N° 58 February '89

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SPAIN - THE 14th OF DECEMBER STRIKE

What happened before

For some times, unions were aware that the politics they have followed have only brought them to lose their influence upon the workers. This politics was centered on the different forms of 'social agreements'; it had deeply disturbed the labour market and spread the precarity of the labour force. Losing their influence means for the unions losing their abil-ity to control and to manage this labour force; thence they would be less useful for the government as an institution. Unions would become more and more depend-ant on the state money (given to them under the cover of 'training subsidies' or other tricky pretexts) as their membership declined sharply.

The social-democrats worked seriously according to a plan of modernization of capital following neo-liberal principles. They openly aimed at bringing up the rate of profit with a lot of measures such as removing the control of employment, limiting wage rise, repressing the social conflicts (see for instance the shipyards restructuring). In short, the 'socialist' government was a good manager of the restructuring process against the most elementary interests of the workers and it always was actively helped by the unions. Up to the point where unions were helpless (as everywhere in Europe) referring to the traditional meaning; we can think that the unions were unable to adapt to the new reality and so can only control a very small part of the labour force. Losing influence means for the bureaucracy losing power and a threat for their social domination: unions had to react..

The day of strike in June '85 against the government decisions on retirement brought some contradictions between the socialist party and its union (UGT): the social discontent got such a level that UGT had to organize this day of strike though it did not follow the CCOO; UGT limited its criticism to the socialist plan on retirement. No doubt that then the UGT bureaucracy hoped

to plane the differences with the party leaders inside the so-called 'socialist family'.

Some elements to understand the strike

So, before the 14th of december we could find in all categories of the population, discontent and precarisation. We have to see the stake of the 14th of December at three levels.

On one side there is an inside fight between the union bureaucracy and the PSOE leaders to control the socialist apparatus. In fact, union leaders were degraded: formerly, the decisions in the state organization were shared with the party leaders; more and more, as the social-democratic party was more and more liberal in politics and as the society evolved, new strategies for domination were needed; in Spain, after six years of socialist government, more and more union bureaucrats are removed from the power centers inside the party, eliminated by the socio-technocrats following a neo-liberal ideology. The same union leaders are complaining that they are no longer 'listened' by the government when planning the social and economic policy. They are right because the union has become an almost obsolescent instrument in the PSOE strategy. In this respect we have to consider how deeply the Spanish society has been transformed: all the previous workers structures coordinating the various elements of this society are dissolving; than the PSOE is aiming at governing for the society as a whole. The party politics is orientated towards the interests of industrialists (Spain is the European country having the highest gross accumulation rate), of banks, of professionals and of the new strata of skilled new technology workers and of course of transitional capital. The PSOE can get workers' votes in the elections, from the same people who will strike - because the only political alternative to a disappointing left is the right.

I Think that the process of proletarisation is going ahead while bringing a new reality for the exploitation of the labour force and in that, unions have to perform a new role. In Fact, the unions are only able now to represent the skilled and secured workers using the new technologies brought by the restructuring.

These workers can negotiate with capital and get the best from the selling of their labour force according to the traditional union tactics. On the other side the precarious workers, for instance engaged with short time temporary contracts and fixed wages have not at all the possibility to negotiate their working conditions: they are not concerned by the branch collective agreements and by the union activity. The negative effect on the union membership (the lowest in Europe) and on their control efficiency means a weakening of the union bureaucracy 'social power' in front of capital and of the technocratic strata of the ruling class (and so a weakening of the legal need of union to help capital in the management of labour force). Actually there is a process to adapt union function to the new level of capital development (as it was mentioned in the book on the English miners' strike); this process gave rise

to contradictions inside the social-democracy with the opposition between the technocrats and the old union bureaucrats: these ones can see their share of power inside the socialist family transformed to the new managers. So the workers mobilization was for UGT an answer to the socio-technocrats to regain some power.

The second point to understand the strike is to examine the role of the CCOO (communist union). This union as well lost its importance and the capacity to mobilize workers. In this respect, the loss of their majority in the SEAT-elections (May '88) to the CNT (U) (see La Estiba) was a warning for the CCOO. They have to react in using the social discontent to regain their negotiating ability from the government and the managers. At the same time, the union CCOO tried to modernize: the new man Camancho was given a seat as a general secretary; the aim was to oblige the government to use again the union in the negotiating process. The same kind of transformation took place inside the PCE: after the eurocommunist period (we know its results: expelling, splits, total support to the capitalist interests to stabilize democracy for the transitional period, etc.), the PCE was strongly declined both in its electoral representation and as a social force. The political strength inherited from the anti-franquist struggle was dilapidated in this transitional period, at first with Santiago Carrillo, then with Rulo Iglesias. A political U-turn was needed to try to rescue some parts out of this wreckage. At a rump congress mid '88 a new general secretary was elected in order to give a more radical outlook with some new words close to leninism (we have to remember that at the beginning of this transitional period, the PSOE 'got rid' of marxism while PCE did the same with leninism). With the eurocommunist programm, the PCE found the political spectrum already fully occupied from the centre left up to the social-democratic reformism and in the process lost all political identity: now it has to look for a new one.

The PCE was part of the campaign against the integration of Spain in OTAN: the June '86 elections were not far but nevertheless it did not gain votes. The new political platform IU (united left) supported by the PCE did not bring more votes as well which reduced drastically the number of PCE MP. The 14 December strike brought a chance to reconquer the workers' confidence with hope (an illusion, I think) to find again a political role and electoral power. The intervention of PCE and CCOO in this day of strike was pushed by this purpose. It would be silly to think they wanted to disturb the social relationships; on the contrary what they were looking for was (as UGT) a change in the social government policy and a more secured recognition of their role in the labour negotiating process. CCOO as well as UGT needed a union success to get something from capital for the workers. In the heat of the battle, PCE members asked for Gonzales' dismissal or some of his ministers' departure, no more.

The third point was what I consider as the real background: the social situation in Spain related to the industrial restructuring and the accumulation process. The characteristics of this process are well known: proletarisation, precarisa-

tion, wage cuts, unemployment benefit cuts, extension of 'charity' in the main towns, harder conditions of work (allowed by new work regulations). In the political spheres, the PSOE had a more and more authoritarian attitude, pushing aside all criticisms and developing a 'clientelism' in distributing rewards and bribes (e.g. creating 25.000 new civil servants), in showing leniency for all kinds of corruption and financial scandals in the police, in the firms; the PSOE image opposed to the corrupt franquism was somewhat spoiled. There was among the population a strong tendency to follow a call to express their discontent with the government. Unions took the opportunity of this 'objective situation' to try to curb it according to their interests, not wanting to go beyond a nice warning. For the past years, social conflicts did not disappear but their size and radicalism have somewhat faded away: the restructuring has somewhat weakened the workers position in the balance of struggle. In fact the old structures living on the class struggle are disintegrating and unions are first ones to be shaken. For all the dominating structures of the capitalist society, the same question comes again and again: up to which point to go with agreements and reforms without provoking a generalized upsurge from the workers?

Considering these points it is not absurd to think that the 14th December strike did not express a sharp level of conflict but is rather a manoeuvre from the unions to prevent some possible conflicts. In fact union programm for this day called to all categories of workers: ordinary workers (asking for more money), precarious workers (more unemployment benefits, new retirement conditions, improvement for young workers); this 'unification' of working class was only to help them to regain their position with capital and government. The Economy Minister accused the unions of supporting corporatism when they ask for wage rise because inflation will rise as well and thence new jobs will go away; in other words, it was a warning to the unions to push them to 'modernize' in order to represent not only the employed workers but all the other workers strata developed with the restructuring.

The strike and after the strike

The strike saw a kind of hysterical atmosphere coming from a war of words of the socio-technocrats of the government and of the PSOE. One of them even took the example of the 1934 strike and of 'communist threat' exactly like in Franco time. The government accused unions to be 'irresponsible', which was true indeed. The unions' weakness ruled out any possibility for them to control the strike and of course the government feared 'wildcat actions': in that they brought the evidence of their complete ignorance of what happens at the rank and file level; the unions though weak knew better that the workers were not that ready to go beyond this day of strike.

