposed to any attack against the 'value of their diplomas'. They sporadically participated in the general assemblies and in the 'great demonstrations' and only wanted to pressure the government.

- The participants of the general assemblies: they participated in a limited way, e.g. often voted for the renewal of the strike and then returned home.

- The most active fractions: they carried out the blocking of the universities (the blockings preceded the strike) then blocked the motorways and rail roads; the representatives of the Student Coordinations came from this group. An important part of these fractions was more and more blocked by the self-limitative yoke of the student general assemblies. These groups were organized (or not) elsewhere; they went from one university to the other, or they jumped from one demonstration to another action; they disagreed with the 'responsible minorities'. As the movement deepened, the gap widened between these active minorities and the mass of the students (and this was expressed in the motions of support for the November rioters; the will to get rid of the whole 'Equal oppor-
tunity' law and to cancel the CNE, and the birth of the 'Neither CPE, nor CDI' movement), but they could not move forward without the legitimacy given by the student masses.

- The high-school students whose entry in the movement provoked a change of dimension of the movement, given their number and the often violent and 'uncontrollable character of their actions.

- The 'undesirable ones' (grouped under the 'suburban youth' label) who invited themselves naturally to the movement, often in a violent way. They played an increasingly important part in the demonstrations as well in the confrontations with the cops and in the aggression of students. In contrast to and against the starting point of the movement, they physically embodied the inanity of the demand of the CPE withdrawal and they questioned it.

Cleavages, contradictions and dynamics of the movement

If the student component of the movement’s active fraction made numerous the call-outs towards 'the wage-earners', the unemployed or the 'undocumented' (sans papiers), in fact they wanted to preserve its forms of organisation within its 'place of work'. Regarding its contacts with wage-earners, it only made occasional links with the teaching and technical staff of the universities. The nature of the movement brought it into a conflict with its initial demand. The initial demand contained the need (to make it triumph), of widening it and not confining it to the CPE withdrawal, of extending the struggle to other sectors. Such a process would have implied opening the assemblies and transforming them into poles of convergence. It would have implied that students did not consider themselves as students any more. But then it would not have led to the triumph of the demand, but to its radical questioning. The minority activists were locked up in a contradiction: on one hand, the need for organizing in their own university to guarantee the continuing existence of the general assemblies; on the other hand, the need to widen the movement, contained inside the initial demand, to the risk of its disappearance. But it was not only the active minority which was locked up in this contradiction, it was the whole movement. This contradiction reflected all the cleavages inside the current student world in France and even more basically the anomaly which provoked this movement: what was objectively a student movement did not have anything student in its subject.

As regards the other categories (wage-earners – often members of the SUD trade union –, unemployed, precarious or undocumented workers), one could hear, from time to time, a delegate on a platform insisting on virtually possible 'footbridges' between struggles which usually only co-exist sporadically. But, after a beautiful applause, every one turned back to his/her usual activities. The student self-organisation as students was simply a form of sectionalism, which limited the movement. The trade unions did not make such gross mistakes; they did not denounce the 'leftism' and 'extremism' of the Student Coordinations. The inertia of the student mass, the extremely heavy management of the debates and the sectional insulation, posed as a principle, limited the movement; these processes were much more powerful than the traditional schemes and slanders. The student trade unions left the general assemblies in the hands of the 'radicals' and represented the movement in the media; they negotiated with the government, and all their speeches were limited to the withdrawal of the CPE. The General assemblies radicalised in seclusion; the Student Coordinations were condemned to issue declarations increasingly disconnected from the real practices in the universities; no Parisian general assembly (except the 'Sorbonne in exile') raised the question of what to do starting from its own forces. In the rest of France, general assemblies, using their own forces, organised 'blockings of flows' (i.e. blocking motorways and rail roads) and 'removals'.

(...) In practice, the universities were 'occupied' and 'blocked' with the administration's agreement. Only one part of the buildings was conceded for the 'occupation', according to modes and schedules negotiated with the administration (for example, the lecture theatres were not invaded but
some were granted by the university presidents; 
the picket lines were held under the control of the university ‘vigiles’ (staff paid by the university to watch it day and night) which regulated them; the strikers respected the internal university rules – sometimes they controlled the student cards to reach certain corridors).

Blocking was never done against the university management but was always regarded as a democratic decision taken by a general assembly representing the students, decision to which the administration was supposed to yield: the users of the university (strikers and strikebreakers, students and teachers, personnel and administrative direction) democratically occupied their universities. When a student organises himself/herself as a student, when he reproduces his separation from ‘the others’, he produces a fictitious common identity which is sanctioned by the movement’s exemplary self-organisation.

The active fringe of the movement constantly oscillated between:

- the identification with all the exploited, not only in words, but on the objective basis of a generalised precarisation,
- and the defence of a student condition which should offer some additional guarantees compared to the ordinary worker.

Between the two, second viewpoint always won. Therein lies the root of this bureaucratic ultra-democratism which was the tool (not the cause, but its form of appearance) impeding any connection with the suburban high-school students who, in Paris, carried out, at the same moment and a only a few metro stops away, a massive fight (over the same period several thousands of active high school students developed their actions and their modes of organisation in a completely separate way). The high-school students lived in the local rhythm of wild demonstrations, throwing stones, confronting the cops, blocking streets, plundering some supermarkets, without the Parisian students being even informed of their actions. When a high school was in the immediate surroundings of a university, coordinated actions were organised, i.e. there was an alliance, but never a fusion. The few common attempts of general assemblies (Nanterre and Tolbiac) were a true mess. The high-school students being unable to accept the ultra-organized mould of the student style of organization, these attempts were immediately stopped.

Conversely, the generalisation of the movement (which preserved it as a protest movement in its initial demand) was paradoxically the condition of its smothering. In spite of the March 18th demonstrations, the trade unions did not manage to take over leadership of the struggle. The active groups in the struggle were alien to the trade unions. If the trade unions were not yet recognised by the movement, they were soon to be. Both the trade unions and government, hoped that the immense demonstrations and days of strikes of March 28th, would be successful in making the unions recognised in the movement. Only a great day of strikes and demonstrations could place the trade unions in the situation of representing the movement.

Bernard Thibaut (general secretary of the CGT trade union) could declare in November: "It’s true that one did not see streamers, trade-union flags, but the movement was about jobs, means of living and dignity.” During the anti-CPE movement, who could believe in unity with the November rioters on the basis of a CDI contract for all?

**From November to March**

The November rioters embodied, objectively by their situation and subjectively by their practice, the disappearance of the CDI contract for all and they knew it. (...) No comprehension of the anti-CPE movement is possible if one separates this struggle from the November riots. This is precisely where the problem lies. The middle class saw the social elevator being blocked, the ‘excluded’ know that they will never be able to climb in it and had announced in November that their own situation, in all its aspects, had become unbearable and was a target. The widening of the movement could not be the result of various situations coming together, but of those situations encountering each other with antagonism. (...)
However the objective common base has given birth to divergent – if not frankly opposite – analyses.

- Some people think that the ‘two ends of the stick’ (‘rioters’ and ‘students’) can’t meet. The social, not to say class, differences between the November rioters and CPE opponents make that each group remains in its social sphere and its struggle (in this kind of analysis, the coincidence between the two movements is postponed to a possible future which will unite the elements which are today separated).

- For others, the objective base appeared as a unity of action and struggle, the anti-CPE struggle became a struggle against any form of precariousness and more basically a struggle against the wage-earning system when the anti-CPE struggle extended itself.

- Lastly, some people affirmed that the encounter between the two movements took place because the participants were not so different (there was no conflict between ‘dangerous classes’, ‘true proletarians’ on one side and ‘middle class’ elements on the other side), but they noticed that the encounter was only partial because of ‘defects’ in the various practices. (...)

The contradictory dynamics of the movement was a reality. And the fact that the majority of the university and high school students were opposed to this reality did not change anything but rather underlined its conflictive nature.

Even it was perceived by a minority, it is paradoxically this dynamic, pointing to the necessity of transcending the CPE withdrawal demand, which permitted its fulfilment. Without the diffuse and uncontrollable boiling movement in the secondary schools of the Parisian suburbs and its overflow into the neighbourhoods (supermarkets, transport routes); without the meeting of school students and uneducated young proletarians in Grenoble, Nantes, Rennes, Paris and to a lesser extent in Toulouse or Marseille; without the risks raised by occupations like that of the Sorbonne or the EHESS university; without the real opening carried out by the general assemblies of Nanterre or Villetaneuse universities; without the quick extension of the motorway and railway blockings; without the ‘impromptu processions’ of sometimes several thousands of people, the CPE would not have been withdrawn.

When the movement started to expand in Paris, especially after the March 7th demonstration, the contradictory dynamics of the movement appeared in the self-transformation, in the struggle, of a great part of the movement’s active fraction. In its singularity, the anti-CPE demand met very quickly, but in a contradictory manner, the whole question of precariousness and the evolution of the wage relationship. Those dissatisfied with the sterile forms developed in the student general assemblies wanted to meet each other. It was not a question of introducing in the movement an alien dimension, even less to show the ‘right line’ or to use it as a model, but to put into practice what already existed in the movement. This practical application demanded the permanent occupation of a place.

The first occupation, of the Sorbonne university, was both a failure and a success. It was a failure because the administration answered the occupation by an immediate blockade: a few dozens of students were left isolated in a lecture theatre watched by university ‘vigiles’. But this blockade was then turned by hundreds of demonstrators, not all of them students, who entered by force in the building. The State reaction was immediate, the government did not want to let the Sorbonne become the rallying point which the occupants wanted it to be. The ‘rectorat’ (university administration for all Paris) explicitly justified the expulsion by the fact that non-students had joined the occupation. It was a success because of its repercussion inside the movement, even if the Sorbonne occupation did not aim to be a ‘symbolic’ act.

The occupation of the EHESS (School of High Studies in Social Sciences), permitted by the apparent complicity of some students of this institution, happened just after the Sorbonne occupation. The assembly which met during the four evenings of the occupation included around four hundred people (given the strong turnover, a few thousand people went to the EHESS, either during the assemblies, or at an other moment of the day). The assembly was held at 7 pm to allow people
who worked to participate. There was in fact an important presence of precarious young people working in restaurants and fast foods and other temp workers. The opponents to the movement and the observers (by definition journalists) were not allowed. The assembly was rather a 'forum' than a 'sovereign or 'decision making' authority. A decision only became valid if one fraction of the participants decided to make it effective.

There were however many proposals and few achievements. The EHESS assembly posed the need of transcending the student framework of the movement; it was the first to call for the generalisation of motorway and rail road blocking; it called for 'diverting' official demonstrations, an initiative which attracted a minor fraction of 'external elements'; it realized, at the end of the movement close to the CPE withdraw, the short occupation of a trade union building (Bourse du travail) affirming in a text that "our situation in capitalism can only worsen" (April 4, 2006). In the dynamics of the movement, the great achievement of the EHESS assembly was its own existence.

CPE report from Echanges et Mouvement

What remains of the anti-CPE movement?

A text by Echanges et Mouvement

www.geocities.com/echangesetmouvement/

Some 'revolutionary people', in an article about the autumn 2005 suburbs riots in France asked the question: "Could these riots be integrated into class struggle?". The question, in fact, implied the answer which was "NO, they couldn’t be". These people were not alone to adopt such a position.

The same people did not asked the same question about the spring 2006 anti-CPE movement in France. As if it would have been totally irrelevant to ask then such a question because the answer would have evidently been “YES, it was”; these people thought it did not even have to be asked.

It is not difficult to explain the differences of opinion and analysis about these two major social events that appeared in France only a few months apart. All kinds of organisations (official ones, established parties and unions, revolutionary groups, the rainbow of 'organised' individual vanguard people were totally alien from the suburbs riots and on the contrary, all of them were like fishes in the water in the anti-CPE movement, of course for different and opposed purposes.

On all sides, the capitalists and their ruling bodies (parties and unions) and all the vanguard people (organised or not in formal or informal groups) were contaminated by a common disease: the May 1968 syndrome. There is a persistent legend that in May 68, the student movement was the vanguard of the workers general strike, in other words that this specific category of people (not a class in itself) was more radical and had a better 'consciousness' than the workers and could show them the way and lead them towards an emancipation revolutionary movement. So, in the spring 2006, the vanguard Diaspora felt itself mobilised to intervene in the anti-CPE movement in order to push it on revolutionary paths, to help it to 'go beyond' (according to the words of one of these groups). In general, these vanguard groups were welcomed by the intellectual milieu of the students, because the students were very receptive to intellectual speculation on the future, a practice they mastered well and could easily instil into neophytes’ heads. Even if they did not reveal the conscious or not unconscious purpose of their intervention, the general meaning was that they hoped that the anti-CPE movement could lead, as in May 68, towards a general strike and who knows, towards a 'revolutionary situation'.

On the capitalist side and from the various auxiliaries of the capitalist domination (including any party or union), they were also obsessed by the remembrance of May 1968 and what they considered as the prospect of a student movement sparking a general worker's movement, not only damaging the national economy but also something ruining the political and social role of all the mediating structures working around the labour exploitation.
If we consider the various student movements in France for the past twenty years we can see they were strictly limited to the education problems even if they spread all over France and gathered hundreds of thousands demonstrators, even if they were concerned with conditions of the labour contract for young workers (as with the CPE). In November - December 1986 more than 500,000 demonstrators obliged the government to withdraw a university reform and the education minister to resign (the Sorbonne was occupied and one demonstrator was killed by the cops); November 1990 more than 150,000 student demonstrated in the streets asking for more money for the university system from the social democratic government; 1994, hundreds of thousands of students in the streets against a proposal to pay the young workers only 80% of the minimum wage (called CIP or nicknamed 'Smic jeunes'); though this measure, like the later CPE concerned the labour contract, in spite of huge demonstrations all over France there was no extension of the movement amongst the workers; anyway the project was totally withdrawn; 1999 again, hundreds of thousands of university students against a reform of the education system: reform withdrawn; 2003 in a confused struggle mixing the reform of the retirement system and the structure of the education system, students, teachers and workers demonstrate and took other actions for months throughout the spring, but without a clear result mainly because most of the workers did not participate in the movement which remained essentially limited to the teachers and controlled by the unions; 2005, more limited demonstration against a new reform of the secondary school system (more than 50,000 demonstrators in the streets).

All these various reforms were aimed at a more efficient education system and the ease of exploitation of young workers by the employers – regardless of when the young person left education entered the labour market. However – all the various movements resisting these reforms, even though they concerned future workers and sometimes (like the CIP and the CPE) concerned young workers who were never students, the movements never spread beyond the education system and had no direct influence on class struggle, a struggle involving actual workers.