Nevertheless, this fear among the ruling class was somewhat contagious even spreading among unions. They had to cool down the importance of the strike and to tell everybody it was not a general 'revolutionary' strike but only 'a day

of protest', a call to the government to give a social content to its politics; the day of strike had to be peaceful, etc.... More it was evident that the strike would cover all the branches of activity, more the union calls were soft and peaceful. Indeed government, managers, unions were frightened and we can understand the meaning of all these calls for a 'peaceful day'.... and the relief of all kinds of bureaucrats the day after when government and unions were praising the 'civism of the Spanish people'.
The PSOE had used all the resources and manoeuvres in the media, using all its political forces to fight against the strike: it was left alone. Even the attempt to open the department stores in the main towns failed with the strength and determination of the pickets; indeed there was very few violence because scabs were seen practically nowhere.

Paradoxically the workers answer to the strike call could be seen as expressing the need to do something and to claim its discontent but without having a clear will to fight. As the social peace was preserved, the UGT secretary could declare on the 22sd of January that 'the same politics will continue with the same leaders and the some pretence from the government'. In fact this strike considered like that looks like a 'family quarrel'. After the strike, it is like a wrestling party between socio-technocrats (PSOE) and the union bureaucrats with the aim to get an agreement in which nobody would lose its face. Some concessions would have to come from both sides. The government will stick to its economy policy (wage control being the only way to control inflation and to guarantee the rate of accumulation). Unions are threatening to call for other mobilizations; the CCOO would be upset of a new agreement between UGT and PSOE. Apparently, and if we follow the media, these events can be related to personal fights between leaders: actually they are manoeuvres towards adapting backwards structures to the development of capital. The proletarian class is in a complex situation linked to its restructuring as a class; this situation is characterized by plenty of contradictions and a lack of perspectives even when workers are fighting for elementary claims (e.g. wage rise); it can explain why the unions could so easily recuperate the claims as their own. If I can draw an evolution for the future, I think there will be an agreement unions-government (UGT-PSOE?); some people and parts of the PSOE politics will have to go in such a way the unions could pretend to represent the workers having got something for them. UGT (and CCOO) will have to give something in exchange: a limitation of the right to strike as it has been already proposed. It is too early to consider all the consequences of the strike because, at the present time everything is still confined in this struggle of interests between the bureaucratic part of the unions (CCOO and UGT) and the socio-technocrats having to manage the modernization of capital in Spain.

Etcetera - Correspondencia de la Guerra Social (Apartado C. 1363 - Barcelona- in Spanish) N° 12/October '88: On the new ideology. The human activity alienated by the division of labour. The nuclear protest at Bajo Duero. UK: the strikes in the car industry ('87-'88). The other face of the Olympic games. Poland to-day (cartoons). Review of publications.

Cultura Libertaria (Apartado - 1687 - Vitoria 01080 - Spain - in Spanish) N° 14/December '88: The libertarian thinking in Basque country and Navarra (list of libertarian publications). Periodicals and documents. Weakness of the syndicalist action. On the 'ciucopuntismo'.

La Estiba (Boletin de la Coordinadora Estatal de los Estibadores Portuarios - c/del Mar 97 -08003 Barcelona - in Spanish) N° 40/Oct. '88: New agreement USA-PSOE: the nuclear colonization of Spain. Chili: The 'no' won, but Pinochet has not lost. The agreements in the Spanish ports (las Palmas, Teneriffe, Valencia). The containers traffic in different port sectors in Europe. Thoughts on nationalism.
N° Nov '88: Negotiations at las Palmas. Projects for a cooperative by the SOC (Union of farm workers in Andalusia). International Monetary Fund and the World Bank: two mechanisms for the extension of (hambre). On the union crisis: an approach of the reality of the workers movement in the USA.
N° 42/Dec. '88: A plan for the employment of you u.gs. A view on the container sea transport in the world in '87. On the ports (Teneriffe, las Palmas).

Odio al capitalismo (Av Vida Natural - Apartado de Correos 25 - 27080 Lugo-Spain - in Spanish) N° 2/Nov-Dec. '88: Programmatic elaboration. Discussion with the group 'A contre courant'. N° 3/Jan-March '89: Programm elaboration. The natural disaster of capital. Information on struggles all over the world. Hatred for capitalism (in English): Critique, programm, struggle, organization, international party for the abolishment of wage labour, basic principles.

USA HS

Workers Vanguard (Paper of the Spartacist League of the USA - Box 1377 GPO - New York, NY 10116 - USA - in English) N° 467/16-12-88: For a workers' America. N° 468/6-1-89: Homeless USA. Militant University workers sold out in Mexico. Electrical workers play hard ball (Puerto Rico). Iran: mass executions of leftists. N° 469/20-1-89: Spain: 'Socialist' regime hit by protest strike. Bloody terror in Khomeini's Iran. N° 470/3-2-89: Bush's 'kinder, gentler' Police state? Racist cops. Judge, jury, executioners (Miami to Toronto, blacks under he gun). Army seizes oil workers chief: Mexico rulers declare war on Labor. Cops rampage against anti-Klan protesters. How the film 'Mississippi Burning' rewrites history.

Workers Hammer (Box 1377 GPO - New York - NY 10116 - USA - in English) N° 104/Febr.'89: A deadly decision in a deadly society: Aids tragedy in Thatcher's Britain. Racist riots erupt in China.

Spartacist (Box 1377 GPO - New York - NY 10116 - USA - in English) N° 41-42/Winter 87-88: Return to the Road of Lenin & Trotsky. Where is Gorbachev's Russia going?

Industrial Worker (Industrial Workers of the World - 3435 N. Sheffield Avenue-Suite 202 - Chicago - ILL 60657- USA) N° 6/June 88: Workers' struggle in Poland. Child labor in the Philippines. Review of the book: The 1913 Paterson strike revisited. N° 7/July 88: Another P9 in the making: Shipbuilders' local union fights for survival. Solidarity unionism. N° 8/Aug '88: Pennsylvania state workers' strike against unions busters. The abolition of work. N° 9/Sept '88: South African workers strengthen solidarity.

Discussion Bulletin (PO Box 1564, Grand Rapids, Mi 49501 - USA - in English) N° 32/Nov. '88: Discussion inside and outside the SPGB on the 'road to socialism', a new revolutionary strategy, etc. 'Base' and 'superstructure': a libertarian view. Review of J. Zerzan and Alice Carnes' book: Questioning Technology.

Documents: copy at Echg. (in E.) - The world according to Ohmae: a noted Japanese analyst takes an unconventional look at the USA trade deficit (June '88)
- After the crisis. Why a crisis of profitability (Against the current/Jan-Apr. '88 - Mary C. Malloy)
- Bush's Job Programm has a few problems to work out (The Washington Post National Weekly edition/4-9-88)
- The Twilight of the big-paycheck blue-collar era: for workers with little education it's getting harder and harder to have a middle class life (Washington Post National Weekly edition/13-6-88)
- Akron: A painful Peek at our future problems - The 'rubber capital' struggles to adjust (The Washington Post etc. /6-6-88)
- Workers' State: deterioration of the standard of living (The Nation/19-9-88)
- Big Banks shift from 3d World: shedding loans to developing nations Loans eliminated and capital added (New York Times/27-7-88)
- The return of inequality: the great bulk of Americans are losing economic and political power while the affluent are gaining both (The Atlantic Monthly/June '88)
- Civil Liberties (American civil liberties Union - 132 West 43 Str. - New York - NY 10036 - USA) Spring/Summer '88: Reagan's legacy: Supreme Court threatens to turn back the clock on civil rights.
- Prisons of US seen facing new challenges in increase in elderly inmates (New York Times)

- The Scopes Trial - Making the grade as an air traffic controller Recruitment and training of US air controller - see articles in previous issues of Echanges (Flying/Summer '88)

Green Synthesis (League for Ecological Democracy - PO Box 1858 - San Pedro-Ca. 90733 - USA - in English) N° 29/Dec.'88: A movement in process. To be or not to be political. A reply to my critics by Murray Bookchin (social ecology answer to deep ecology). Introduction to the SPAKA process. A personal report on the Institute for Social Ecology.

The People (a publication of the Socialist Labor Party - 914 Industrial Avenue-Palo Alto - Ca 96303 - USA - in English) N° 15/22-10-88: Living conditions worsen for migrant farm workers. Airline industry conditions spawn fatal errors. N° 16/5-11-88: The lessons of the international paper strike. N° 17/19-11-88: Sweatshops alive and well in capitalist America. N° 18/3-12-88: De Leon's 1897 Address: Plain words to Boston workingmen. New factory methods mean more work, fewer jobs. N° 10/17-12-88: Polish workers' struggle faces manu obstacles. Rift grows between workers, Solidarity leaders. (RH)

The disposable employee is becoming a fact of corporate life. Economists say so-called contingent workers make up 25 % of the labor force (Business Week 15/12/88 - In English - copy at Echanges) This article gives a lot of data on the present tendencies of the labour market in the USA and on related wages (70% of part-timers have no employer provided retirement plan and 42% have no health insurance).

GENERAL & THEORETICAL DISCUSSIONS (HS)

Ecology and Green movements

Echanges comrades sent various texts which could be of interest for those studying these subjects (all texts in English available at Echanges).

In Australia the Greens are different from the Greens elsewhere (translation of an article published in the Dutch monthly Act & Thought in September '87)

The potential of the Green Movement - Howard Hawkins (New Politics, Sum. '88)

Call for a left Green Network followed by 'Principles of the Left Green Network' (26/9/88 - Left Green Network - PO Box 372 - West Lebanon - New Hampshire 03784 - USA)

Anton Pannekoek and the Quest for an Emancipatory Socialism - John Gerber-New Politics, Vol II, N° 1 - Summer '88) The author makes the very valid

introductory remark that little attention has been paid to Pannekoek in the past decade, whereas considerable attention has been given to non-orthodox marxist thinkers like Korsch, Lukacs, Gramsci .. Particularly in connection with Gramsci we can talk of a veritable 'Gramsci industry'. The 'External fraction of the ICC' says in International Perspectives, N° 10, p. 20:

'While Luxemburg, Lenin, Pannekoek and many others fought against revisionism in the Second International, against the opportunistic attempts to abandon the revolutionary programm of the social democracy, there existed a parallel evolution that was not to be found in the political programmes: the gradual relentless absorption of Social Democracy into the state apparatus.. The growth of the SPD and the great bureaucracy that developed as a result was seen, even by the left, as the growth of proletarian power..'

The impression of Pannekoek created here by the EFICC, that he didn't see this, is very wrong. It's precisely because he saw much of this that he is an interesting thinker for us also when he was active in the pre-war social democracy. Gerber also points out this when he writes about Pannekoek's views of the socialist parties and the unions in this period:

'He contended that these gigantic and powerful organizations had almost become a state within a state, with their own officials, finances, press, spiritual values and ideology. The thousands of officials, secretaries, agitators, parliamentarians, theoreticians and publicists formed a distinct caste, with their own narrow interests'.

When Gerber says that 'much of the attention devoted to Pannekoek has often been marred by its partisan character', I find that a statement of little value. Firstly because I don't see anything necessarily wrong with that. Secondly because what he says is not true for many of the works he refers to. Among the 'partisan' works he would certainly include Brendel's 'Anton Pannekoek, Theoretikus van het Socialisme', a very valuable work, unfortunately only published in Dutch. Concerning this work, Gerber makes an error which is quite interesting. He says that the only detailed studies of Pannekoek are the university dissertations by himself and by a Canadian, and includes Brendel's work in the list of Pannekoek anthologies. It's true that Brendel's work is 'partisan' if you like (but not uncritical) and that it's not a university dissertation, but it's a major study of Pannekoek's ideas and not an anthology of his texts.

Gerber's university dissertation is definitely worth reading - the article says that it will be published as a book. RH

UNITED KINGDOM

Documents (in English - copies at Echanges)
The Communist Party: Farewell to all that (Socialist Worker Review - 9/88) EETPU-No substitute (Socialist Worker Review - 9/88) How to fight Hammond (Socialist Worker Review - 11/88)

(RH)

Solidarity (A Journal of Libertarian Socialism - c/o 123 Lathom Road, London E6 2A - U.K. - in English) N° 19/Winter 88-89: In Moscow's vaults: while the new 'openness' strengthens Gorbachev's hand in the short term, Ken Weller questions whether the Kremlin can survive untrammeled discussion of the party's role in Stalin's atrocities. Perestroika: improved reforms outpaced by mood for real change. Damage limitation politics (on the last) Labour's annual conference ant the failure of plans to marginalize the left in the party) Two letters on Castoriadis' distortion of marxism.

Subversion (Box W - c/o Raven Press - 75 Piccadilly Manchester - M12 BU - in English) Discussion paper N° 1: Capitalism and class struggle in the USSR. (We reproduce the preface of this short pamphlet and review it when the next one on class struggle in Russia will be published)

Internationalist Perspective (in English, USA - PO Box 1748, Montclair, NJ 07042; UK - BM Box 8154, London WC I N 3 XX; in French: Belgium - Destryker-BP 1181, Centre Monnaie, 1000 Bruxelles) N° 11/Fall 88 (in English): Poland once again. New sirens to sink the class struggle. Problems of the period of transition (1936-1937) N° 12/Fall 88 (in French): Russian imperialism looking for a new look. In Poland, workers' defiance to Solidarity. Hunger riots in Algeria: the end of a myth. France: why a new victory for the new left. Crisis in the present revolutionary milieu. Discussion on state capitalism: the ICC or the ostrich game. Problems of the period of transition (1936-1937)

Counter Information (p/4 CI - 11 Forth Str - Edinburgh - England - in English) N° 22/Feb-March '89: Pay no Poll tax (information on the poll tax resistance available from Community Resistance to the Poll Tax, p/hole CR, c/o 11 Forth Street, Edinburgh). Boycott School (S-Africa). Nurses angry at regrading swindle.

Socialist Opportunism (Autonomy - c/o Box A - 34 Cowley Rd Oxford - Uk - in English) General strike. Leninism, Trotskyism, a communist critique. The content of communism.

SOUTH KOREA

Labor Resurgence in South Korea - B. Stephens (The Nation - 19/9/88 - copy at Echanges)

BRAZIL

Collapse on consensus (Socialist Worker Review - December '88 - in English - copy at Echanges) On the last strikes in Brazil (civil servants, teachers, steel and oil industry) and the rise of the 'Workers Party' (P.T.) supported by the unions (a kind of Labour Party - a social democratic one). (RH)

CHINA

Getting back to basics - Unions seek to represent workers' interests (Far Eastern Economic Review - 3/11/88 - copy at Echanges)

The tendencies of the official union in China to become like a western union and their evolution links to the capitalist development in China. HS

CANADA

Open Road (Box 6135 - Station 6 - Vancouver-BC - Canada V6R46 - in English) N° 23/Fall '88: Will the real CNT please stand up? Aids as biological and psychological warfare. Designer disease. West Bank Youth keep it up.

FRANCE

L'Aube Internationaliste (M. Duchemin-Librairie l'Herbe Rouge - 1bis rue d'Alesia-75014 Paris - in French) Sept/Oct '88: The SNECMA strike. Was the POF a marxist party. The Senegalese democracy in crisis. Geronimo Prah, prisoner of the American capitalism. Black September/red October: bourgeois terrorism at work.

Critical thinking on the social movement Winter '86 - '87 in France (Librairie l'Herbe Rouge - 1bis rue d'Alesia - 75014 Paris - in French) This pamphlet is made of two articles: the immobility of history or the mystery of alienation - Revolt and voluntary servitude of present proletarians (SNCF blues). Both are a commentary on the strikes in France and of the 'coordination' committees.