On the other hand, what we could see is that, if these struggles were important considering the number of demonstrators and the wide spread of the demonstrations all over France, practically they only attracted university and secondary schools students and had no connection with workers’ struggle (even if they sometimes involved adults, parents of students or a display of union bureaucracy). So, although it was of course a social movement, it stayed on the political side with the central demand being the government withdrawal of the CPE.

Amongst all the questions raised by the anti-CPE movement, some deserve more attention:

- Why the movement ended so abruptly only with a vague withdrawal of only an article of a repressive law (even the word 'suppression' was not used for this article) and without having provoked a political turmoil (e.g. the departure of a minister).

- Why, if we deny the role of the traditional student and worker’s unions in the movement (insisting for instance of the importance of the universities assemblies and of the national or regional collectives) could then the movement have stopped so abruptly in one day when all these traditional organisations claimed ‘victory’ leaving the ‘revolutionary’ groups powerless and calling for a last demonstration reduced practically to their own members and followers.

The answers to these questions have to be considered according to the social background of the ‘strikers’ and demonstrators involved in this movement. This question raised quite a lot of controversy. Even if we think that most of them didn’t belong to the traditional ‘middle class’, we have to consider that most of these students (over 16 years old) have already been selected according to their social background, roughly according to the family income. The French education system is built in such a way that most of the children below 16 from families having the lowest income have practically no access to the top levels of the education system (over 16).

Until recently most of these students over 16 years old could hope to climb the social ladder and at the end of their studies have access to a job with a
permanent working contract with a 'normal' wage and the hope of 'building up a career'. It is evident that for the past few years more and more different forms of working contracts (over forty different contracts) have been affected by a new precarity.

For the last few years, this precariousness was the 'normal' lot of many the young people who were obliged to accept any kind of working contract to make a living. These young people did not feel threatened by the new law because for at that age it was simply their life at work for a while and not their future. But, for most of these young over 16, the CPE was the concretisation and generalisation of what they could already see invading the present, dashing their hopes to get, with their fresh degree a more settled situation.

Some commentators have observed that in some demonstrations adults were mixed with the students, jumping then to the conclusion that workers were involved in the movement. In some cases, parents of the young demonstrators normally felt concerned by the future of their children (the reproduction of their social position in the labour force). Then there was also the usual parties', unions' and groups' members who take any opportunity to be seen in the streets. And finally those who used the demonstration to express their general political and social discontent (in a certain way, the movement in itself was, beyond its specificity, the expression of this general discontent which gave a more political than social colour to its meaning).

Some 'revolutionary' groups thought to push the movement to 'go beyond'. The students assemblies, the co-ordination committees, the demonstrations, could provide successful opportunities for promoting any materials for discussions about a future society and the elimination of capitalism. But it was only words even if they could have an echo outside the university walls. The Internet was a marvellous instrument to distribute, all over France and all over the world, this blazing literature propagating the idea that a kind of revolution was in progress. But anyway, sit-ins in the universities and secondary schools had no other effect anyway on the normal course of capitalism and for quite a lot of students, they cared about their university career and examinations, providing lessons so the 'strike' would not be too harmful for their future: in a certain way the same purpose as their action against the CPE. About this question of what was said inside and outside of all the collective organisations of the movement, we have to say that what is essential is not what any people say about themselves or about their aims but what they are effectively doing. On that respect there was an colossal gap between the words and the actions.

To be 'efficient', the 'strikers' had to go elsewhere to be heard and somewhat hoping to 'extend' the movement towards the working class. One of these attempts was the blockade of ways of communications: railways and roads or the entrance of some public buildings. It was a traditional means used frequently by workers or peasants but often, proposed or supported by the traditional unions and harmless for the economic activity as far as they don't last more than some hours. Just like the demonstrations these actions, even repeated, did not go very far and totally lacked the pretended radicality they were supposed to express. Even more, their repetition was somewhat discouraging which was a means used traditionally by the union to soften the too strong movement. But anyway, the social background of most of the students, as described above, and the worry about their future, prevented them using more radical means to extend their movement.

It was the same with the efforts to extend the movement directly towards the workers by distributing leaflets or sometimes picketing at the factory gates; even if sometimes they were supported by some individual or members of some radical groups or unions, even if their blockade of railways lines or stations or the picketing was seen with some sympathy by the workers, all these actions were without consequence particularly for the running of the economy. Even there, all these actions were noticeable by their lack of radicality, for instance they did not even try to resort to sabotage.

It was for all these considerations that the somewhat frustrated 'vanguard minorities' tried to re-shuffle the movement with some 'coupes' supposed to awake the sleeping giant (the May 68 syn-
drome). The short occupations of the Sorbonne, or of the university school EHESS, failed as well simply because the present situation, even mobilising quite a lot of students in occupations and in the streets, completely lacked the 1968 background. A close analysis of the movement from its beginning could have led to such a conclusion but, as ever, it is precisely the function of the vanguard (organised or not) to see in any social event the eventual potential for a revolution.

What remains of the anti CPE movement?

The pretended victory which brought an abrupt end to all kinds of actions (except in some universities, but not for long) was a Pyrrhic (paper) victory:

All the students run to recuperate the ‘lost’ time and pass their examinations and some of them to repopulate the left (or ultra left) parties (more than 60,000 for the Socialist Party); as in the previous students movements in the past, we certainly will see some of the ‘leaders’ climbing the political ladder in the years to come. Some more ‘radical’ tried during the summer to gather what was left of the co-ordination committees, making plans to start something up again when the school year resumed in October, and they failed. Some commentators could explain that the movement was a good training for young people and that the experience gained during these days would not be lost and would be a good start to trigger class struggle when they start a professional life. That has to be seen, as then their fight will depend on their place in the production process and for sure most of these students don’t be at the lowest levels of the hierarchy.

The precariousness which was the actual stake in the movement was ‘organised’. Some commentators tried to explain that the movement had a wider political background, at first that one of the aims was to remove the ‘equal opportunities’ law. As the movement stopped abruptly as soon as some obscure discussions between the government and the traditional students’ and workers’ unions proclaimed that only one article of this law was put on the shelf - the one concerning the CPE - we can jump to the conclusion that most of the students did not care at all about this repressive law concerning essentially not them but the suburban population. On the other hand the movement, though not expressly showing this character, was more the consequence of a general discontent already seen in other movements or in recent polls: this tendency gave a more political tone to the whole movement.

The anti-CPE movement has been the students’ and workers’ unions cat’s paw: and they have played their usual function. Not only were they not initially against the CPE any more than against the CNE (the movement was not initiated by them) but quickly they see their interest in being more or less the organisers (fixing the dates and characters of the biggest national days of demonstrations and even providing them assistance to keep order). Workers’ unions had been discussing modification of the labour laws for a while, in order to find an answer to the unemployment and precariousness. The government and the boss unions were studying the same questions from their side. A general plan was already well on the way with contacts between all these people: on each side references were made more and more openly to a complete structuring of the labour laws under the name of ‘Professional Social Security’ who’s specific aim was to “organise” precariousness, to give it a legal general frame at the same time artificially reducing unemployment. The anti-CPE movement helped in fact, even if the CPE was removed, to go ahead with this reform with all the social representatives. This new organisation of precariousness is already actually tested in some parts of France: if it succeeds the project is to generalise it: so the anti-CPE movement will be buried in its pretended ‘victory’.

To come back to the ‘equal opportunities’ law, we can say now that it is not by chance that this law was not dismantled. On one hand as has been mentioned, most of the students were not at all concerned by this law. On the other hand all the organisations and political parties as well as the government did not know how to cope with the suburbs riots and more generally with the poverty of an important part of the population because it was the very problem of capitalism and of a communist revolution. Nobody wanted to remove this law which presently appears even inefficient.
against the 'suburb problem'. Recently figures were given on an serious increase of crime in the suburban areas and of the consequences of the autumn 2005 riots: young people have become more aggressive, provocative and less respectful of the law. In a certain way the clashes between the students and the suburbs young during the spring anti-CPE demonstrations were somewhat expressing the distance between the two movements. If the students have come back to their future (even not very clear), the suburban young have come back to their present with no future.

Greek student movement

A brief outline of the student movement in Greece, June 2006

An article written by a group based in Athens, TPTG, JULY, 2006

On the 28th of April, the Greek ministry of education published a draft proposal for a bill regarding the reform of university education. The key points of this proposal are the following ones: Specific regulations for the expulsion of 'inefficient' students. This category includes students failing to complete their studies after n + n/2 years, where n is the scheduled duration [a two year course must be completed in three years, a six year course in nine years], as well as students failing in a main course more than three times. It must be noted that the state had repeatedly and unsuccessfully tried to introduce such regulations since the beginning of the 80's. Economic 'rationalization' and cutting down on expenses by appointing financial managers, putting an end to the provision of free textbooks for university courses, as well as establishing 'retributive scholarships' for poor students. Setting university spaces practically open to police raids through the abolition of 'academic sanctuary'. Student mobilizations and university occupations will be more difficult to take place in the future since prosecution will become possible. At the same time, there is an ongoing process for the revision of the constitution which will enable the establishment of private universities. This proposal, which was to be voted during the summer in the parliament, is the last one in a series of laws passed in the previous years considering the alignment of university education with the imperatives of 'lifelong learning', quantification, standardization and evaluation of academic labour, but which have not been implemented yet. At this point, it must be emphasized that these policies conform to a broader initiative in the context of the European Union referred to as 'Bologna Process'. This initiative has codified the main goals of neo-liberal restructuring of university education listed below:

Adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees through the establishment of a system of credits in the context of a two-cycle degree system;

Promotion of mobility of students, staff and graduates;

Promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance;

Effective accommodation of labour market needs and, thus, flexibility of provided studies.

The publication of the planned reform was the sparkle that ignited students' mobilizations which started in the end of May and spread quickly all over the country. In the beginning of June, at the culmination of the movement, more than 2/3s of university departments were occupied and continuous mass protests and demos disrupted the city centres of Athens and Thessaloniki (an unexpected development since no student mobilizations have taken place in the last 20 years at this time of the year, just before summer exams and holidays). The government was obliged to 'freeze' the reform, postponing it, possibly for next autumn. Due to the freeze and the summer break, mobilizations have stopped with a promise of reappearing next autumn.

Occupations were practically supported by the most active students (leftists and autonomous elements), but the participation in assemblies and demos was high. The struggle was also supported by the union of university teachers, or, better say, those teachers who do not or can't participate in the entrepreneurial university activities. Students'
high participation is attributed to accumulated discontent with the continuous intensification of the studies and the widespread experience of precarious and devalued labour. A more thorough research about the class composition of the movement, the everyday experience of the subjects of the struggle, their goals and ideas remains to be made.

What we can say for sure is that slogans and activities in the demos and the leaflets that were distributed expressed a lack of imagination and that they mostly reflected the ideas of the state capitalist political organizations active in the universities. The latter ones insist on the maintenance of the ‘public and free [that is, state controlled] character of university education’ and the demand for ‘full and secure employment’. On the other hand, the rank-and-file expressed an inarticulate denial of the worsening conditions in the university and the workplaces and an outright desire to stop work time. Very few attempts were made to address wage workers. In one of them the Thessaloniki Medicine School students organised a meeting with doctors and nurses working in the nearby hospitals (many of them are precarious workers). In another case, some radical elements (both students and non-students) organised an expropriation of books from a big book store in Athens during a big demo, protesting against the abolition of free textbooks. They also distributed leaflets to the personnel, explaining the meaning of this expropriation. And, of course, during the demos there were the usual anarchist attacks on banks and cops.

Greek report and leaflet

Occupation, not democracy!

This is a short text, then a copy of a leaflet by a group in Thessaloniki called Blaumachen.

Introduction

To begin with we should write some introductory lines about the students’ movement that spread throughout Greece during last May and June. We believe this is necessary since very few information on it is available in English. We write considering ourselves a part of that movement, given that at least half of Blaumachen’s members are students themselves. Higher Education in Greece is undergoing restructuring in accordance to ‘Bologna Declaration’ (1999) and as a part of the wider neo-liberal restructuring of the indigenous capital relations. The aim is, as elsewhere in Europe, producing a rather flexible labour force, susceptible to life-long learning and reskilling. This policy has created an increasingly proletarianized young population, doomed for its most parts to flexible working conditions and/or unemployment. The present Higher Education restructuring met the first waves of resistance in the 2001 students’ struggle. However, that struggle has ended, school work has increasingly intensified since then and at the same time some legislative reforms have already taken place (although they have not been implemented yet). The present (neo-conservative) government’s efforts aim at revising the constitution which for now secures the public character of Higher Education and reforming the legislation concerning Higher Education in order to align university with the imperatives of evaluation, competitiveness, flexibilization and commodification. This attempt ignited the recent students’ struggle. ‘June’s days’ were the most massive students’ movement in Greece since 1986. 430 university and technical university departments were occupied (451 in all), a great number of demonstrations (with the biggest of them in Athens and Thessaloniki with twenty and ten thousands demonstrators respectively), clashes with cops in Athens’ centre and massive general assemblies taking place. In our opinion, we can understand nothing about this struggle if we think that the draft proposal of the new bill is the only problem for this young proletariat occupying university buildings, giving up studying, demonstrating and making its own festivals. Instead, we live a social explosion which reflects the accumulated anger, the negation of an everyday life in campuses increasingly intensified, of the poverty of the limitlessly limited choices offered by the spectacle, of the promise of a future with nothing more than even more work, even more insecurity, even more fear. The strong and determined opposition
to the new bill represents this young proletariat’s reply to the neo-liberal fixations: don’t blame us for the fact that social needs are not covered; we won’t pay for this; we won’t try any harder. However, this negation is fractured and (so far) not united towards a radical critique of the existing world. What emerges so far as the dominant tendency of this movement, a tendency which is continually reinforced by the Left, is the defence against the legislative reform in Higher Education, which means the affirmation of an earlier form of class settlement. This is reflected in slogans such as “Public and Free Education”, “We want jobs, not unemployment” …

Eventually, this movement ended in late June, when the government announced that the introduction of the new law will be postponed till autumn; in regard to this, we shouldn’t ignore both the practices of the (reformist or radical) social-democratic leftist organisations and the imminent summer break. We know that this introduction is too short to describe and criticize a whole social struggle. This is not the place to take on such a work. We are working on such a project in Greek right now. For now, we publish in English our contribution Occupation, not democracy!. This leaflet was written by some of us together with other comrades during the early days of the movement. It was distributed during the second week of the occupations and in the 10000 people demonstration in Thessaloniki. Its content was determined by what we saw then as the major weaknesses of the movement, i.e. the adherence to democratic procedures and generally to a democratic ideology along with the absence of any critique of school work and of the media’s mediating role. Another leaflet under the title ‘Let the occupations become time-barricades’ was distributed in Athens and Thessaloniki during the third and fourth week of the movement, criticizing the various leftist groups and introducing the ‘social wage [minimum income]’ demand. We hope that this will be also available to English readers in the future.