Contre (Journal dans le mouvement - published by 'Octobre' - in French) N° 4/Autumn '88: A particular day: the 1st of May. It's right to revolt: autonomy, organization against the power. Unemployed: the failure of a coordination on the guaranteed income. Algeria is burning.

Alarma (Ferment Ouvrier Revolutionnaire - FOR - BP 329 - 75624 Paris Cedex 13 - in French) N° 39/Jan-Febr-March 88: The proletariat in front of the EEC. A supplement to this issue (May 88) contains a polemic with ICC and a split inside the FOR.

Among others, we are customers and unemployed... Leaflet in French on the last strikes in France, the coordinating committees, the democracy and the various manipulations of the rank and file movement (M.D. and T.G. c/o Kiosque de Belleville - 1 rue de Belleville - 75020 Paris)

Jalous (c/o Librairie l'Herbe Rouge - 1bis rue d'Alesia - 75015 Paris - in French) N° 16/June 88: This last issue explains the reasons for stopping the

publication and joining the FECCI (Revolutionary Perspective). These events rought a venomous personal defamatory diatribe from one ICC leader (Revolution Internationale). HS

Interrogations pour la communauté humaine (c/o IS - BP 243 - 75564 Paris Cedex 12 - in French) December 88: Various texts on the last strikes in France. On Poland. On ecology. A critique of the proletariat.

L'Intersyndicaliste (Groupes de Salariés pour l'economy distributive - 11 rue St. Vincent de Paul - 13004 Marseille - France - in French) N° 21/Sept-Oct-Nov 88: Guaranteed income in France (it's only a beginning). Leaflet to the postmen .. from other workers (advocating a new kind of strike: to deliver the letters free)

Workers strikes in the North of France (1929 - 1935) (Gerard Fuuffrock - 210 FF - Edires - BP 213 - 59054 Roubaix Cedex 1 - in French) This book analyses the strikes in the North of France before the 1936 wave of strikes, showing that these last ones were not at all a break with the situation of the previous years. HS

BELGIUM

Communism (Central review of the International Communist Group - BP54 - Bruxelles 31 - 1060 Belgium) N° 5/Oct. '88: Editorial. Introduction. Against Idealism. Self-criticism of the editorial published in our French review 'Le Communiste'. Errors and guarantees against them. Proletariat against the individual. Conclusion. Against terrorism of all existing states. The West Bank, Gaza, Jerusalem .. the bourgeoisie is preparing another massacre against the proletarian struggle. Human activity against Labour.

Book review:

A STUDY ON COUNCIL-COMMUNISM IN BRITAIN

Last year, a detailed study on the history of council-communist groups in Great-Britain from 1917 to 1945 has been published by Macmillans Publishers Ltd. The book runs to 240 pages and is entitled: 'Antiparliamentary Communism'. The subtitle is: 'The movement for workers councils in Britain'. The author is Mark Shipway, who at one time was a member of the 'Wildcat'-group in Britain, which since broke up. Today Mark Shipway is co-editor of a paper, called 'Subversion'.

In his 'Introduction' the author says, that primary he intended to write

the history of the group around Sylvia Pankhurst. Sylvia Pankhurst was the daughter of a well known and prominent Suffragette. She herself played an important role in the suffragist movement. As she started the fight against social abuses, little by little she became convinced that this fight could only be significant as a struggle against the capitalist method of production.

Sylvia Pankhurst became a socialist and then grew into a radical-communist. She got in touch with Gorter and Pannekoek and between 1917 and 1924 she was the editor of the weekly 'Workers' Dreadnought'. In this weekly appeared an English translation of Gorter's 'Open Letter to Lenin'. 'Workers' Dreadnought' stood for similar opinions as were advocated by the K.A.P.D. in Germany; the paper passionately denounced the trade unions, the Labour Party and the supporters of Bolshevism in Britain.

As Shipway went deeply in the publications and in the history of the 'Dreadnought'-group, he discovered that after the first world war there had been some other antiparliamentary groups in Britain and that some of them remained to exist after the disappearance of the 'Dreadnought'-group. So he changed the plan of his book. Finally it became a more extended work.

Shipway's book is the first one dealing in a well-ordered way with antiparliamentary- or council communism in Great-Britain. The author didn't skimp, he made profound research and not only examined all the issues of Sylvia Pankhurst's weekly but also used her correspondence - as far as preserved- and likewise has based himself on all the materials related to the activities of the group around Guy Aldred, which can be found in Glasgow.

One can't ignore the differences between the group of Guy Aldred and Sylvia Pankhurst's group. True, both groups consisted of antiparliamentary communists; both turned against state capitalism as it had developed itself in Russia; however right from the beginning both were very different as a result of their origins. Sylvia Pankhurst and her friends were influenced by European left wing communism, which had been condemned by Lenin. This left wing communism, on grounds of a marxist analysis, not immediately bur nevertheless very soon, came to a severe and principal critic of Bolshevism. Guy Aldred and his comrades had primary been influenced by the 19th century anarchists like Michael Bakunin.

Several historians of the British Labour movement have dealt with Sylvia Pankhurst and her paper 'Workers' Dreadnought'. This probably is partly due to the fact that she and her mother were famous as suffragists. Guy Aldred and his group rarely have been the subject of any writings. It's one of the merits of Mark Shipway that the history of Aldred's group has been described now in extension.

Shipway has very systematically ordered his subject. In the first part of his book he deals with fundamental questions. He explains how and for what reasons both of these groups - just like their European adherents - lost their enthusiasm for the Russian revolution. He pictures in the next chapters their point of view with regard to the Labour Party and with regard to the trade

union movement. What makes his text so very interesting is the fact that he proves that some opinions are acquired with great difficulty and that this means that those who have acquired certain opinions or conclusions very often act in contradiction with it. In that case they backslide into former opinions or they prove to be the victims of illusions, one wouldn't have expected and which only are understandable if one has an eye for a sort of voluntarism, the people in question never have lost. We presently return to this.

The second part of Shipway's book deals with the history of antiparliamentary communism in Britain during the second half of the twenties and the beginning of the thirties. In a third part he describes the consequences of the Spanish civil war and the second world war for the groups in question. In a last chapter he draws up the political balance. There he makes an attempt to explain their waning significance and final disappearance. Follow the footnotes, a survey of the literature consulted and a table contents.

We don't hesitate to denominate Shipway's book an important work on high-level for many reasons. The first one is, that Shipway proves to have that amount of objectivity one may expect from a historian. And this without any colourless neutrality. In his introduction the author himself remarks that the choice of his subject also has been determined by his point of view, that the antiparliamentary (council) communist belong to the few who have an alternative for capitalism. In other words: they have been able to indicate what sort of society could eventually replace the existing one. As we see it, this point of view can be criticized for many reasons, as we will explain below. However, the remark of the author makes it very clear that he is very concerned in his subject.

Whether this concern or the carefulness of his research forms the outcome, as a matter of fact he understands to characterize council communism far more accurate than most of the authors who feel themselves called upon to do so. Shipway knows and declares straightforwardly, that the tendency he describes sees communism quite different as social-democrats or bolsheviks do. Communism, he explains, the groups concerned don't see as state-capitalism. They see it as a society without a state, a society in which wage-labour is abolished, in which there's no production of commodities and in which by consequence not labour power, but labour forms the basis of production and distribution and in which as a result there's no longer money the general commodity and a middle of exchange. Shipway's explanation excels for more reasons. For instance, he records that the antiparliamentary communists consider the British Labour party as a capitalist party and he doesn't fail to explain why. He also tells that everything the group of Sylvia Pankhurst was aiming at in fact remained within the framework of capitalism, though the group itself had not the slightest notion of this and took his version for a communist one. For all this reasons we take Shipway's book for very deserving.

Shipway makes no secret of the fact, that the groups he deals with consider Russia as a capitalist country and he himself is under no illusion that anywhere

on earth there exists something like socialism or communism. On the backside of his book it is said, that a stateless and classless society without money and without wage-labour is the purpose of antiparliamentary communists. It's not completely clear to us whether these words come from the author or from the publisher. However, they are not applicable to council communism as it has been developed in Germany and in the Netherlands after the first world war. Council communists in these countries didn't make anything there purpose, but considered the overthrow of capitalism as the immediate result of the class struggle. Does this mean that the text on the book's backside we have just quoted is a complete failure as far as it describes the council communist point of view? No, this is not the case for the simple reason that Shipway only deals with the antiparliamentary communists in Britain and from all the facts and materials he reveals it becomes clear enough that they were not free from a certain amount of idealism and that they indeed were aiming at some purpose. Above we already briefly recorded this. We leave out of consideration that on the European continent council communists likewise were not free from idealism and voluntarism, at least in the beginning. What we want to remark here is that, judging from Shipway's explanations, the groups he is dealing with don't show any direct relation with the daily struggle of the British workers.

The opinion that parliament and elections for this institution for the working class were meaningless and that working class power can only be exercised by the workers' councils, came into being in Germany as the product of a practical experience. This cannot be said from the opinions of the British antiparliamentary communists, at any case not in the same way. In Britain at most there was the very negative experience that the so-called parliamentary road to socialism didn't exist.

Shipway speaks about these negative experiences with parliamentary illusions and with completely unjustified expectations as to what Labour could do if it would be in office. However, his excellent descriptions of the views and development of the antiparliamentary communists in Britain, nowhere are put against the background of the class struggle. As we see it, this is the only, anyhow the most important weakness of his book. And so, for British readers, his history of council communism remains a history of opinions and ideas. Though it may be true, that to a certain amount it really is, never in society there's a current or tendency which doesn't reflect social reality. How this has been the case with the groups Shipway describes is not revealed. Anyone how has the desire to know - like us - has to read between the lines. On the pages of his book British council communism only seems the echo of continental council communism. And to make matters worse the description of continental communism is casual and done in outline.

In spite of all this - and we take it for our only objection - we welcome Shipway's book as a work that fills up a gap, a gap which has not yet been filled up for the continental council communism either, though some starts are made. This appreciation doesn't exclude that on some points our opinion differs

from the author's view. This is especially the case where in his conclusion he considers some postwar development as the cause of the disappearance of the antiparliamentary communist groups. We on the contrary consider the idealism and the voluntarism of these groups, as far as it exists, as the main reason for their disappearance. But Shipway has no eye for such a view. He neglects the fact that after the second world war the British working class is more and more acting autonomously, even then when apparently it sticks to old traditions and to old ideals. And therefore Shipway of course neither sees that as soon as workers are acting this way, the groups he deals with have no longer a task, if they ever had.

Council communism is not an ideal, council communism don't want to realise such a thing. Council communists have a very special opinion about the development of working class struggle. One can't find this view in Shipway's book, on none of the pages. Nevertheless, the history of those groups in Britain which saw very clearly that none of the variants of the 'old' labour movement could deliver a contribution to the liberation of the working class because their standing on capitalist ground is described with care and with devotion. That this description, even for those who can read English, is difficult of access, is due to the fact that it costs £29.50, which is as much as some ƒ120,—. And this is really the one thing which is regrettable with this publication.

CB

(Translation from 'Daad en Gedachte' ('Act and Thought'), February 1989)

HOLLAND

Daad en Gedachte (Monthly of a councilist group with the same name - Schouw 48-11-8232 BD Lelystad - Holland - in Dutch) N°1 /Jan. '89 (25th year of publication): What Marxism really is and what not. Book review: the biography of the late Ben Sijes (once a member of the Group of International Communists). Critical remarks on the policy of the Dutch government. Critical remarks about the project of a coming celebration of the 100th birthday of the 2sd International by the SPD and Bolsheviks together. N° 2/Febr. '89: Information about a strike on the French shipyard in St. Nazaire (traduction from information given by a French comrade). Critical remarks on the policy of the Dutch government. A protest against the way two Syrian women had been expelled. N° 3/March '89: Book review: Mark Shipway, 'Anti-parliamentary Communism' (an English translation of this book review can be found in this issue of Echanges). A few notes on Hungary (due to the fact that some party-officials at last have admitted that the events of 1956 had nothing to do with a so-called counter revolution). Film review: critical remarks on the British tv-programm 'A very British coup'. The collaboration of Walesa and Jaruzelski becomes clearer and clearer.

CB

At this cold beginning of December(1),at the gate of Dover East port on the side of the round about leading to the motorway to London,there is still a symbolic picket, a silent one most of the time, a handful of irreductible seafarers with sometimes some supporters, constantly under the surveillance of as many or even more cops well protected in their van;this last for almost one year and car and lorry traffic does not even notice the writings on the side wall, ferries go on their carousel sailing across the Channel.The last call from the TUC last October for a boycott of P & O sailings sounds like a provocative joke for the thousand seafarers - sacked P & O workers-who desperately still proclaim their right to fight a company diktat , their proud intent to fight to the bitter end and their disgust for the TUC manoeuvres which legalise their victimisation .

All through I986 and I987 the ferry companies tried to capsize the Channel Tunnel Project either fighting it openly (on the question of 'security ') or entering a consortium to build it .The Zeebrugge disaster capsized these attempts but actually capitalist interests both sides of the Channel for a fixed link were strong enough to allow some success to this campaign .Capitalist competition does not care about security but about profits (2) ;it does not care either about keeping its promises or previous agreements; there is no rule ,no moral,no respect of what was said or agreed a short time before , only a pragmatic approach with but one law , the law of profit .Long before the tunnel became a reality , pressure was mounting on seafarers to allow the ferry companies , not only to escape the tunnel trap but to make money from it in the short time up to the first train running through it .It means for the workers involved not only the prospect of definitely losing their job in some years but of working harder for less money before being made redundant .

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(1)In April I989 , this picket is still on; the sacked strikers had recently the one year celebration of their "strike ".

(1) A recent report (3/89) of the Royal Institution of Naval Architect said that since 1986 (Zeebrugge disaster) "it is not clear that the risk of death following an accident has changed significantly " and added that " the vulnerability of a ro-ro ship following an accident and the difficulties of evacuating a damaged or burning ship remained serious cause of concern "Since I986 , the Transport Department checked the stability of 72 ferries; 17 failed the test but will continue in service for some years...

One might think that such an attack on wages and conditions of work would arouse a strong and united opposition , a struggle not only from all seafarers -eventually of all dockers-English and European working on the cross Channel ferries , but also from all English seafarers ,This would be to suppose that all seafarers have more or less the same working conditions ,On the contrary there were huge differences at first between the deep-sea merchant navy and the short-sea vessels.Most of the english deep-sea ships operate under foreign flags , practically only officers are English and most of the crews are low paid foreigners .

For British flag ships the labour market in the merchant navy is organised by the Merchant Navy Establishment (M N E)which underpins wages and conditions and ties shipping companies to the British Registry of pooled labour actually dominated by the NUS , National Union of Seamen ,So , all british seafarers have to be registered there if they want to work for the english companies and at the same time have to be members of the union ,NUS,A joint regulatory body - the National Maritime Board (NMB)with delegates from the company organisation General Council of British Shipping (CGBS) and both unions NUMAST (officers) and NUS (seamen) -is the negotiating arm of the MNE ,fixing wages and general conditions in the merchant navy .

The MNE covers only 22,500 seafarers because 2/3 of the UK seafarers are now employed on special company conditions negotiated outside the framework of the board ,The major breaches in the NMB agreements were the work of the,,,NUS through various 'solutions' to world competition in separate deals with companies like Cunard , Canadian Pacific,etc,,, for the use of foreign flags ,,For 40 years there was practically no real organised resistance to this 'evolution 'only some skirmishes;the internationalisation of the maritime traffic could break national protections systems and impose low wages and conditions of work adaptated to the new techniques of transport ,Practically the NUS tried to maintain its bargaining position exchanging it against agreements implementing the company conditions ,The english flag deep sea fleet has dropped from 1614 ships in 1975 to 400 in 1987 ; eight years ago 9 british flag ships used to berth at Harwich each week, only one three years ago ;deep-sea seafarers accepted changes to their crewing arrangement in return for redundancy terms (maximum 140 weeks - 30,000 pounds plus 7,500 if leaving the MNE ; 400 NUS members of Dover found it hard to refuse such an offer .