Leaflet Text:
About some widely spread myths; to be used by the fighting students (and not only them) of June

The idea of democratically debating every day with those who are against the strike on the renewal of the strike is absurd. The strike has never been a democratic practice, but a political accomplished fact, an immediate expropriation, a relationship of power. No one has ever voted the establishment of capitalism. […] A strange idea haunts this movement, the idea of occupying university buildings only during work hours. This is an occupation that does not liberate space. An occupation where fire fighters, administrators and pretexts of authority and safety continue to make us childish, and where the university will remain simply a university. It’s true that once we’ve taken over this space, we would need to populate it, populate it with things other than the desire to return to normal. We have to embrace with serenity the fact that there will be no return to normal, and then inhabit this irreversibility […] No one has the right to tell us that what we are doing is ‘illegitimate’. We don’t have to see ourselves as spectators of the struggle, even less should we see ourselves from the point of view of the enemy. Legitimacy belongs to those who believe in their actions, to those who know what they are doing and why they are doing it. This idea of legitimacy is obviously opposed to that of the State, majority and representation. It does not submit to the same rationales, it imposes its own rationales. If the politicizing consists in a struggle of different legitimacies, of different ideas of happiness, our task from now on is to give means to this struggle with no other limit but what appears to us to be just and joyful.

From “An Update by the Sorbonne Occupation Committee in Exile”, distributed during the March unrest in France. We begin this small note by tracking a moment of the social explosion in France a few months ago. Indeed, we are referring to France but mainly not to what actually happened there but to what didn’t happen; to the failings and weaknesses of that movement; to the revolutionary content that didn’t exist and to the
practices that didn’t take place; to anything we need to overcome as that struggle’s lessons become a part of our own memory, of our own struggle here. The movement in France has ended. What it has left is not only the partial withdrawal of the ‘CPE’, but also a legacy in the minds of those been there, in the streets of the ‘City of Light’ and the rest of France; moments of human poetry and collective joy. The whole campus in our city is now occupied and under our control. We demonstrate in the streets to overthrow capital’s attack against our lives, an attack represented by the new bill. We do not accept the solution capital offers us. This doesn’t mean that we are satisfied with what now exists. By occupying the university, by fighting, we create a time-barricade, which we desire to become a total attack against the existing world. We are tired of working more and more intensively and always without pay. We are tired of all this crap like ‘student life’, ‘knowledge’ and ‘education’. We are outraged with the fact that we get to think how capital could better manage our exploitation. We are distressed by political games, political tactics and every thought concerning political cost. Only those who go into politics could have a political cost. The only politics we are concerned with is the abolition of politics. So we need to get over with some myths haunting the minds of lots of people with whom we struggle together, side by side.

First myth: Majority is always right

The idea that within a movement one must count hands, or even that one could, makes no sense. To yield to this idea is to place oneself at the mercy of the democratic illusion according to which the collective will is the simple addition of sovereign individual wills, whereas in reality it is always the result of a complex play of reciprocal influences. The democratic myth wishes to convince us that only individuals exist, each one with its own responsibilities, its own will and its own thoughts. Our experience, however, proves that human relationships, communities and the joy of human contact exist; what we see is that all these are destroyed day by day. Their democracy wants us to be alone, neurotic isolated individuals. Their contradiction is that we cannot produce profit for them by being isolated, so the productive cooperation between us must always be ensured. In this contradiction is where our power lies. When deliberative proceedings are constituted (an assembly, a coordination or a parliament) the principal question is not the procedures by which the will of all the participants can best express itself, but the relation between the process of debate and the action, a question which cannot be dissociated from the nature of the action itself. We don’t care about procedures in which everybody’s opinion can be expressed. We don’t want to debate with everybody. The opinion of those who try in a certain time to change the conditions of their lives is what concerns us. If a situation is sufficiently rich in possibilities, one can well conceive of a minority undertaking its own action alongside the majority, and that the result of their actions then leads a good part of the majority to join the minority, or else shows the minority that it was mistaken. The domination of the democratic illusion would lead the minority to inertia due to respect towards the majority and the movement as a whole would lose the opportunity for a qualitative leap forward. What we say here can be easily understood if we think of the procedure of the students’ general assemblies. We are all glad that the majority supports the occupation and the struggle. But what would happen if DAP [the government students’ organisation] (or any “DAP”) mobilised more people in some schools (or even in all of them) becoming the majority? Should we accept our defeat by adhering to democratic legitimacy? Every democratic procedure ends up in turning against our revolt. The State and all parties are quite familiar with breaking the limits of the democratic legitimacy whenever it doesn’t suit their aims. The proof lies equally in the history of fascist regimes and our direct experience of our struggle right now. We would be even happier if 500 people determined to keep up fighting, although a minority in a general assembly, destroyed majority’s dictatorship.

Second myth: Occupation is just a means to an end

Even though most universities in the country are occupied, there are still many different understandings of the significance of our occupying our workplaces. Occupation is an act that blocks the
productive process, whether cars are produced, higher education or human-commodities, namely us. From this point of view, occupation can be considered as a means of pressure, since it freezes the profit-producing process (and no boss, no government can accept such a freeze). But, all the more so, occupation is an act of re-appropriating the space and time dominated by capital. Blocking university’s function means that first of all we stop working, studying, going round hospitals and compulsory courses. At last we have some time... some time to live (something that we cannot usually do). At last we feel that the university campus belongs to us and we give up wasting our everyday activity in an alien place. At last we can truly meet with other people, laugh, laze, enjoy ourselves. We know that in the present situation these moments of negation are probably temporary. In a couple of weeks the occupation will end. Nevertheless, we have to embrace with serenity the fact that there will be no return to normal, and then inhabit this irreversibility.

To prevent this bill from being voted or implemented is important since the latter would make our lives worse. It’s also important to create those organizational forms that would question the democratic myth and avoid getting fixed as such, since every fixed organisational form is alien to us. No particular form will ever guarantee the nature of the movement. But, what primarily concerns us is to create situations able to make the possibility of returning to the former state of affairs difficult. It is a question of starting to modify, however slightly, the conditions of existence of those touched by the movement - both within it and outside it. About 20 years ago, in France again, some postmen put forward the idea of delivering the mail for free. If only one post office had done it -for example by stamping all the letters without charge- it would have made an impact from which the whole movement would have benefited and the shock waves of which would have spread throughout society: the action of a minority would have had infinitely more weight, for themselves as well as for the others, than a hundred thousand votes in the assemblies.

Third myth: Images and actions

This movement is haunted by the idea of drawing the media’s attention to its actions and ‘fair demands’. We find this idea absurd and even hostile. The only role the media can play is that of incorporating the movement’s language into the dominant one, into capital’s language. The only attitude we should have towards the media is that of totally negating the domination of images. As long as the movement remains within the limits of managing capital’s problems it will be reconciled with the language of the media (or at least of those [media] in opposition to present government’s strategy). Our word may escape the mediation of images and journalists’ lies only by the development of its own quality and its reflection into the respective decided actions. Practices of revolt have already emerged; we have blocked the productive process of teaching and research in the campuses. We have to expand such practices into the terrain of circulation of commodities-things and human commodities by blocking roads and railway stations. We have much to learn from the French experience in relation to this. After all, don’t we want to block the reproduction of capital’s social relations? Don’t we want to abolish anything that alienates us from our own life? Towards this direction, the movement has to find its own means of circulating its word; it must develop its own voice. The strength of a movement is in its effective power, not in what is being said about it, and the malicious gossip about it. The dictatorship of images isn’t restricted only to the relation between the movement and the media. It also involves the relations developed among individuals into that same movement. Separation is the alpha and omega of the spectacle; separation between those involved in the movement and those watching it (fragmented) on TV; between those just voting for actions and those taking part in them; between those just taking part in and those organizing actions and so on...these separations create spectators at different levels. This world which is founded upon our separation from the products of our activity and our creative ability reproduces us as spectators of our life. We are used to watch our life rather than make it. This fact is so firmly imprinted on our brains and bodies that it is pre-
served during our struggles, too. Take as an example the admiration for those with “leading abilities” or with the ability to give a rousing speech, the applause for vain unionists’ words, the millions of photos from massive general assemblies, the obsessional idea that our demonstrations should head towards governmental buildings—symbols of decision making, the spectacular collision with the cops—this is the spectacle laying wait. The spectacle is the nightmare of imprisoned modern society which ultimately expresses nothing more than its desire to sleep. The spectacle is the guardian of sleep. What the movement must do is to crush the images through our creative actions.

Fourth myth: Coordination

National coordination reflects the sterility of politics and essentially our weakness. Unionists and dozens of leftist groups offer platforms written in advance by their leadership. National coordination is a certain political power’s attempt to dominate the movement. We know that coordinating the actions of the various parts of the movement in a broader framework is necessary; so is the development of ideas within the movement. However, not only doesn’t the national coordination (in the way it has developed so far) promote this, but it is also hostile to such a necessity. The only existing debate is about whether coordination is necessary or not, about the ‘when’ and the ‘where’, but there is no discussion about what exactly we are going to coordinate. Discussion about the content of our actions is almost totally absent from the most occupation committees. In cases where only one political power dominates, content is self-evident; it is its political platform. In the rest of the committees discussion is always postponed in order for a so-called unity over the ‘minimums’ not to be disrupted. It is quite clear that under such conditions national coordination means the domination of the political platform of the organisation or the organisations that will dominate (primarily in terms of numbers) in the amphitheatre’s conflict. They want us to be spectators. Instead, since we don’t seek for the ‘minimums’ but for the maximum (“We don’t want just a loaf of bread, but the whole fucking bakery”, according to an old slogan), we must destroy their aspirations and coordinate our actions in an autonomous way.

Fifth myth: You are wrong; I don’t work…but when I grow up I’ll become a doctor!

Very few people have yet to understand that university is tied up with the labour market; nobody believes that higher education has such fairy aims as broadening one’s horizons, creating “renaissance men” or other such crap reminding of Plato’s Academy (for the lovers of antiquity we should only remind that in ancient Athens there had not only been those nice guys—male of course—debating during the procedures of direct democracy, but many, too many slaves as well, who would pleasantly piss upon the gates of the “ideal society”). On the one hand, university produces knowledge necessary for the reproduction of waged labour relations (new technology, the ideological mist of an exploitative society etc.). On the other, new workers are produced furnished with those attributes that make them more exploitable for their future employers (unskilled, flexible, categorized and of course compromised with capitalist reality - the new law is just to complete this condition). What is well hidden is that university studies are labour, not just potentially labour. We are already involved in the productive process, producing a very precious commodity; ourselves. Students’ working hours resemble those of the “free” employable or better still those of the one who is totally subsumed under the labour exploitative relation; of them who have been working for their whole life. In medical school (most of us waste our everyday lives here), which vomits a so-called upper crust of workers into the market, school work is increasingly intensified. The modern version of the future doctor is constructed of many hours of practical training in teaching hospitals, days of duty, compulsory attendance at several courses and lectures and full-time studying, which has nothing to do with the renaissance dream of homo universalis. The ideological veil of this intensified unpaid labour consists of words like “education”, “professionalism” and “conscience”. A whole generation of young people has been nursed with the values of the American-Dream-Made-in-Greece, that of becoming a respectable lawyer or doctor; and when one is com-
mitted to become an expert at their object (see exhaustive work without any “free time”), complete their university qualifications with honours (see individualism and fierce competition), lick his doctors-educators’ ass, they will be rewarded with the respective social acknowledgement and a big wage. We’ll probably have to remind that the era during which many doctors had been a secure middle class faction has ended for some years now. Medical students come in their majority from working class families, which cannot afford even a small private consulting room. Most of them are going to be employed in one of the various health services’ enterprises (private or state funded) or otherwise be a part of the so-called industrial reserve army. A huge medical proletariat has emerged in Greece during the last 10 years; capital has nothing else to offer us as a solution apart from introducing exams in order for one to get a medical speciality, together with a system of continuously evaluating working doctors. One can advance when they deserve it. Deserve what? A reward for being more productive for capital. Exhaustive alienated labour in the school means (not for everyone) passing the exams and becoming a resident; becoming a resident means (for everyone) exhaustive alienated labour in the hospital.

Sixth myth: A myth that includes all myths

In order to conclude; we are not concerned with any discussion about the knowledge provided by the university. We don’t seek for an alien, dead, indifferent, incomprehensible knowledge facing us, with ourselves just absorbing it. We are not concerned with any discussion about improving the democratic institutions of this society. We don’t desire to be alone, isolated individuals with our relations mediated by money, images or voting. We are not concerned with any discussion about the way our representatives could correspond better to our demands. We don’t want to be spectators. We are not concerned with any discussion about the way our labour could be organized in a different way. We don’t want to work. We don’t want to be fragmented: doctors, workers, citizens, consumers, men, women, now working, later entertaining ourselves and once in a while voting in procedures separated from the unceasing movement of life. We are concerned with turning our life into a unified and creative experience. In order to manage this we must abolish this university and the rest of the commodity society. “We’ve made our body a vast graveyard of murdered desires and anticipations; we abandon the most important, the most essential things, like playing and talking with kids and animals, with flowers and trees, playing with each other and being happy, making love, enjoying nature, the beautiful products of human hand and mind, gently diving deep inside ourselves, getting to know ourselves and people next to us…” -Chronis Missios, Smile, man... What’s so damn hard?

With regards from AUTH’s Medical School’s occupation, Luther Blissett

'underclasses' debate

Introduction to debate on the new 'under classes'

Translated from Wildcat no.77, Summer 2006
www.wildcat-www.de

The income disparity in Germany aggravates, the rate of long-term and youth unemployment consolidates, the majority of workers have to face real income losses, particularly in the low wage sector: the number of working poor increases, people who work but cannot make ends meet. Studies undertaken by the federal employment agency, the official report on poverty published by the federal government and other analysis officially

1 A debate taking place in Europe since the late 90s. During recent years politicians, academics and other social managers discovered that mass-unemployment creates a layer in society which allegedly can not be re-integrated in the labour market and which breeds another generation of small criminals and social benefit claimants. The debate was intensified after the riots in the suburbs in France. Within the left the usual attitude towards these new ‘sub-proletarians’ is hostile: in England they are caricatured as ‘chars’, who are only interested in cheap thrills, in Germany the entire unemployed youth in the East is declared as right-wing thugs, in Italy the left leaves the suburbs to the ‘right-wing Mafiosi’ and in France the left sees the suburbs as Arabic no-go-areas.
state this as fact. The facts are known and undisputed, but the question is how to interpret them.

“Of course there are under-classes in Germany”, says the conservative historian Paul Nolte and he refers to people who are “unwilling to work and integrate”, sometimes he simply refers to 'Neukölln'. There in Neukölln people eat too much fast-food, they watch telly all day (and the wrong programs!), make too many children to whom they cannot serve as role-models. These 'under classes' themselves are responsible for their situation, therefore it is wrong for the welfare state to grant them a livelihood. This is the ideological background music for the enforcement of the Hartz IV reform which first of all aims at extending the low wage sector. In order to do that the 'superfluous' and 'delinquent' parts of the working class are captured as caricatures and put on stage for public bashing. This picture of the 'underclass' is an offer to other parts of the working class to draw a clear line between themselves and those 'on the bottom' by showing self-initiative and proper behaviour. In times of social upheavals similar pictures served for the legitimation of 'security' measures and repression. Everyone who lives in these alleged 'underclass' areas knows how little these characteristics relate to reality and how much they are ideological constructions. During the last months we could follow how such constructions are used in the public debate. Be it a murder committed in order to 'secure the family honour' or racist violence against 'coloured people'. Be it an open letter of teachers which aimed at the dissolution of the (Rütti) secondary modern school. Be it 'violent school students' (kids from a poor or, if politically convenient, from a migration background, or daft German racists (underclass, wrong telly programmes), or the Islamic threat (immigrants). They all call for more cops, more social work, more (forced) integration in the German Leitkultur, in any case they are grist to the states mill. Emancipatory developments within the third or fourth generation of Turkish or Kurdish immigrants – to which murder of honour is a brutal answer of a decaying patriarchy – are completely blanked out. The practical element of the 'underclass debate' a la Nolte is the fact that it can be turned into a social or cultural question depending on tactical political convenience. If necessary it can be attached to the culturalism a la Le Pen or Junge Freiheit, as well.

From 'Gastarbeiter' to 'youth with migration background'

Since there is Germany, there is immigration. The working class always had a foreign or an immigrant face ('Ruhrarea Poles', 'East-Jews', 'Refugees', 'Itacker', ...). The boom in the 60s was only possible on the backs of the 'Gastarbeiter'. The annual immigration of workers (mainly from Spain, Portugal, Italy, Turkey, Greece, Yugoslavia) increased from 330,000 in 1960, to 1,5 million in 1969 to 2,6 million in 1973. Work and the struggle against work was the main integrator of this cycle of migration. In independent struggles at the end of the 60s and at the beginning of the 70s these 'Gastarbeiter' were able to get rid off their low wage categories and to enforce general wage hikes. The scope of the struggles (striking skilled and chemical workers, student- and youth movement) went far beyond the immediate working conditions and wages, they questioned the totality of social relations. The struggles weakened the racism within the working class (e.g. fear of the new workers who would put pressure on wages and dissolve the unity). After the government decided to stop the mass recruitment of workers from abroad in 1973, some of the foreign workers stayed in Germany for good. Which was not, however, the plans of politicians and employers –

2 Neukölln is an area of Berlin with high (migrant) unemployment. It became a synonym for ‘under-class area’ when teachers of a school wrote an open letter to the mayor in spring 2006 refusing to continue teaching. They claimed that due to the violent and criminal behaviour of the students and their insufficient knowledge of the German language they are unable to do their job. The conservatives used this in order to state the failure of the ‘multicultural’ model of integration.

3 Hartz IV was a major reform of the unemployment benefit system undertaken by the social-democratic ex-government in 2003/2004. For more info on the reform and protests against it see prole-position newsletter no.1 and no.2.

4 German right-wing magazine

5 'Guest worker', official term for migrant workers hired by German companies in the 50s and 60s

6 Swear word for Italians in the 50s
and often not the immigrants own original life plans.

Of 14 million Gastarbeiter who came to Germany before 1973 about 11 million went back to their countries of origin. A lot of those who stayed sent for their families or partners and settled down in Germany together with them. The 80s were characterised by these family reunions and a new wave of migration. After the military coup in Turkey a lot of young and politically aware Turkish from urban backgrounds came to Germany and its factories. The lifestyle from southern Europe changed the culture of daily life. Bit by bit the immigrants workers’ clubs focused their politics on the new ‘home country’ and thousands of immigrant workers were integrated in the union structures. ‘Gastarbeiter’ became ‘foreigners in Germany’ or ‘immigrated Germans’. The current debate on ‘integration’ and ‘migrant background’ seems surprised to acknowledge that the numbers of the ‘migrant population’ is much higher than supposed.\textsuperscript{7} But today migration and the debates around it take place in a changed social context. While the first generation Gastarbeiter (workers who often were not able to read or write) was socially integrated through the work process and the class struggle, today a lot of young kids with a ‘migration background’ are excluded from regular jobs. And the share of ‘migrants’ increases the younger people are. Since 2001 youth unemployment increased by 50 percent and kids with a ‘migration background’ are particularly effected: in some bigger towns half of the youth of a certain age group are unemployed. The school system is aggravating this tendency. According to the PISA\textsuperscript{8}

7 “The share of the population with migration background is essentially higher than it was thought to be. About a fifth or about 15 million people have migrated themselves or have at least one parent who was not born here. Accordingly, at 18.6 percent, the share of people with migration background is double as high as the share of foreigners in Germany. There are major regional differences. In West-Germany the share of migrants and their off-spring is 21.5 percent which is four times as high as in the new federal states, where the share is 5.2 percent. 27.2 percent of people aged under 25 years have a migration background and already one third of children under six years”. Financial Times Germany, 6th of June 2006

8 European wide governmental study on the education system study 40 per cent of migrant youth do not have a ‘basic knowledge’ of maths, German and science.

**Generational Ruptures**

Again and again state and employers try hard to undermine the cohesion which exists between the following aspects: on one hand the high productivity of an industrial production process, on the other hand high wages of core workers, minor wage disparities, high welfare costs and the unwillingness of parts of the class to subject themselves to the production process. Hartz IV and increasing repression are meant to put pressure on the welfare-fed ‘over-population’. The share of unskilled or semi-skilled workers of the total employment\textsuperscript{9} has decreased from 25 percent (1985) to 20.5 percent (1995) and is likely to shrink to 16 percent by 2010. The classical jobs for un-skilled workers in the textile industry, the steel and machine-operating sector, the mining sector, in warehouses and in agriculture have been cut. At DaimlerCrysler people who have ‘only’ finished secondary modern school (nine years of school education) hardly have a chance to get an apprenticeship. The unemployment amongst low-qualified (job qualification or A-level school education) is double as high as the average – an indication for the fact that the low-wage sector is (still) underdeveloped. A lot of the future low-wage jobs are supposed to be created in the service sector, but is there any former industrial worker who wants to lick the boots of bosses and clients for 25 percent less money, who wants to ‘serve’? The artisan and handy-craft worker of the early twentieth century, proud of his or her position as a skilled worker, wanted and expected that their children would follow in their footsteps. About 70 years later the kids of the factory workers did not want to go to work in the factories and their parents worked hard for their chance to become ‘something better’. During the expansive phase of capital a considerable part of the working class had the chance to climb up the social ladder by achieving better educational qualifications, further training or even by going to university. The expansion of mass production which was based on

9 Total employment is defined by all jobs which pay a contribution to the social security system.
an intensified division of labour had to be secured by further migration. The worldwide wave of class struggle lead to an explosion of the reproduction costs of the commodity labour power in Germany (welfare system, public swimming pools, universities, ...) and the wage differences within the labour force diminished, taking the wages in the core industries as a fixed point. Along with increased qualification and career opportunities the birth rate shrunk and in the context of the ’68 movement a part of the new generation refused a workers life from cradle to pension. The highly productive working class does not reproduce itself any more.

At the same time the distribution of the total labour volume is changing. About two decades ago over 80 percent of the workers were employed full-time and in regular jobs, today only 68 percent are. The labour volume has decreased generally, more male are unemployed and more women have entered jobs, but they work less hours for less money. The temp-work sector is growing (in 2005 by ten percent), though only 30 percent of the temps are “un-skilled” or “helpers”. The male factory work force has been diminished constantly.

The current social ruptures also result in ’moral decline’. First of all this shows in increasing violence within the class. And even in times when violence generalises itself and becomes an upheaval, like during the riots in the French suburbs (see prol-position no.5), most often the small cars of the proletarian neighbours are set on fire. But the ’excluded’ take part in movements of students and workers to a massive extent, e.g. in the movement against the CPE in France (see article in this issue) or the ’Si se puede’ migrants movement in the US (see link in prol-position no.5). Therefore the powers are increasingly afraid of the possibility that the violence and frustration could leap over into the town centres and better-off areas. Therefore the sociologists intensify their research of (migrant) kids (in urban secondary modern schools), of hooligans during the world cup and of right-wing thugs, therefore the repression is fortified.

Fear of ’moral decline’

The social rupture creates feelings of insecurity, the fear of social degradation has its effects on the shop-floor and functions as a way to divide the class. The exclusion from wage labour and the states refusal to grant the necessary means of reproduction, impedes the ’excluded’, who are lacking a space of common experience, and the ’enclosed’ [those trapped in wage labour]. coming together as working class.

The radical left does not know how to handle social reality. For years the anti-racist left cares for refugees and asylum-seekers but the second and third generation of migrant kids remains alien to them and vice versa. The anti fascist left fights against fascist cadres and structures but leaves the suburbs and whole (east-German) regions to the agitation of the far right. Even on the home turf of squatted houses, like recently in Cologne (see article in this issue), only a few people managed to deal with the contradictory composition of people involved. Even though the anger and the determined action of the mixed composition of squatters was the driving force. While living together and organising daily life, the squatters were able to learn a lot from each other. The kids managed to resist being locked up in young peoples homes and created a meeting point and information structures.

The space widens

Although the fear of those in power concerning an uncontrollable development is mainly justified by experiences outside of Germany and although the Monday demonstrations (see prol-position no.1) are already part of history: all in all the space for struggle movements has widened. Unemployment benefit ALG II brings the material condition of social benefit claimants, unemployed workers, proles and people who cannot or do not want to work to one and the same level. It standardises the material condition of people who, previous to the Hartz IV reform, had been neatly divided into different (benefit) categories. To a large extend the shame of being a social benefit claimant turned into consciousness of being one out of four million unjustly treated people.
During struggles, in strike tents and at assemblies, the atmosphere became more open. People are more active themselves and contribute to organisation and discussion. Unlike in the past, today you can visit any strike and find people who are eager to debate. While the debate on under classes is a debate of exclusion and inclusion (in a double sense: lock-up some, integrate the rest), the experiences within the struggles head towards the opposite direction.

Barmer Block

Cologne: ‘Barmer Block’ occupied. The feeling of great potentials...

Wildcat no.77, Summer 2006
www.wildcat-www.de

For over three months in the ‘Barmer Block’ housing estate an unusual squatting experiment took place. It was unusual not only in its duration and size, but more than that its social composition. The space which had been opened by some lefties was taken over by ‘the street’. This created an explosive mixture which not only troubled the city council administration but also created major internal conflicts. Most lefties proved themselves to be unable or unwilling to deal with the contradictions of actual social movements.

By building the Barmer Block – 260 flats around a park-like courtyard - in 1914, the Erbbauverein co-operation started the construction of a housing estate for postal workers in Deutz, a part of Cologne. Due to recent re-developments the housing estate got wedged in by the ICE (high speed train) station and the (industrial) trade-fair centre, and exactly for these two projects 381 flats in good condition were supposed to be demolished. The developers presented pompous plans for a ‘trade-fair foyer’ and a congress centre with towers and in order to put these plans into practice the town council bought the houses for 67 million Euros.

The Erbbauverein (hereditary building association) constructed new flats in different parts of town for the 1,000 inhabitants of the Barmer housing estate. Then Unesco threatened taking the Cologne Cathedral off the list of the World Cultural Heritages if the new towers would be built in the area. By end of 2005 all investors had left the project and the plans dissolved into nothing. Only the plan for demolishing the flats was persistently held on to by the town council. If the flats were not demolished for shiny building projects then at least for new parking lots. The left in Cologne only got aware of the scandal at a very late stage and only acted when all tenants had already moved out. In February the Monday-demonstration1 called for a protest march which was rather small. Together with some people of the SSK2, the SSM3 and unemployed initiatives open assemblies were organised. The SSM registered a porter cabin as a constant demonstration on the premises of the housing estate. When the demolition date came closer some people of this group decided spontaneously on 3rd of March to occupy the building. No-one really thought that this occupation would last for more than one or two days. Mainly because of the fact that in recent years all squatting projects in Cologne got evicted within short time. This time things went differently. While the SSM acted on a political level, uncovered lies and intrigues and troubled politicians with open letters, more and more people moved into the Barmer Block, people who had little to lose and who made clear that they would defend their new homes with all their force. By themselves neither of the two groups – neither the ‘punx’ nor the ‘policos’ – would have been able to defend the squat for that long time. It was this peculiar mixture of political experience and determination ‘from the streets’ which held the town council in check for months.

In the end the demolition could not be prevented. Nevertheless this occupation was important in many ways: it made public the political housing

1 In some towns stll small demonstrations take place every Monday against welfare cuts, a heritage of the protests against the welfare reform HartzIV – see earlier issues of ppnl.
2 SSK: Sozialistische Selbsthilfe Köln (Socialist Self-Aid Cologne), a living and working commune which exists since the beginning of the 70s. (German web-site: www.ssk-bleibt.de)
3 Sozialistische Selbsthilfe Mülheim, a group which split from the SSK in 1985.
scandal; it showed that resistance is possible again in Cologne; for those who were made homeless again by the demolition alternative housing might be offered by the town; and most of all, the three months of occupation was an opportunity for making experiences and learning processes for all those people who were involved in the ‘socially culturally biotope’, experiences which might become useful in future conflicts. The following text deals with these internal structures and processes. The quotations are drawn from a conversation shortly before the eviction with Sabine (SSK) who took part in the occupation from the very first day.

The occupation

“We drifted into this occupation quite spontaneously. We had no time at all to built certain structures, but even if we had had the time we would not have been able to assess what it means to occupy 30 houses instead of one. All of a sudden you have this vast space which you are not able to oversee. You are not able to distinguish between inhabitants and visitors, only after two days you might notice: this person was here yesterday, as well, may be she or he lives here now. We never made people register and we did not control who went in and out. We wanted to open this space for everyone and get more people to move in. We could guess what kind of various problems might occur, but we were not able to deal with them beforehand, and even less in a theoretical way. We did not know who would turn up, and anyway we thought that the whole project would mainly be supported and pushed forward by the left. This did not happen. People came with their very own rules and laws, with very different ways to communicate and to solve conflicts, and you have to adjust to it. Your lefty formalist approach did not help much.