The effect of this evolution was a quick decline in 'real English seafarers',In March 1988 , the NUS had 21,000 members , half of them

working on ferries around the british islands (10% of them on P&O ferries).Even in such conditions, we might have thought that a seafarers strike , even limited to the ferry and coastal traffic could have constitued a strong pressure against any attempt to break the resistance of the Channel ferry seafarers to the 'rationalising 'on the way.A general strike -supported eventually by English and continental dockers would be quickly damaging to the British economy ,now dominantly European orientated ,which relies on short-sea traffic both sides , imports and exports; but the importance of this traffic must not be overestimated ;94% of the UK trade by weight goes by sea but only 21% is carried under UK flagship(700 ships for 8 millions T against 6,000 foreign flagships for 102 millions T) , thence the importance of the dockers in such a conflict .

To examine this question , we have to consider the real capitalist structure in this very limited industrial branch ; the short-sea traffic around the UK is actually deeply cut off from the deep-sea traffic (though a lot of english seafarers fed up with the hard conditions of the deep-sea navy have tried to find a more peaceful and more settled job on the ferries) ,Neither is this short-sea traffic a coherent one ; it is divided into various specialized transports with peculiar conditions of work ; ferries , oil rigs suppliers , coastal ships specializing on containers , cereals , oil, etc ...; even the ferries can carry only either lorries ,or only trains ,or lorries, cars and passengers.Specialisation means very different conditions of work and so very difficult unity even for a solidarity strike about the peculiar conditions of a narrow sector of shipping .Each ferry company could offer different conditions of work dividing seafarers according the national flag (even in one company like Sealink , pool of ships of different nationalities with national crews)

The opening of the Channel Tunnel will also not affect the ferries in the same way ; the closer to the tunnel , the more will they be affected.To get a better view on this point , we have to consider the situation of the different ferry companies.For years and years , they have greedily exploited the quasi-monopoly of the Channel crossing;it was the dearest crossing in the world for such a short distance, the company taking even more money from the customers pockets when hordes demanded crossings during the holiday peaks.Some outsider newcomer companies had to fight (even against an NUS and TGWU coalition) to establish new lines either from less accessible small ports sometimes remote from London (Sally Line at Ramsgate , Olau Line at Sheerness , Brittany Ferries at Plymouth ,Portsmouth and Poole) attracting

customers with fare cuts or specific links (for instance more direct link to Spain or North of Europe),Paradoxally , most of these outsiders will be less affected by the tunnel opening because of this specificity , once a handicap now an advantage , they had formerly to build against their main greedy monopolist competitors ,Presently , after different mergings,there remain of these competitors only two private companies on the Dover routes; P & O (after merging and manipulations to wipe off the consequence of the Zeebrugge disaster) and Sealink ,Distinct from them is a private hovercraft company ;Hoverspeed ; though having a reduced capacity and a dependance from the weather , it could compete with the tunnel because of the short time crossing ,So the real main competitors for the tunnel will be Hoverspeed and air companies (as happened in France for the TGV),

This situation explained why the center of the conflict would be the two companies P & O and Sealink, But even considering this point ,the immediate interests of the seafarers of both companies would not be affected the same way even if their jobs and conditions were about the same,The companies'attitudes in the workers'fight would be of course different,not because they are more or less tough towards the seafarers (some media propaganda tried to oppose the' nasty' managers to the' good' ones which is sheer rubbish), but because they could lose more or less from such a fight; they could as well according to their objective positions - and they will do it - use these differences as a lever in their competition,We will se that again in these different politics , the union NUS and the TUC will try to support one competitor against the other one ,showing once more they are part of the capitalist system .

P & O is only a small part of the Peninsula and Oriental Steam Navigation which is a conglomerate having most of its interests in construction and properties (Bovis) , services (exhibitions halls , catering groups),transports (P & O shipping ,OCL containers , P & O cruse,...),P & O European Ferries (ex Townsend Thoresen and six small ferries companies,,)(3),On one hand , the ferry business is a very small part of the turn over and profits of the group (4,7 % in 1987) so P & O can sustain a long strike without being affected seriously ,On the other hand , having concentrated its fery business on the most

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(3) A capitalist congmlomerate don't to put its eggs in the same basket, P & O (already involved in proprety development in the Waterloo Channel Terminal) has recently acquired 6% stake in Taylor Woodrow , part of the consortium building the tunnel ,So eventually , P & O can move from ferries to more profitable tunnel business.

juicy routes (Dover-Calais and Dover-Zeebrugge)(we shall examine the methods and consequences),it will be most threatened by a quasi-disappearance at the tunnel's opening.
Sealink , a public company owned by european railways but mainly by British Rail was sold by the conservatives in 1984 to a shipping company -Sea Containers - based in Bermuda.It is difficult to know if this sale was to make money for the State treasury or to get rid of a lame duck threatened by the tunnel already decided upon at top capitalist and political levels .What is more evident is that presently the Sea containers group is dependant on Sealink for both cash flow and profits.So the Sealink ferries have to be kept running at almost any price .But , contrary to P & O ,, the Sealink operations include a lot of small ferry companies all over UK (Ireland , Isle of Man ,Ulster , Isle of Wight , Channel Islands ...) not affected at all by the tunnel ;the Dover routes represent 25% of the Sealink profits.So , Sealink interests in the fight are exactly the opposite of P & O ones even if they are fighting for the same sake of capitalist profit .

This last point must not be concealed by the above-mentioned differences;privately the ferry operators expressed their determination to 'milk the business for all it's worth in the remaining five years of their monopoly '.P & O crudely put to the seafarers the 'need ' to get a better return of capital so that , by the opening of the tunnel , all the new ships would have been paid for . By 1992, the average age of ships in the Dover fleet will be 11 years , not a good competitive product against brand new high speed rolling stock .On the 11/3/88 ,Peter Ford ,P & O chairman declared that the 'revised rosters were essential to raise profitability from a present return of capital of about 10% to closer 25% '.What was not revealed is that most of the 'old ' ships , already several times paid for by profits , would not go for scrap but would be sold at a good price to underdeveloped countries less exigent on security matters and on conditions of work (see for example recent ferry disasters in the Philippines).So the pretended 'need ' was actually a good opportunity to get rid of a lot of underground working practices built in by the workers during a long period of high profits for the companies and so to even increase these profits.

Before going into what was called a 'Wapping on sea ' we must say more about the seafarers involved in the Channel ferry traffic , 2/3 of the crews are not exactly seamen but catering staff.We have already explained what the ferries meant to deep-sea seafarers ; settling in Dover was a kind of promotion and afforded the prospect of a

comfortable life ,with frequent returns to the family .According to some figures , Dover ferry crews could push their basic wages(210-225 pounds a week) up four times through perks, duty free goods , etc,..Most of them,has to work 94 days of 24 hours throughout the year (including periods of sleep and meals); they were off 271 days per year;most of them could have a second job .Politically , they appear as a conservative body; many of those living in Dover were conservative voters ;70% of the Harwich local seafarers volunteered to accompany the task force to the Falklands in 1980 (perhaps they were also subjected to some 'patriotic ' pressure).During the campaign against the tunnel ,headed by the ferry Companies - mainly P & O - before the Zeebrugge disaster, most of the Dover seafarers and the NUS blocked behind 'their company flag ' for the defence of their job.It's easy to joke about such a situation; the best example of the difference of interests, even if apparently boss and workers are united in the same fight ,would be this seafarer highly greeted by P & O managers for his courage during the Zeebrugge disaster and sacked several months later because he refused to bow to the P & O ultimatum .. We insist on these points to show how far judgements of the miners'strike or the Wapping fights , considered as actions of 'conscious ' workers led by 'leftist ',more conscious, leaders were from the actual workers fight .The Zeebrugge disaster destroyed the port campaign based on safety grounds against the Channel tunnel ; the immediate consequence was that P & O wants a quick cut of costs by reducing manning levels on its Dover based ships.If more than 1,000 seamen refused - and still stubbornly refuse -to accept P & O conditions it is not because they were 'conscious 'of their exploitation ; on the contrary they believe in the system, were ready to support the government and the company as far as ...they can get and keep the benefits drawn from the greedy monopoly position of 'their ' company .Their 'conscience ' came from the sudden need to fight to keep all that when the company attitude made it very clear to them that they were only the labour force , no more , no less than the other costs of exploitation and nothing else .