After we had occupied the Block with few folks the first homeless people arrived, some of them lived on the streets for many years. They attracted other people: young kids who hang out on the streets because they are supposed to be in young peoples homes, where they did not want to be or they came from emergency shelters where you have to leave the building at 2 pm and are only allowed back in for sleeping. Amongst them the news about the occupation spread in no time. The street kids brought along many people from the skin-head movement with its various sub-groups, of which I got to know more about in the meantime. Most of the skins who arrived called themselves non-political or left-wing, OI-skins, SHARPs or whatever. Some students moved in who thought that for the time of the university holiday the whole thing is interesting and exciting, but who moved out once university started again. And like during any occupation the punks arrived quite early on. After about two to three weeks the first punk arrived with a shopping-trolley and a generator and within the next three, four days there were twenty punks around”.

The vast number of square meters of unembellished walls made the occupation attractive for some sprayers, of whom only a few moved in, some bikers used the Block as a meeting point. Migrants from Ghana and Cameroon got involved although they were not homeless themselves. Most of the squatters came as a result of the expulsion of homeless people from the cities, out of a situation of extreme poverty and oppression.

Synonym for all the discontent

“I see the Barmer Block as a synonym for all the discontent which is around, being it because of the HartzIV laws or the mentality to lock people up, which excludes more and more people. In contact with the young kids I became aware of the whole problem again. For youths under 16 there is no alternative, there is only the young peoples home. I met 12, 13 14 years old kids who tell you clearly what they want and what they do not want. They appear more like being 16 or 17. They are against the home and they count the years till they are allowed to live in a shared flat with support of a social worker, for example. They tell you that they live on the streets for two or three years, passing time and hoping not to go to the dogs. For them it is clear that there is no alternative. I met some women who came from homes in the Eifel (a near by area) where they had been locked up. They had

4 Welfare reform implemented in 2004 which cut the unemployment benefit and increased the pressure to take any job.
been sent from Cologne to these homes, after e.g. being diagnosed with borderline syndrome. Escaping a young peoples home several times is reason enough to be sent to a locked-up home (geschlossenes Heim). More and more young kids are running danger of being locked up. The responsible institutions do this in order to minimise the effort and expenses for their care. They tell about metal bars in front of windows and the need to register dates for receiving visitors. It is more or less like in prison. It is interesting that a lot of the kids know about these boot-camps in the US. They tell each other what kind of evil measures against 'young offenders' exist, they are well informed. They also know addresses where to get some food, where to wash, where to sleep, who is friendly etc. If they need something they now how to get it. It was revealing to see how they manage this kind of things on the street, with their connections and all. We were not really able to tell them much, practically they are much advanced and a thousand times better organised, particularly concerning spontaneous things”.

**The difficult process to self-organisation**

The punks in Cologne have been squatting houses for years. We do not know much about most of these squats. They occupy without making it public, without political statements. Their actions are not political-symbolic, like those of the political scene, but necessary-real ones. In the Barmer Block different ways of re-appropriation clashed and came together.

“The conflict erupted quite early on: “you lot only occupy out of your political motivations, but we do not have a place to sleep or we have to do a runner”. At the beginning there were some hard clashes and verbal conflicts. For a long time it was not possible to have an assembly together. Until amongst the punks a party of the ‘non-political’ formed, the ARRGH-party. They took great effort in showing to us ‘politics’ how we act and behave. They protested for days with banners and signs and shouted slogans, like we do, but their slogans were rather non-political. They tried to take the piss out of our leftyness. But we did not perceive this as a provocation, we thought it was funny, partly at least. Funny was that they formed their own party in order to mock us and thereby they themselves became part of the circle of organisers – although this might not have been their intention in the first place – because now they formed their own reference group. Suddenly they were addressed by others as ‘the party’ and had to take over certain tasks, like making breakfast. All this resulted in all people sitting together in an assembly finally. These assemblies were terribly arduous, because there were no rules at all. If you wanted to introduce something like an assembly facilitator you were immediately accused of being ‘the boss’. But even those who used to be the most persistent opponents of assemblies now want them and after the experience of everybody shouting being no use at all there now is a facilitator. Today different people from before facilitate”.

The coming together took time and was probably only possible because some ‘politicos’ moved in and shared the daily experience and organisation of the occupation: the tough conditions of being without water and electricity, the risk of being evicted, or the constant physical confrontations with visitors who roamed the houses after concerts, rioting and looting. In the course of the common daily activity the different groups started to understand and tolerate each other. At the beginning only very few knew what SSK/SSM stood for and some even mixed us up with SKM or SKF (social service of catholic men/women). This rather evil confusion with social work and management of poverty is finished at last. But actually after more than 30 years the SSK and SSM are treated as institutions which the town likes to address and use as representatives of such kind of occupations.

“The politically responsible persons were surprised and unnerved when they had to face not the normal lefty educated spokespeople but actually the ‘scum’, the people from the streets. Recently we have been at the university when the students tried to disturb the university senate meeting because of the planned introduction of fees. People from the houses always join these kind of actions, they support them, get engaged. It...
was people from the Barmer Block who pushed the doors of the university open, not the politicos or students. These two guys from the street told the security guards “We will just go in there now”, and they did it and the students followed. The other side of the barricades notices such things and they try to play with it. They shower you with information and offers to negotiate. During the weeks some spokespersons emerged and the other side tried to address only them.

We struggle on different levels and about different issues: against the demolition, the misappropriation of money, the industrial trade-fair scandal, the whole housing problem, the replacements that people who live in the houses get once the houses are demolished. Sometimes it is difficult to keep everything transparent. Structures emerge within your group which you then have to fight against. I think in every confrontation it is a major act for spokespersons to make the whole thing transparent, as objective as possible, to encourage debates and rather to hold back with their own opinion. Right from the beginning we had the problem that we were too few to lead the whole thing into an emancipatory process and to mediate it together with the people involved to the ‘outside’, in the speed of the people, in their ways to communicate, not in ours.

At this point representatives of the punks took part in the “fucking political meetings” and the negotiations with the town and they reported back to the others in the house. Political actions were planned and prepared together and the heterogeneous squad of squatters became a group, the initial confrontations between politicos and punks turned into cooperation.

“Some guy from the street once told me: “You do not have to tell me anything, it is enough to walk around the Barmer Block, to see the industrial trade-fair, the fat hotel, the ICE-station, the Cologne-Arena... I know what things are about. I do not have to read books in order to know that, I do not have to know who is member of the town council. I am pissed off because of it all and that is why I am here”.

It was not only people who were looking for a place to live who moved in. For a lot of people it was a mixture: they thought it was cool to be part of a project which bothers the town council rather than living in a house individually for some days until the eviction comes. This is why people were getting involved to such an extent, because they recognised their own anger. This coming together of your own struggle and of theirs, that was great, I have not experienced it that intensely before. We went as the Barmer Block, really all groups, to the local party meeting of the SPD (Social Democrats) and scoffed their buffet, we went to the Green Party, to all meetings, we rock and rolled through town. That was a big fun factor. It was obvious for everyone that we had big power, mainly because we were all quite different and they could not really suss us out. For most of the people we meet we are just too much”.

**Do not play with the scruffy kids...**

Unfortunately the composition of people was too much for the 'social centre', as well. During the first weeks a so-called 'planning assembly' of different people met and we thought about possible ways how to use the vast space we had just conquered. Groups were explicitly encouraged to take over houses, to secure them against demolition and destruction and to make their on events in them. Actually only two groups did that. The SSK established a second-hand shop in the former shop of the estate, as a kind of info and exchange point for the outer-world, given that a lot of people were quite afraid of entering the estate through the dark and scary entrance. Another aim was to get some money for the occupation together. Another group which had been trying to open a social centre in Cologne for some time took another house. But already their initial steps aimed at confrontation. On Indymedia they dissociated themselves from the squatters and the accusation of ‘anti-Semitism’ was brought up. A single guy in the heterogeneous group of squatters made some shit-house remarks on 'Jewish financial capital', which the group around the social centre used as a motive in order to defame the whole occupation as anti-Semitic.

“We took some time to decide internally how to deal with the concerned person. The guy was told

6 German lefty song title of the 70s
explicitly that such kind of slogans are not wanted here. A lot of us think that exclusion is not the right way. The guy was not taken to seriously even before he made the remarks, he was not really a guy with a solid opinion and now he had to face all these confrontations. I thought we dealt with the whole issue rather well and therefore did not understand the external accusations stating that we were not taking the problem seriously. Then I understood that we were supposed to make a public statement. We were attacked from various sides, partly from people who had never been in the Barmer Block but who had heard that there 'was an anti-semit'. At the beginning a lot of people moved in who we did not know and then one guy hung a German flag out of his window. When we talked to the guy he said something about World cup and football. But the flag was seen as another evidence for the anti-Semitic content of our occupation. There were public calls to left groups not to support us any more. People came along only to tell us what kind of shitty project we were. This provoked a kind of 'anti-attitude' against everything which appeared political or anyone who wanted to discuss, because people had the feeling of having to justify themselves or of being under attack”.

The people from the social centre only came for their own events. They did not share the daily life of the occupation nor did they sleep in the squat. For their concerts they took up to 5 Euro, which a lot of the squatters were not able to pay. Thereby inhabitants were excluded from events in their houses. The impression arose that some people occupied a ready-made nest, make money out of those who actually keep the occupation going and who hardly have any money and on top of it have to take shit from the very same bourgeois kids. During the clashes between these two different worlds the social centre did not display too much sensitivity for social relations. The reactions were not nice either.

“The social centre got more and more wound up because of all these evil squatters punks started writing things like “88 means Hey Hello” next to the “No space for anti-Semitism”. Some of them are real idiots, but some do it out of mere provocation and if you react in the usual lefty way you will never be able to exit the loop. I really thought they were hard to take. As soon as the social centre arrived they acted like they were extremely right-wing. I did not like it, particularly because I tried to mediate between the groups, tried to construct something common, but on the other hand I understood that the kids resisted being pigeon-holed. This is how things are on the streets: If you try to give me shit, I will give you more”.

After three weeks of acting against each other and an escalation after a burglary the social centre left the Barmer Block in mid-April.

“The social centre was the only locked house in the whole block. Twice guys tried to break in. Some people of us got bashed up badly trying to prevent it. At some point they could not be asked to secure this house any longer. Then another burglary happened and we were accused of being responsible for it. Out of the blue a raid-squad of fifteen people from the social centred rummaged in peoples flats. That was over the top and there were some violent attacks from both sides. That was the end of an attempt to bring more left-wing content or culture into the project”.

Some of these events and confrontations were reminiscent of the beginning of the SSK. At the end of the 60s the so-called “home/asylum campaign” focussed on the scandalous conditions in the public homes for kids or “mentally disturbed”. The youths escaped the homes in masses. Students who were disappointed by the proletariat because it did not show the will for an upheaval discovered on their look-out for a new revolutionary subject the so-called ’marginalised groups”’. Marcuse\(^8\) and Fanon\(^9\) provided the theoretical framework for the focus on the ‘de-classified’. In the

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\(^7\) 88 is used by neo-fascists as a symbol for the eighth letter of the alphabet. In their terms HH stands for “Heil Hitler”, the nazi greeting.

\(^8\) Herbert Marcuse describes in his work; The one-dimensional man (1964) the industrial society as a society without opposition in which the proletariat got integrated and became a buffer of the system. Only the marginalised groups still had nothing to loose, but their chains.

\(^9\) Frantz Fanon emphasised in his anti-colonialist manifesto; The damned of the world (1961) the importance of peasants and urban lumpen-proletariat for the liberation movements, given that the workers in the colonised countries had turned into workers aristocracy.
practical relation with kids from homes and former prison inmates many disappointments had to be faced. At the Conference of Marginalised Groups in 1970 various collectives exchanged experiences and declared the 'marginalised group strategy' as failed. Instead they propagated political work in the proletarian neighbour-hoods and on the shop-floor. In their explanation of this step they partly used the same stigmatising vocabulary which is also used by the administrating bodies and they declared the kids as being cases for social work.

The SSK did not follow this u-turn, neither theoretically nor practically. For them the homeless kids were not 'lumpen', but part of the working class, an impoverished young part, and the institutional care and education was criticised as 'disciplinary measures against the workers'. Out of the critique of the welfare state the concept of self-aid evolved and out of the critique of social work the intention to fight permanently against the hierarchy between 'bourgeoisie' and workers within their own organisation. A lot of the contemporary self-proclaimed revolutionaries treated that approach as non-political. The arguments resembled those against the Barmer Block: to fight only for cheap living space is not revolutionary and people from the streets are useless co-combatants, because they are entangled in alcoholism, drugs and violence. But we have to admit that these arguments, at that time at least, were still part of a search for a strategy towards revolution. In contrast to that the self-proclaimed extreme left today – the so-called anti-Germans – only secure that the use of language is politically correct and any action from below – not only 'from the streets', but also of workers – is under general suspicion of being anti-Semitic. Such an attitude might help to feel morally on the right side, but is no way to overturn the social relations which bring forth such atrocities.

Where violence rules

The experiences of homeless people with the state force are essentially much harder than the violence with which the political scene is usually treated. A lot of the squatters have experienced prison, homes and some even war.

“One evening the guys from Cameroon talked about their experience as child soldiers. We sat at the fire, people from all kind of backgrounds. The guys from Cameroon talked for a long time, there was total silence, everyone was listening. Bit by bit people started to talk about their experiences. Very quickly they were aware of the connecting elements. Surrounded by all these tough stories I felt like a total outsider. This evening there was an amazing atmosphere. The next day the relationships were different, a new group of solidarity had emerged. When people with such kind of personal histories are around, of course there is also a lot of aggression connected to that. When this aggression bursts out, you have to be able to deal with it. Street people mediated for persons who had caused trouble. There was incredible social work going on amongst them which you are not aware of from the outside. They would not call it that themselves, but this is happening on the street all the time. During the occupation I had a feeling of a great potential which did not originate from the left, but from the base, from the street people. Maybe as a lefty you have to channel this potential a bit in order to help that it does not explode randomly ten meters after leaving the squat, but at the right time and place. Meaning that you have to move to these right places. I have various nice memories of situations where we partly succeeded in doing that. But not with your usual suspects, but completely different comrades – and with much more clout. It was a bit like during the anti-deportation actions which were organised together with immigrants, with people from organisations like The Voice or Karawane. There was much more force in it. The demonstrations are much more riotous, although people would have to face much more repression. On the evening when the security guards started to provoke us and people first thought that they were fascists, all of a sudden thirty people with clubs stood on the street and the cops were between the front-lines. And I thought: if things go off we might not be that helpless after all. It showed a real power which I have not perceived during other occupations, an impressing willingness to defend the house physically, if necessary. This is not my style, I am too afraid. But I realised that we often only use empty phrases when we talk about what
to do after the eviction and that normally we end up doing some fun actions or get entangled in small legal arguments. During this situation it became clear that once the eviction starts there will be a wired mix of people, some who will stay peaceful, some who make fun actions and some who defend themselves violently.”

**The Barmer Replacement Group**

The Barmer Block was evicted on the 1st of June. Obviously the state was afraid of the mixture, as well. Hundreds of cops were involved and the eviction started when special riot cops stormed the house at four in the morning, pointing their guns at people. Facing such a force no-one tried to get engaged in senseless resistance. But on the very same day the Barmer Replacement Group established a camp-site of tents and made-shift shelters right next to the housing estate. They demanded from the town to provide proper housing for all people who were made homeless, housing which would enable people to continue living together as a group. After a short occupation of a different house and in time for the start of the World cup the town offered two storeys in a tower block which is supposed to be demolished in September. As a temporary solution this was acceptable. But the actions continue and in case the town will not offer a long-term shelter soonish, other occupations will follow. Arrgh!

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**Delhi’s Call Centres**

_A report from someone who lived in Gurgaon for a few months and worked in one of the booming call centres there._

**Introduction**

In prol-position newsletter no.3 we published a general overview on global relocation of call centre work. The main emphasis was on the fact that along with call centre work, capital also relocates its contradictions, thereby creating new aspirations within the emerging work force of the target country. From India we received various articles reporting about increasing wages and first labour conflicts within the Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) sector. The following report adds some subjective impressions on the matter. It was written after three months employment as a foreign call centre agent in Gurgaon, a booming satellite town of Delhi, India (see more on Gurgaon: prol-position newsletter no.4 on strike at Honda). The text consists of five main parts:

1) Short introduction to employment of foreigners in Indian call centres
2) General description of the company and the work
3) Subjective story of a working day
4) General situation, workers interviews and leafleting in Gurgaon call centre cluster
5) Political conclusions and links to other related texts

Politically, the job itself was not too interesting but provided opportunities to talk to a lot of work mates who had been employed in various call centres in the area and to get contacts to people there. The political intervention of distributing reports on working conditions and strikes in European and US call centres to BPO-employees in Gurgaon and Delhi was a collective effort of “Workers Solidarity”, a small non-party group based in Delhi. If you want to get in touch with them or get hold of the distributed brochure please write to: workers.solidarity@gmail.com

**Employment of foreign work force in Indian call centres**

We cannot talk of mass labour migration of European or US call centre work force to India. Although the Indian call centre companies complain about a shortage of labour force, migration from the western world will not solve the alleged problem. Compared to the thousands of relocated jobs only a small amount of students and backpackers make use of the recent employment opportunity in the Indian BPO sector. Their motivations vary from careerist aims of having a six months job reference from an Indian company in

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10 Pun in German (Barmer Ersatz Gruppe) which refers to a known health insurance.
their CV to advent(0)urism and lack of financial resources for a longer trip abroad. Of course the western media is keen on reporting about these new “labour migrants”, the main German television news broadcast a feature on the “poor academics” who would not find a comparable job in Germany and nearly all bigger European newspapers published articles praising the young pioneers who make use of the new global labour market. Particularly in the UK the number of people who would work in Indian call centres seem big enough to set up agencies for recruiting them: “There’s even a new group of service providers to help supply India’s outsourcers with hires from overseas. In October 2004, Tim Bond set up Launch Offshore, a London recruitment firm that caters to Indian call centres. He has found jobs for 100 workers, and this year expects to place 200 more”. (BusinessWeek January 16, 2006)

I found the job advert in a normal German job centre. Evalueserve, a market research company based in India was looking for people with call centre experience and good English/French skills. The conditions were as follows: ten-hour late-shifts, five days per week; the monthly wage 27,000 rupees which is about 500 Euros (more on wages and wage comparison below); 5,000 rupees per month for shared room in company flat, 30 rupees for meal in canteen; after ten month of employment the company pays for a flight back (as it turned out later on they would only pay after eleven months); meaning that the initial costs (flight, employment visa, administrative costs) of about 1,000 Euros would have to be paid by the employee. The companies manager called twice, short conversations in English and French, one day spent at the Indian embassy for employment visa, another e-mail with a PDF-work-contract attached and the date to start working in one and a half months.

The Job

Company Evalueserve is a fairly new company with about 1,000 employees in Gurgaon, India and Shanghai, China. In Gurgaon Evalueserve employs about 800 people in two different buildings, a call centre and a “research unit”. About 80 of the 800 workers are foreigners. Evalueserve says that it belongs to the knowledge process outsourcing (KPO) industry: “Evalueserve offers fully customised, multi-lingual research solutions at affordable rates to North-American, European and Asian financial services institutions, Fortune 500 companies, SMEs, and consulting and research firms. It provides ‘customised knowledge process outsourcing (KPO) industry research’ in five synergistic streams: business research, investment research, market research, data analytics and intellectual property. Evalueserve’s analysts cover a range of industries, including - Banking, Insurance, Hi-Tech, Telecommunications, Pharma & Bio-Tech, Chemicals, Energy, Consumer Goods, Discrete and Process Manufacturing. Our geographic reach is worldwide, including North America, Europe, and Asia. We have performed research in 192 countries. We utilize both primary and secondary sources to conduct our research and analysis. Our primary research capabilities are extensive, including the ability to conduct research in multiple languages”. (Quotation from company web site) They say that in the “research unit” real academics do real academic research work, mainly with the help of the Internet. I worked their for only two projects, for the first one I had to google Shampoo-websites and write down ingredients of Shampoos which are advertised to be organic and then phone up these companies and ask them questions about their market share. For the second one I had to google any information on privatising public housing and facility management in Germany. The work was done for a company that plans to buy up public property in Russia. Both projects were handled as important research work, so I cannot say how intellectually challenging the other work in the “research unit” actually is.

My main job was in the call centre, which officially was titled “research unit”, as well. Most of the people working there see “call centres” as something they hope to have left for good, therefore the re-titling of more or less basic outbound call centre work.
Foreign Workers

Nearly all foreign workers are students (business, international law, finance etc.) on internships in their early and late twenties. They get about 5,000 rupees less than the two foreign people with proper employment contracts. The company uses the students for all kind of tasks. Most of them have to work for at least one or two months in the call centre. Then some are allowed to do internet research in the research unit, do translations etc.. Some of them organise the human resource management for the foreign employees, e.g. calling embassies, sending invitation letters, doing job interviews over the phone, arranging the housing for the employees etc.. This is seen as the best position to achieve and the company gets cheap dedicated young managers. The students/workers come from various countries: Czech Republic, Russia, Singapore, South Korea, Germany, France, Italy, England and others. Because they are prone to leave the internship after six months, and because they would not do the rather boring call centre job for too long, the company started recruiting ex-call centre workers. When I arrived I was the only foreigner with a normal employment contract, another woman arrived later on, but she was an academic and left the call centre for the personnel department. Actually the young future-managers reported that they had difficulties finding ‘normal’ workers to do a call centre job in India.

All foreign students/workers were lodged in flats organised by the company. For Indian conditions rather splendid, for European standards fairly normal three room apartments for six people. There were various troubles because of too many parties and some students being discontented with the living standards. The group meetings to solve these problems were kind of training sessions for the human resource managing and diplomatic skills of the young managers. The German personnel department leader encouraged them to argue their points and negotiate. Some of the foreign workers expressed the boredom which they feel during their job and that they had expected more. For others being in India itself was interesting enough, although most of them stayed in the safe world of foreign community parties, shopping malls and organised tourist trips. In a way the mixture of back-packers life, international shared flats and communities, some hard-ships and improvisations and the quite formal world of Indian offices might be a good school for future “flexible” managers.

One job the company gave to a group of four students/workers is a good example of how the company used their academic ambitions and internal competition in order to get a cheap and usable result: the company wants to open another unit in Latin America, so each student had to write an investment assessment report on Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, Dominican Republic respectively, advocating one of the countries. Another job the foreign workers and locals with foreign language skills have to do are translations. For example an Indian worker with German knowledge had to translate a document written by the German machine manufacturer Liebherr concerning the quality management in its Indian part-suppliers. The document contained quite difficult technical bits; a professional translator in Germany might have been able to ask for 100 Euro an hour remuneration. The call centre worker did the job for about 1,70 Euro. A more evil task was the translation order Valueserve got from the local Deutsche Bank call centre. We were supposed to translate the private e-mails of foreign call centre workers sent from the company e-mail account. Some people refused to do this, but most of the foreign workers actually translated love letters, holiday greetings and other private mails.

Local workers

Nearly all local workers in the call centre are young a-level students or (ex-) students in their twenties, half of them men. Nearly all have previously worked in call centres in the area, they see the company as the top level of the call centre ladder, not only in terms of wages, but also in terms of stress levels. Most of them had to sell things on the phone as part of their previous jobs and having to do silly interviews now seems a relief. Some of them want to continue their studies; most of them say that they do not find time to do so. A lot of them come from other states in India, so they
speak for example Bengali or Tamil, then Hindi and English. Some of them learned additional foreign languages because they expect higher wages and job security. Apart from English Indian workers called in Italian, French, German, Portuguese, Spanish, though more than half of them have never visited the respective countries. For Indian conditions the language courses are very expensive. If in general only middle-class people actually speak English, only upper-middle class people will be able to afford to go to these courses. Being middle-class in India could mean that you are from a relatively poorer rural family which still holds land and is able to send some kids for education to towns, it could mean that you belong to the property or business owning urban middle-class, which often has additional income from relatives abroad, or it could mean that your parents have better governmental jobs which might be less well paid but provide access to formal education.

Depending on seniority and language skills the local workers were paid 12,000 to 25,000 rupees, a project or team leader could expect up to 50,000 rupees The cleaners and canteen staff who mainly come from Calcutta and Bihar had to work longer hours, up to 60 to 70 hours per week and only received 2,000 rupees per month. Previously they had been small farmers, carpenters, workshop-workers. In general the cleaners were smaller and darker than the call centre workers, due to regional origin, their class background and caste. I arrived in India without too much pre-knowledge of the caste system, also wanting to see how caste would reveal itself. After staying for some time it became obvious that certain surnames indicating upper-caste belonging were more frequent amongst call centre workers, but caste itself was never mentioned. Also religion or regional origin was not much of a topic.

The team- and project-leaders are male, in their early thirties and seem burnt-out. They frequently spent 15 hours in the office (the monthly working hours bill displays the individual working hours of all the staff), complain about health effects and family crisis. The general experience is that managers who worked in the call centre industry for a while will not find a job in other sectors any more, they are seen as marked, spoilt, worn out.

In general the local workers are quite “western”, they consume western products, most of them have been abroad, they are more or less aware of what is happening in Europe or the US. Most of them have boy- or girlfriends, although some still seem to have to face “non-love” marriages. Politically, they are fairly liberal and indifferent towards the general poverty around them. Like most of the call centre workers they feel unsure of how long the industry will provide jobs, particularly market research or sales over the phone seem to become increasingly difficult tasks. The company itself started two projects of setting up internet-questionnaires.

The Work

We had to perform telephone interviews with companies or administrations in various countries. The clients who pay for the interviews are other companies and administrations. For example for a pay-TV provider we had to call four and five star hotels in Germany, France and England and ask about their pay-TV systems. Or mobile phones, swimming pool pumps, anti-virus software. None of the interviews or projects required particular knowledge, apart from language skills. The job organisation and technology was not much different from call centres in Europe. We had to perform about 100 calls per ten-hour shift. Depending on the project we were supposed to perform four to ten interviews per day. A difficult task given the general saturation and level of nuisance that market tele-research has reached. You could try different strategies, not knowing whether the person at the other end of the line would feel intrigued or conned if you would tell that you phone from India.

We were organised in teams of about ten people, sometimes, depending on composition, we agreed not to make more than 80 calls. In general the team leaders were ok, not too pushy, but once the project dead-line is in danger they get jumpy and ask for 150 calls or more, threatening “You will not want to be in the first Evalueserve team which had to postpone the dead-line, you just will not want to be”. The management style was quite picture-book like, team-meetings and competitions, general assemblies with motivating speeches and
general applause for people who receive little gadgets or money for extra-performance, bill-boards with statistics concerning performance. The company is doing fine, for example the US water pumps manufacturer paid 70 US-Dollars per interview performed in Germany, they demanded 90 interviews in eight days by ten people. This would be 6,300 Dollars for the company of which they would have to pay about 1,000 Dollars on wages. Other project targets were 1,000 interviews in five weeks by 18 people. But this is the ideal. I calculated that my really productive work (translating, interview time) was ten per cent of the total time; the rest of the time is spent in waiting queues or smoking at the back entrance with the cleaners. In comparison to the general conditions in a very similar market research call centre in London I can say that my living standard and relative wage was higher in India and there was less strict control and targets, which might be due to the general status of call centre work in India and of the company in particular.

Subjective descriptions

Glass-marble building with dust and dung and shoe-shiners at the front and wood fire smoke and drumming from a building workers plastic tarpaulin camp-site at the back entrance: very much an Indian call centre. Ten hours on the phone, calling German secretaries and their managers sitting in glass-marble buildings 6,500 kilometres away, asking questions.

Poona sits next to me, it is her first job apart from being daughter of the owner of a construction company. She speaks good enough language school German and is more successful than me. She can really play the Indian card and the managers on the other end of the line like to ask her whether the weather is not too hot or the Indian food too spicy. Some IT-department executives get all teary remembering their good old days in Goa back then.

Today we are supposed to call for a software company, asking IT managers of bigger companies if they know the various slogans the company uses. There is no way to translate “Veritas provides resilient infrastructures” with the help of the bablefish website, but Poona does not care and is successful. The IT department of the hospital in Mannheim is on strike, at least.

I get lost in the automatic voice response program of the Südfleisch AG, a Bavarian slaughterhouse and have to go to the toilet afterwards. Gopal cleans the toilet floor, as usual, which is his daily twelve-hour duty. He is a skilled carpenter with family in Calcutta, but he is ignored. Next to me pisses my quality manager, he is in his mid-twenties from Assam and speaks four European languages without having been there. His father owns a plantation in Assam, he finds it difficult to adjust to the impersonal life in Delhi and continues trying to invite me for drinks in the nearby shopping-malls clubs.

Back to software market research, my project manager has just sent me an email saying that they know that I could do better. A worldwide phenomena, like young proletarians with pre-paid mobile phone contracts without credit. At least I do not have to call the pay-tv survey anymore. Saying hello to the receptionist asking whether their hotel provides pay-tv featuring movies with adult content made me feel indecent. Though not as indecent as while listening to the five star hotel waiting queues advertising the brunch deluxe and the visit of the hotel own beauty farm when you have spent the day before in a slum hut in old Gurgaon. Or writing down shampoo ingredients, e.g. of “The Bioestethique” by Contier, 10ml for 77.50 Euro, knowing that most of the people around you would have to run machines, clean floors or cycle rickshaws for two months in order to have a hair-wash.