They then had to follow the same path as other workers in previous struggles , not as an example ,but because their situation obliged them to do so , on one hand , organising their survival in a long strike like the miners,on the other hand organising mass picketing as did the miners or the Wapping people.In contemporary England , the same kind of problem will bring the same consequences .

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The ferry seafarers' fight was not properly a new one,Because Sealink was somewhat of a lameduck,Sea containers had had the first one,and this before the problems of the Channel tunnel came to the forefront ,in implementing its rationalising policy from I984,3,000 redundancies had already reduced the crewing to 3,6 in Dover based ships , to I,5 on the Western Channel,It was not enough and what will culminate with the P & O strike will actually begin with Sealink in october I986 with a revolt of the rank and file seafarers .
In october I986 Sealink merged its Channel Island services with another company , Channel Island Ferries (subsidiary of Brittany Ferries), registered in Bahamas , the first ferry operator to run foreign flag ships with off shore contracts (with no opposition from the NUS) ,The consequences of the merging were drastic ; only one ferry was to run throughout the year , 2 on peak periods and another would be mothballed ; result 657 redundancies .Immediately the four ferries were occupied by the crews and the dockers'solidarity blocked all access to the ports terminal of this line,The strike spread quickly and spontaneously to the other Sealink ships,8 days later I4 out of the 20 Sealink ferries were stopped,After long discussions , the NUS on the 15th of october got a narrow vote from a minority of strikers for an agreement to new conditions(a working week of 84 hours instead of 66,200 redundancies, 5% on basic wages and a lump payment of 500 pounds). Despite this agreement and the vote , the four original ferries were still occupied and all the involved seafarers dismissed for breach of contract.On the 26 , they were reinstated after agreeing to go back with some improvements: redundancy payments of 5/6 week salary per year, no off shore contracts but they themselves would have to maintain their own pension contribution and sick pay .

Occupations of ferries were not that exceptional, e.g. on the 21/10/87 two ferries were occupied in Harwich by seamen supporting a member of the bar staff disciplined after a minor incident.All the crews were dismissed for breach of contract; the strike was over on the 25 when everybody was reinstated,The company involved was a P & O subsidiary and actually the strike was against working conditions.We can understand why P & O stranded its ships in foreign ports when it was evident that a strike in Dover could not be avoided and that probably ferries would be occupied; a much more difficult situation to solve plus the threat of a general strike .This last strike was not over the fact that P & O announced its intent to cut 400 jobs on its cross Channel operations,NUS agreed to talk about this on the 28/I0 to prevent an immediate strike,These talks were still going on on the

4/12 when certain other events showed clearly to P & O that the rank and file seafarers were not ready to agree with the 'restructuring' .

This alarm rung for P & O ,not from the NUS union but from the Sealink seafarers going on a wildcat strike in the same situation we have described for the Channel Islands ferries ,This time another Sealink subsidiary was involved ; the Isle of Man 's Steam Packet Shipping Co ,On the 29/12 , a new package with cuts in jobs , leave and pay was 'offered' to the 160 seamen, in breach of the rules of the MNE,They immediately went on strike,On the 31/1,the NUS called a national ferry solidarity strike from the following tuesday and on the 2/2 ,all the ferries around UK were stopped ,

These strikes were illegal , the wildcat one as well as the NUS one,This last one for two reasons ; it was a solidarity strike now forbidden by the law and it had not been decided by a secret vote ,compulsory according another recent law ,There was a lot of discussion on the attitude of the NUS; waiting for one month before deciding under rank and file pressure to cover a wildcat strike and helping it through a more general action ; when obliged to do so , doing it in such a way that this general action was engaged in the worst conditions ,We should remember that at the same time the NUS was still discussing with P & O the drastic 'restructuring ' and that it has to prove his ability to keep its troops under control ,NUS had been a useful instrument in imposing transformations wanted by the shipping companies on the seafarers in the past , but recently , in the last bastion of English flag ships it had proved itself a rather useless instrument.In such conditions ,the 'illegal ' general strike was only to give the companies proof that the NUS could defuse the growing anger of the ferry crews to clear the way for radical changes in existing working agreements required by the ferry companies,This tactical action was very risky for the NUS ;it was in the same situation as the printing unions around Wapping , but in an even more risky one because the general strike it had finally covered was there and imposed by the rank and file;in the process it could lose at each end, both company confidence and 'representativity ' and the rank and file following for its long concessionary politics ;actually , it was not a gamble but would be the consequence of class struggle and of the strength of the seafarers to keep up the fight for their own interests ,Anyway , whatever the result ,class struggle would go ahead by any means ; the damage would be for the NUS with long term consequences .

On ther 1/2/88 , P & O and Sealink got a High Court Order asking the NUS to withdraw from staging the strike ;it was out of question;the NUS leaders knew in advance that this thing would happen and they also knew on the possible effect of defusing the general strike,There was a kind of agreement between the companies and the NUS;it was an easy task for the NUS,Apparently , the NUS could only defy the order ; the strike was already effective by thousands of seafarers anticipating the union strike call,On the 3/2 ,46 ships were idle and the companies were seeking enforcement of the High Court Order asking for sequestration of the NUS,The seafarers were not at all impressed by these 'legal ' actions; a second cook on the St Nicholas at Harwich declared ; 'They can put Mc Cluskie (NUS general secretary) in prison, they can seize all the assets , but this ship won't set sail',This was not of course the point of view of Mc Cluskie; on the 4/2 , the High Court decided there was no action against the NUS if the strike was called off before the 9/2 and Mc Cluskie agreed to 'withdraw the strike call ', actually, against the seafarers'position , he and the NUS could not play any other card than 'legality ';' We are only a small union and the whole might of the law was against us ,We have only 5 millions pounds assets and I am not prepared to be busted by the law ',This constituted the whole of the difference between the union and the workers; the quoted seafarer said ' we don't care about the consequences for the union , we will go ahead with the struggle for our interests ' and Mc Cluskie answered ; ' Don't care about the struggle , the essential is to preserve the union '; he considered that the power of the NUS was only his asset not even a word , even lip service ,for class struggle and the strength of a united class ,At this point 6,000 out of 7,500 seafarers NUS members remained on strike united for a simple thing ; ' we are not asking for more money but for the employers to confirm the little we have '.

But even with this evident conflict of interest , the court decision and the NUS agreement quenched the strike,Actually the NUS position and its consequence could be explained by the fact that the strike did not meet support from other port or sea workers other than the English ferries seafarers ,Though more than I,000 trucks were queuing both sides of the Channel, Dover , the main port was moving 40% of its normal traffic ; all the non english ferries (including the french ones under Sealink flag) were crossing normally and there was no solidarity action from the dockers ,On the 7/2 , most of the ferries were back to normal except P & O at Dover , Sealink at Harwich and all ports to Ireland and Ulster ,The NUS had for a time won its bet .