Priti on my left likes to practice her French with the French foreigners. At the moment she tells everyone who asks about her current work project: “Ca me fait chier”. Priti takes a risk, because officially the only language allowed for internal communication in the call centre is English. Hindi is for the masses. Priti is cool, she came all alone from Bhopal to Delhi, worked in fourteen call centres already, she loves to talk about the fact that she has a boyfriend and that they go partying and she writes a homework about the current riots in the Parisian suburbs for her pricey language class. I would like to send her some French Situationist links but the management blocked all in-
ternet email-websites, allegedly for security reasons. To secure that we keep on dialling, I guess. Poona in the other cubicle wishes the submissive German respondent “a very nice rest of your life”, and gets a chocolate biscuit from the team-leader. Pravesh is twenty-eight and tired, while smoking at the back-entrance he confesses that he has not seen his two year old boy for thirteen days, because he spends two much time in the call centre or that he had fever for the last five working days. He ponders about the sense of modern life, creates some ideal original Indian way of natural living, when cars were unknown end everyone was self-contained. From over the fence the drums of malnourished building workers. But he has to pay his house and the credit for his Maruti and for the future of his son.

Back at my desk. Did you know that union-busting Wal-Marts Headquarter in Germany is located in the Friedrich Engels Allee in Wuppertal or were you aware of the fact that the immigrant deportation-airline Lufthansa uses the Nina Simon song “I wish I knew how it would feel to be free” for their waiting queue intermission. They really try to fuck up your mind. I ask my German co-worker how things are in his flat, if the neighbours still keep on complaining about the parties, the half naked girls on the balcony and the booze. “No, that is all fine. But we sacked the cleaning woman, she was not doing her job properly”. Would they send you to an Indian prison if you would kick a German arsehole in an international research unit in an Indian special export zone in the face? I should evaluate that one first.

On the screen I can see that there is no use in dialling the next number. It belongs to the Gerresheimer Glashütte, a glass-manufacturing mill in Düsseldorf. The day before I left for India my flat-mate came back from the usual passive demonstrations against the final closure of the plant, priests praying for work and local politicians doing solidarity barbecue. I already had some similar loops back in time and space, e.g. phoning the admin building of a carpet factory where I was kicked out through a side entrance after a minor leafleting action among fellow machinists. Twelve years later the managers secretary kicks me out of the telephone line, which leaves me alone in an Indian call centres open-plan office, but hey, I guess that’s what they mean by globalization of the information society. Different shit, same outcome.

I like watching my Indian co-workers doing their phone job, being all flirty and smarmy and girlish and once the receiver is down spit out a spiteful manly “Bakvas!”, “Bullshit!”. Always makes me chuckle. Gunes, the Turkish student interrupts my voyeurism, she is upset because of the Brazilian wage level. She has to do an investment report for the possible opening of a companies call centre in Latin America and she has to advocate Brazil. And compared to Argentina the wages are way too high. I try to make her feel better by persuading her that President Lula has become a politician capable enough to sort this problem out. She is happy now and tells me about the latest episode of the reality-soap she is involved: As part of her daily work she translates private e-mails of Turkish call centre agents working in the nearby Deutsche Bank call centre and the Turkish employees seem to be the most bonding ones. I do not know if advising her not to undertake her hashish orders via company mail would make her question this spying job, but it confuses her and helps my conscience. And the questionnaire we use for the survey helps my consciousness, or at least it has a transcendent effect on it. Yesterday I found myself meditating an hour over the phrase “does the implementation lead to acceleration of the time/value relation”? What kind of influence does this acceleration have on the profit rate and the general time left over for the human kind? Anyway, the only time acceleration I wish for is for the time in-between breaks.

During the breaks we sometimes discuss in the canteen, some people still remember the police attack on the Honda workers in Gurgaon last year, when 800 workers were badly injured. They watched it on the news. Of course they dislike the event, some of them blame the Japanese management, question the effect of opening Indians markets for foreign capital, talking badly about US management styles in call centres. Although the Honda workers incident happened only five kilometres away, it seems much further away from
their world of apartment blocks and company cabs.

Back on the phone. Another secretary who tells me “We are not interested”. “Me neither, isn’t that tragic”, I think. Poona receives an electronic Valentine’s card that flashes and makes corny music when opening the inbox. Apart from call centres Valentine’s Day is the other big US and British import good which is recuperated by the youth of the Indian middle-class in order to fight against arranged marriages and start dating. Some fanatic Hindu groups attack stalls with Valentine cards and last week the police had another go at couples in Lodhi Park in Delhi, where young men and women normally go to hold hands. If you tell normal male workers outside the call centre that you are employed in one they get eager eyes and want to know if working there makes it actually that easy to get laid. And how much an English course for beginners would be.

Another e-mail pops up. Five minutes silence for a young woman who was employed at the research unit and who died in a car crash yesterday on her way from work. We stand up behind our cubicles. There are actually a lot of accidents. I saw three dead people on the streets in two months. No wonder, cab drivers are tired after seventeen hours shifts, everyone is tired. Subod, the night guard of our apartment block works twelve hours night shifts without a day off since six months. The day-shift guy was ill last week so Subod worked the day-shift, as well. After having worked 24 hours non-stop I told him that I could do at least six hours of his night-shift, but he was too scared to lose his 2,000 rupees job, so he worked another 24 hours. Systemic insomnia and cars mutilate people, on the streets and before the cars are assembled. A friend told me that every day in the workshops supplying sheet metal for Maruti/Suzuki plant in Gurgaon about eighteen fingers are mutilated. Mainly during night-shifts.

Five minutes are over, back to formal opening questions for the expansion of the markets. I cannot bring myself to do it, have a quick cigarette with Gopal at the toilet window instead, asking him what he did last Sunday, an exceptional day off. “I was roaming”. He shares a room with five other Bengali artisans, now having jobs in the booming service sector of Gurgaon.

When I get back to my desk the team-leaders call for assembly in the canteen. The big boss from Switzerland is having a rant. The usual motivation speeches off-the-Scientology-peg. There they are, all the Indians, and listen to him making jokes about their Chinese co-workers in the call centre in Shanghai, which he has just visited. “They are like children, they cannot deal with criticism”. His joke is greeted with comparably well paid formal laughter. In China he probably has just told the Indian version. Would the Chinese CP grant you political asylum if you would defend their people against racism by tossing a allegedly neutral swiss citizens head into a machine which provides only bad instant coffee anyway?

I look over to Maneesh, he shrugs. He is smart and ironic, I started liking him when he told me about his first call centre job: “...and the team leader told us every morning that we have to treat the customer like a king, but what kind of fucked up monarchy did he talk about? Every bloody minute yet another king on the phone...”. He then worked as an estate agent for an uncle in Torino, where he learned Italian. The job and visa ran out and the only possibility would have been to do restaurant jobs and similar work. He has chosen to come back instead, not doing manual jobs. Not a single call centre employee I talked to had experience with manual labour. In a country which is so full of physique. If you want to put a half disbelieving, a half pitiful (with tendency towards a slight shade of disgust) smirk on their faces tell them that you left school aged sixteen in order to work on construction sites. It is half past ten night-time, the offices shut in Germany and I go for a last smoke to the back entrance. Three managers stand in the dark, smoking and listening to the building workers drums. “They only work in order to sing and drink during the night. That’s all...”.

**General conditions in Gurgaon Call Centre Cluster**

Gurgaon is a satellite town in the south of Delhi, a new development area. The area is characterised by the automobile industry. Maruti/Suzuki, India’s biggest car manufacturer, and Hero Honda
and Honda Scooters and Motorcycles India, India's biggest two-wheeler manufacturers have their plants and suppliers in Gurgaon. Apart from the automobile sector Gurgaon is a textile hub, there are extensive industrial zones consisting of textile export factories. The government of Haryana recently announced the opening of another Special Export Zone within the next few years, allegedly creating an additional 200,000 jobs. About five years ago Gurgaon became a call centre cluster. Several multi-nationals have off-shored their call centre work to Gurgaon or nearby Noida, South Delhi or Okhla: Microsoft, American Express, Dell, Amazon, IBM, Citibank, Deutsche Bank, HP etc.

Some of the call centres are huge, e.g. in the building of Genpact, formerly GE Capital, about 12,000 workers are employed. In May 2006 Dell was just about to open a 5,000 seat customer service centre. Other call centres are hidden back rooms with six people on the phone. Exact numbers of how many people work in call centres in and around Delhi are not available, but in Gurgaon alone there are probably about 150,000. Most of the bigger companies not only off-shore their work to India, but outsource it at the same time to tele-service companies like Wipro, Converges, Genpact, IBM. American Express for example has an outsourced process at Converges, at the same time and just across the street it runs its own in-house call centre. Wipro employs 1,200 people in the Dell process while Dell is opening its own centre only a few kilometres away. It is unclear yet whether Dell will keep on running both processes parallel, but during conversations we heard that workers in the area are also effected by re-locations of their work. Some workers reported that the process they had worked in was re-located to a call centre in Hyderabad in the South of India. IBM has an in-house call centre and at the same time acts as a service provider for Amazon and various bigger airlines and travel agencies. Due to the re-shifting a lot of workers see their work as unstable. They know that they were at the receiving end of global re-location (although they are also aware that they earn only about 20 per cent of the US-workers), but they also know that the boom is temporary, that capital/work might move on.

While having a stroll through Gurgaon, the main revelation is that the planners of the industrial plot have not studied European revolutionary periods in the late sixties, or the struggles in Latin America or the movements in South Korea in the 80s. Or they think that due to the general deeper divisions in Indian society putting call centres right next to huge motorcycle factories and textile mills will not create explosive potentials in case of bigger turmoil. While we were distributing the call centre brochure the temp workers of the Hero Honda factory organised a wild occupation of the plant which went on for five days. Right opposite the factory is a bigger call centre with 1,000 young students, able of conversing in international languages and with access to modern means of communication, having to work ten hours night-shifts under quite severe pressure, while watching the police sleeping in the shadows of the occupied factory. Only a couple of weeks later we heard of trouble in the call centre because incentives were not paid in time. We were not able to verify the rumours but during a visit at the site a lot of young workers complained about having to travel and wait two hours in cabs before shift starts and about delays of wage payment. During times of revolutionary upheavals the students first had to “discover” the workers, here they work right next to each other and are in similar ways connected to the global movement of capital, e.g. the IBM call centre is right next to the Delphi plant, the world’s biggest car supplier, and in the US both companies are in deep economical shit.

Also in the daily street and communal life of Gurgaon its particular class composition expresses itself. The nights are full of white medium sized transporters carrying night-shift call centre workers, in the middle-class housing estates of skilled permanent Maruti/Suzuki workers young call centre employees of different call centres have sparsely furniture shared flats, bigger groups of call centre workers have coffee breaks in the shopping malls while ex-Honda temp workers sell them cigarettes or tea or peanuts. The spatial proximity is obvious, as obvious as the social abyss that still opens between them. Their different status is a social and cultural one, but can also be expressed in money terms: an unskilled building worker on the Dell call centre building site
might earn 1,000 to 1,500 rupees per month, working a 80 hours week; a textile or metal worker employed through a contractor earns about 1,500 to 2,500 rupees for the same working hours; the official minimum wage for unskilled work in Haryana for a 48 hours week is about 3,000 rupees, a contract worker at Maruti or Honda is paid between 3,000 and 5,000 rupees for 50 to 60 hours per week; a guy at Pizza Hut serving the call centre agents gets 3,700 rupees for a 60 hours week; permanent skilled workers at Maruti with a certain seniority, the highest paid industrial workers in India earn about 10,000 up to maximum 30,000 rupees Basic wages in call centres for a-level students start at about 8,000 rupees, the average wage including incentives range between 12,000 to 14,000 rupees for normally 50 hours night-shifts. Some call centre people, mainly in sales, earn up to 25,000 to 30,000 rupees During the last five to ten years the wage of unskilled factory workers decreased (apart from wages in the main auto mobile factories), while basic call centre workers wage are said to have increased by about 3,000 rupees. In many cases a nineteen year old call centre worker, e.g. daughter of of a university professor or hospital doctor would earn more than her father. To put it in context: The rent for a normal single room in Gurgaon ranges between 1,000 to 2,000 rupees per month; if you cook your food yourself, as a single person you would need about 3,000 rupees for a basic, but health nutrition; a basic meal at a street stall is 20 to 30 rupees, a coffee at Starbucks or one hour internet the same; a mobile phone contract/number for one year without credit is about 1,000 rupees; the price for a small car ranges between 300,000 and 500,000 rupees.

The money, the night-shifts, the contact with the “western world” creates a kind of call centre culture, even best-selling novels about it. The experiences of the new proletarianised middle class generation are characterised by a call centre job straight after school or university, the night shifts, the technological control and general pressure, the shared flats, the purchasing power, the expensive food in the neighbouring shopping malls, the long hours in cabs, the frequent job changes, the more open gender relations at work, the burn out, the difficulty to keep the perspective of an academic career or to find jobs as academics.

To these general experiences others are added. We had gatherings with other call centre workers in their flats, they arrived in Gurgaon coming from various states in India and they worked in different call centres in the area. One guy had been put into an Australian detention centre for several months and has not seen his two year old son for a year, since being deported. Another guy, a heavy metal guitarist, originally came from Mizoram, a state in the north-east and grew up under a militarised state of emergency. Someone was about to open his own small call centre, having worked four years night-shift he has the money and business connections. Our conversations mainly evolved about the sense of this new life, the question of love-relationships opposed to classical married life, the shattered illusion that a well paid work is a fulfilling one, the threatening perspective of depending on call centre jobs, the lack of other opportunities, migration.

Concerning the gender relations the social management tries to contain things and maintain certain boundaries, e.g. we heard of various cases where people were told off and warned by the management for bonding or flirting in the call centre. Landlords and neighbours normally make sure that there are no “mixed” shared flats, at Evaluserve normally only the male Indians came to the parties of the foreign workers etc. We also heard of cases where male team-leaders took advantage of the new moral pressure on female employees to be out-going and modern, by privileging flirty agents. The following interviews are products of rather short conversations during breaks, but they give an impression of the workers background, reality and perspective.

**Workers Interviews**

**Female worker, 22 years old**

In April 2004 I was still living in Bhopal when I had my first job interview with a call centre company in Gurgaon. After a first interview over the phone I was invited for a second interview in Gurgaon. I went with my mother. The company said that they were interested, but that they currently...
had no job, that I should wait another week. A friend of mine arranged me a different job, so I moved from Bhopal to Gurgaon. I first had to convince my family, but when my father saw that the flat is fine, they let me go. It was the first time that I went to a big town. In the following one and a half years I worked in fourteen different call centres and by changing jobs I increased my monthly wage from 8,000 rupees that I earned at my first job to 20,000 rupees, my current wage. All jobs were outbound, I was calling the US, Canada or the UK. First I had a quite glamorous picture of call centres, you know, free cabs and meals and all. But that changed after a while, after working six days a week from 2.30 am to 12.30 pm plus travel-time. I started working in small call centres with ten people employed, later I worked in companies with up to 2,000 employees. The smaller call centres are less organised, they often do not give you a contract, they do not pay in time, you do not get your promised incentives. They also often do not pay the Provident Fund (unemployed/pension insurance), they do not give you a PF-number, although it is obligatory. They also hire more or less anyone who can speak a little English.

In the smaller units I called for Rogers Canada, they do business in telecommunications, or I called trying to convince people in the US to make use of the Government Grant Profit. They are supposed to pay 299 USD into this scheme, but often it turns out to be a con-trick. The shift-times for the US are tough, you work from 11 pm. to 6.30 am. I called for Three-G-Network or OneTel, selling mobile phones to private households in the UK. A lot of call centres here call for telecommunications companies.

Most of the call centres had automatic diallers, meaning that you can not influence when a call is made. Sometimes you have to make 400 to 500 calls per shift. Bigger companies like Infovision or Technova sometimes share a building, so that you have one row of Infovision workers the next from Technova. Big companies have their own buildings, unlike smaller companies, which often share a single one. It can happen that in one row there are people working for seven different companies. Infovision also has several branches, one still in the US, three or four in India. Some people start working while they are still living with their parents. For them it is pocket-money for party or gadgets. For them it is also not such a problem if wages are not paid on time. But I guess that 60 to 70 per cent of the people actually have to pay rent, they came from various places in the North, if there is no money, they are in trouble.

One time at Icode Customer Management wages were not paid in time. It is a small call centre, only 25 people worked there. The management made cheap excuses, said that the client was not paying, that money will come in soon. That happened several times before people got fed up. During a night-shift people decided not to work as long as there were no wages. The manager actually went and got cash money from the bank and paid people the next morning. Later several people left this company, now there are only ten workers left. Similar things happened at bigger call centres, as well.

There was also trouble about taking leave. For example my brother was ill and I had to go back to Bhopal. The team leader said it was fine, but when I came back he asked me “Who allowed you to take holiday?”. Sometimes I just left a job because I needed holiday, I took a new job after coming back. You can find them in the internet, in the newspapers or you hear about them from friends. There are call centres like Wipro or Converges which are seen as better and more established call centres, also because they have good clients, for example BT or Orange. The problem is that they are far away from Gurgaon, you would have to travel at least two hours plus working a ten hours shift. The atmosphere in the call centres is a bit like in college. There is a culture of parties, people share flats, keep in contact via google-groups. Sometimes it is fun, people come to work after a party still drunk, falling asleep, waking each other up when a CIO comes. Sometimes it is childish, even harassing. Boys play their games, make jokes of the girls. We also got abuses when calling the US, but mainly from private people, not from employees. We did not know much about working conditions in call centres in the US, also we did not talk about it much. We only saw the high-up US managers from time to time, that is it. When I
saw that more and more people came into the call centre business I felt that only speaking English is not enough of a qualification, because so many people speak English. I learnt French. In call centres you mainly learn about working time and discipline, you are physically un-free, but mentally free. You do your task. I also tried to get a job teaching French, but that is difficult and the wages are not that good. I finally joined Evalueserve, here you are less under pressure. In a call centre, if you do not sell, you are fired. A lot of people try to continue their studies while working in a call centre, about 40 per cent study on correspondence. But it is difficult, a lot of people stop after a while. Also for managers working in a call centre is not a step towards career, they can stay within the industry, but outside of it call centre experience is not valued.

GE Capital, female worker, 21 years

I worked for GE Capital in the Australian shift. The shift would start at 4 am and finish at 1 pm, meaning that the cab would wait for you at 2.30 am. We did not get better pay for these shift-times, the same wage, about 8,000 rupees Sometimes when Australian people heard that we were from India they would say “How can I trust you”. About the job in general, well, I just finished college, still living with my parents and I thought it would be fun, but it was more like a prison. You could not move away from your desk, you had to be available all the time. If someone missed a call, a manager would call from Australia and complain about this particular worker. We answered about 100 calls a day. We had five minutes to got to the toilet. I had to give me an English name, the dress code was very strict, as well.

Female worker, 27 years

The job gave me a lot of confidence, I worked hard, got some respect for that. But the job was tough, 120 calls a day, often no weekends off, because clients of water and gas companies in the UK have queries at weekends, as well. We were supposed to convince UK customers to get a regular payment plan for the gas or water, meaning that the money is regularly extracted from their bank accounts, instead of them paying each single bill individually. For poorer people we proposed a pre-payment meter, so that they would pay in advance. They are keen on quality, if someone disconnects a call, he would be fired. If someone would be a second too late back from the break the incentive would be scrapped. There were bi-annual bonuses, a good performer would get about 14,000 rupees. In some call centres they display the incentives right there on the shop-floor, for example bikes or fridges or televisions.

HP, male worker, 22 years

I came to Gurgaon from Calcutta. I come from an Adivasi (indigenous) background, my father got a job in the government sector. I first went to a Catholic School were a lot of rich kids hung out. I graduated and my brother, who is working as an engineer paid a technical course for basic computer hardware knowledge for me. The course cost about 17,000 rupees, but the qualification is basic, so I would have only found jobs which paid 1,500 to 2,000 rupees a month, so it would not have been a great investment. I wanted to start working at Wipro in Calcutta, because it was the biggest and best known call centre in town. But a friend told me that they make you work 16 to 17 hours and would only pay eight. Soon after a guy from a consultancy contacted me and asked me to come to Gurgaon to work in the technical support for HP. I talked to my parents and then decided to leave for Gurgaon, only because HP seemed to be a chance to increase my computer knowledge. There was some delay with the re-reimbursement money that HP is supposed to pay, for travel costs and the first two weeks rent in a hostel, but that seems to be solved now. HP outsourced its technical support to Daksh, which was then taken over by IBM. In the call centre there are also other processes, such as Delta Airlines, another US company. The HP process is quite new not older then six months, I guess. HP has its own call centre in Bangalore, I do not know why they have kept it, they do basically the same job there. About 100 people work in the HP process, all rather youngster, often not married, most of them fresh from college, I guess for 80 per cent it is their first job. They know a little bit about computers, but HP only requires good English skills. They come from everywhere, the consultancies which work for HP
even go to Kashmir in order to hire people. They get 5,000 to 6,000 rupees per head. Before we started to take calls we had a two months training period. It was basically about how to use the tools. The main tool is a kind of HP trouble-shooting google-like program, a search engine to find technical solutions to problems. Basically we receive calls from the US, mainly from private people who have problems with their HP product. On average I receive 30 to 50 calls in a 9 hours nightshift, some of them take 30 min, most of them less. The company tells you off if you would need more than 30 minutes. We have direct-to-ear phone machines. After three months on the phone I have already dealt with about 90 per cent of the problems that I come across. That makes things rather boring. I am happy if a new problem crops up and I can learn something new. I brought all my software books from the course, because I thought that I would work at IBM now, but I do not need them. I can come to work in T-Shirt and with my base-ball cap. The basic wage is 10,500 rupees, but there are incentives. We are supposed to sell things, from software programmes to computers. For example if a guy calls because of a virus problem then we are supposed to sell him a virus software after having solved the problem. I sell stuff for 1,000 to 2,000 US-Dollars a month, but I get only 1,000 to 1,500 rupees for that. The rest is for HP. There are other incentives, e.g. the client can rate the service on a scale ranging from 1 – 5. You should not get less then 4. Some of the incentives are tied to team performance, meaning that if you take too much time on a call, the whole team would loose the team leader would get trouble and pass it on. The total incentives would sum up to 3,000 to 3,500 rupees per month. One guy sold stuff for 5,000 US-Dollar a month, he was invited by HP guys for dinner and then offered a job in the HP call centre in Bangalore. There he would make 250,000 rupees a year. We rarely talk to guys from HP in the US, only if they pass on clients. But there is no time for chats. Also everyone knows that they earn more and that HP shifted to India because we work long hours for much less money. We mainly talk to clients, about life here and there. This is what I like most, the rest is not too exiting. Apart from that we make jokes, the atmosphere is fine. We say that HP computers are pretty crap, but at least this saves our jobs. Somehow the main thing that I got out of the job is that I have learnt to cope. Night-shifts are tough, there is not much life left, I could not send money home during the first months, because life is quite expensive here. So in a way I am prepared. It is the first job and it is tough, it can only get easier. I will not stay longer than for another year.

Citibank, male worker, 24 years

I used to work for Converges, in the Citibank process. In total about 600 people work there, it is a 24x7 process. Converges made sure that they got the people with the best accent for the Citibank process. I worked inbound, the credit card department for US clients, we had to do balance transfers, give information on interest rates and loans. We were also supposed to sell pro-active loans and credit protectors, a kind of insurance in case people pay their rates to late they would not have to pay higher interests. We got two US Dollars for each sold credit protector. We were supposed to sell two a day. Our wages were calculated in Dollars. The other people at Converges would not get these incentives. The basic wage would start from 8,500 rupees for beginners, they could go up to 17,000. Some people made 26,000 total wage including incentives. It was also the most strict process at Converges, e.g. if you did not log out your computer and left the desk for a minute you would get the sack. Citibank had a individual floor and entrance in the building. People working for Citibank were also obliged to wear a tie, the others not. So you could see who works for Citibank and who is not. The call centre here in Gurgaon was the only outsourced call centre from Citibank. If a supervisor was not available and there was a problem then we sometimes had to transfer a customer back to the US. But the Citibank workers would only ask for the client’s details, they were professional, no chat, no nothing.

Intervention

As 'Workers Solidarity' we put together a small brochure mainly consisting of job reports written in the late 90s by friends working in call centres in the Ruhr area, Germany. The interesting fact was
that some of the companies mentioned in the brochure also had call centres in Gurgaon, such as HP and Citibank. The other part consisted of struggle reports from various call centres and countries, e.g. in France and Spain (see prol-position newsletter no.3). We wrote a short introduction trying to relate the situation in Europe to the current conditions in India and analysing the general trend of global re-location of work. We distributed the brochure in front of the major call centres. Often we had to explain first that we were not trying to recruit people for jobs in Europe. Another misunderstanding was that people thought that we blame them for taking European or US jobs. Some people had a defensive attitude stating that there is a win-win situation for capital and workers in India: due to higher qualification, lower wages and longer working hours capital makes more profit and provides Indian youth with relatively well paid jobs. In contrast to that most people were aware of the fact that the main reason for capital to come to India is due to the wages being 20 per cent of those in the US or the UK and that also on a personal level call centre jobs will not guarantee a long-term income: people said that after five years in call centres you are finished. A lot of people complained about the usual call centre work related side-effects, such as boredom and burn-out, particularly due to night-shift work. In general it was not much different distributing leaflets in India or in Europe, in Gurgaon probably more people took a brochure. Similar level of stress with security guards, though.

In general people are grateful for being informed about conditions and struggles of others, but the distributors are seen neither as heroes nor as from Mars. Actually a lot of people were up for meeting again another time in order to talk about the conditions. Unfortunately the brochure does not contain any information on struggles which took place in the US or UK because of the re-location of work to India. Recent examples could have been struggles at IBM or Dell in the US and in Europe against redundancies. This would be a challenge for future interventions. We tried to get in contact with the call centre union called UNITES, but did not manage to do so. There is an NGO labour rights group in Bombay which is active around call centre work. And there are various related academic research projects (see below), but so far we have not heard of any “organised” action of call centre employees to improve their situation. There have been rumours and stories of spontaneous strikes and of a riot in Bombay (see ppnl no.3), but they seem exceptional or could not be confirmed as fact.

**Political Conclusions**

Like in Europe or the US the particularly labour force demanding boom time of call centres encourages rather individual solutions for dealing with problems: people change jobs frequently. The difference in India is the relatively high wage level and level of education of call centre workers on one hand and the additional alienation (night-shifts, racism, dead-end for academic career etc.) on the other. Another big difference, which might have an impact on future conflicts or struggles is the fact that in India there is a kind of call centre workers culture and net which also organises the reproduction, e.g. the living arrangements. Connected with this culture is an erosion of certain gender roles or the hierarchical relation between generations. At least in and around Delhi the call centres are situated in areas of massive new industrialisation, with struggles of first generation factory workers in world market companies, which might influence potential conflicts. Call Centre workers who do not live at home anymore realise that the wages are only relatively high and not as glorious as promised. This material constraint, plus the dim outlook for finding other academic jobs, plus the daily alienation and first signs of the finite of the boom might trigger some outbreaks. Interesting would be if these outbreaks will happen while the struggles in call centres the western world are still going on...

**Texts**

“India calling to the far away towns: The call centre labour process and globalization” Phil Taylor, Peter Bain


Links

MUNI SOCIAL STRIKEOUT; The attempt at a transit system fare strike in San Francisco

http://www.infoshop.org/myep/love2.html

In early 2005, bureaucrats in San Francisco’s Municipal Transit Authority announced plans for a fare increase, service cuts and mass layoffs of bus drivers.

In response, a small group of anti-authoritarians initiated an effort aimed at uniting Muni riders and drivers in large-scale action that could spike the attacks. This article, written by a participant, critically examines this attempt.

“Our effort, modelled on similar actions in other parts of the world, especially Italy during the unrest of the 1970’s, aimed at fomenting a city-wide "social strike" where Muni drivers and riders would act together, drivers would let people ride for free, and the fare collection system would collapse until the fare hike, cuts and threats of layoffs had been rescinded....

Unfortunately the people behind the action... lacked backbone and nerve, practical solidarity with one another and political cohesion. This article examines this failure. These problems aren’t etched in stone. A rigorous critical examination of what happened with the failed 2005 Muni effort can contribute to a better, more aggressive, more far-going effort next time.”

A working class revolt in Bangladesh, Strike, riot and fire among the garment workers

www.endangeredphoenix.com


In Prol-Position number 6 there were some reports on the struggles in the factories in Bangladesh. Here are two articles with more on this. One including more political analysis from Endangered Phoenix and the other an update on what is happening from libcom

Radical Gathering of Women

www.escanda.org/RWG

Following a recent international gathering of women in Escanda, a new website has started with an eclectic selection of texts relating to women anti-capitalists, capitalism and patriarchy, migration, health, history etc. Some old, some new, some still in note form.