The original conflict with Sealink was quickly settled ,Harwich resumed work on the 9/2 and the ports to Ireland on the 11/2 ,The same day , the NUS was fined 7,500 pounds and order to pay 10,000 as damages to Sealink (we will see that P & O withdraw from Court accepting consideration of the strike as a primary industrial action; after all , at this point , the NUS had proved its ability to keep control).An agreement has to be signed for the Isle of Man ; to pressure on the seafarers, the Manx government plan a non-union ship service-germany registered with non-unionised non-british crew mainly from the third world ,Prisoner of their 'legality' and having removed for a time the strike threat,the NUS leaders could impose an agreement on the isolated seamen of Man ;the 'deal' was 43 redundancies (instead of 161) of volunteer seafarers and better redundancy terms,

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So the secondary illegal strike has ended in a legal primary action against P & O, but the 2,000 seafarers based at Dover were thoroughly isolated ,They were 'offered " 400 redundancies and big changes in 'working practice'",Actually , though endorsed by the NUS , the P & O strike was a wildcat one because they defied the union order to resume work ; on the 8/2, 3,000 seafarers were still on strike at Dover showing a strong grass root opposition to the leadership ;the NUS could only feign endorsing the strike and P & O considering it was a 'legal ' one though it has in no way respected the legal compulsory procedure ,It was evident that both sides , union and bosses had tried to cool off the situation to find an escape route .

We have said that , for P & O the ferry business was a small part of its empire;to keep it going it has to consider how to face the tunnel competition more than any other competitors because , to cream profits in previous years it has concentrated its activity on the only routes seriously affected when the tunnel will open.A lot of calculation had been published to try to persuade the seafarers that 'their 'interest was to espouse P & O interests,Actually the whole thing was a war between various branches of capital ; investment in one branch aimed at destroying other branches'capital in order to take over the profits.If P & O could succeed in undercutting fares by 20 or 30% and if savings till the tunnel opening justify new investments in new 'jumbo ferries', this business could go ahead ,No concern about the fact that the new ferries would be even more vulnerable ,Everybody agreed that bigger , faster and undercrewed ferries would be more dangerous: company and government knew perfectly well that maritime

regulations were being disregarded but that profits for capital already invested or for investment later were far more important than the crews' or passengers'lives ,The only people to fight in these circumstances were the seafarers because big reductions in costs mean big changes in conditions of work ,Ships have to be made as efficient as possible which means crews working harder for longer hours and for as little money as the company can get away with,New such proposals were well on the way ; presently P & O seamen were working 94 shifts of 24 hours a year,they were proposed 122 shifts of 24 hours in a very different way ,by rotation of 24 hours (24 hours on , 24 hours off) (so the usual practice of a second job would be completely ruined ,); the number of crew per vessel would be reduced from 3,6 to 2,5 cutting 400 jobs (with an offer of a redundancy payment (30,000 maximum plus 7,500 to leave the MNE),Even these first proposals were changed to a tougher version when P & O thought from the crumbling of the solidarity strike with the Sealink subsidiary crew that the NUS position had weakened,P & O pushes ahead ; 750 redundancies, crewing per vessel reduced to 2; for being 72 hours on board seamen would be paid 42 hours(rest-time on board excluded from working time),Even so , Mac Cluskie declared on the 29 th of february that he (and the NUS) was 'prepared to co-operate with the planned rationalisation on the understanding their implementation was phased over a period leading to the expected opening of the Channel Tunnel in 1993.'

P & O refused any concession and pose an ultimatum to dismiss all crews if they have not agreed with the new conditions ;the first delay 4/3 was reported on the 15/3 ; effectively , as no striker moved ,2,300 notices were sent to the Dover based seamen,The new contract proposed a complete restructuring of wages (basic salary structure with 24 additional bonus items replaced by a single salary based on overtime plus profit sharing),flexible rostering, greater management control (annual leaves , meal times , etc,,,),The anger was so strong in Dover and other ferry ports that the NUS had to consider a ballot for a general solidarity strike of tis 21,000 members ,Formally and legally it would have been a solidarity strike though the seafarers would all the same have been defending their own positions ; if P & O succeed ,they will be imposed all the same sooner or later ,On one side the balance of struggle was on the seafarers side ;the french maritime union has called an indefinite ferry strike on pay and conditions which in practice completely blocked Dover ,On the other hand this strong position had been weakened because P & O officers accepted the conditions-package though pretending to refuse to sail ferries unless crews were acceptable to the NUS,On the 20/3 , P & O applied for a High Court injunction to stop the NUS holding a ballot

for an illegal solidarity strike ; the other shipping companies joined to get the same injunction ; this injunction was granted on the 25/3 and on the 28/3 , the NUS called off the ballot,Sealink was operating normally but the 2,000 Dover based P & O members were still strong enough to go ahead with the strike ,As we have seen above , the union's interests prevailed against the seafarers' interests and this situation was used by the companies - and the government- to widen the repressive scope of social laws; not only was the solidarity strike forbidden but the right to organise a vote on an illegal strike; so the law can be used to prevent workers - the seafarers in this circumstance -from relaying to others their need for a solidarity strike which would eventually have opened the road to an effective general strike when the seafarers had found out the position of their strength,Divided by their working conditions , separated by their location all over U K ,the seafarers would have had great difficulties in going on strike alone ;they could not do what the miners had done at the beginning of their strike in 1984 ;so the attitude of the union , the nececessary link between them, was determinant ; we can understand the Dover based seafarers' anger against the leaders of the unions,

From that moment,even if the strike could at times spectacularly spring back,the weakest of the strikers (economic pressure for most of them) considered getting back to work, which increased the strikers anger and their resentment against the union ,The strike began to crumble little by little ; 100 on the 23/3 , 350 on the 18/4 ,600 on the 20/4 when a new deadline was fixed ,900 on the 21/4 , 985 on the 22/4 after 11 weeks of strike , had accepted the 'Red Book ' of new working practice proposals ,The core of 1,000 still on strike were very determined to carry on despite this 'bitter end ' , taking a harder line than shop stewards and relying on the hope that they would get some help ;even the 'scabs ', seafarers and officers, promised not to cross the picket lines ,french and belgian unions promised to black P & O ships, and TGWU to ask dockers not to handle non-union vessels,All these good words went with the Channel wind ; from the unions it was somewhat 'business as usual' ; from other workers it was the expression of deep divisions among the workers relating to their working conditions and the peculiar fight of the P & O seamen ;to give only one example , Dover dockers were not 'registered dockers but employees of the autonomous port of Dover and Calais dockers working on the ferry terminals were not 'dockers 'of the port but employees of the Calais Chamber of Commerce , Solidarity action might have come about nonetheless , but for a more general purpose and a more general movement ; even the seafarers were not in a solidarity strike , so

what about for other port workers ,,,The P & O position became of course stronger and stronger ; on the 25/4 , I,000 still on strike were officially sacked, P & O withdrew NUS closed shop not only for Dover based ships but for all its ferries and subsidiaries;NUS had proved it was useless to impose on the workers the company conditions ,Pickets mounted in Dover in a desperate effort to stop P & O putting ferries in sevice ,Nothing could prevent 2 P & O ferries berthed in Rotterdam from leaving the port,

There was still an immediate violent reaction from the seafarers themselves,A wildcat strike burst out again in most of the ports blocking most of the ferries at the end of april; the situation that the use of repressive laws , the company and union manoeuvres had tried to prevent was here again,As said a seafarer ; 'If P & O succeed ,,,the picket at the entrance of Dover Eastern docks will be left as a redundant symbol of a past era of industrial relations ' , From the 1/5 the two P & O ferries were in operation on the Dover Zeebrugge line,The situation was in total confusion because the strike did not get organised and left the NUS manoeuvrering to keep together its remaining tatters ,The English-crewed Sealink services from Dover and Folkestone were at a standstill but now the french crewed services stopped their strike and were operating normally;an agreement had been signed by the SNCF , the CGT and the CFDT with some concessions on the conditions of work and wages ,There were no ships to Ireland and to the Channel Islands ; the oil platform supplyer vessels were totally stopped,The isle of Man ferry men were expelled from the ships they occupied and replaced by dutch crews; the officers' union NUMAST members voted to work with non union crews,Despite having called everything off NUS was sequestrated and fined 150,000 for ,,,not being able to discipline its members, and even though only 5,000 seamen out of 21,000 NUS members were on strike ,

The situation became even more disorientating for the striking seamen when the NUS held discussions with Sealink in order to short circuit P & O in the Channel competition ,It was a TUC proposal to set apart a trust fund to assist 700 hundred sacked P & O workers ,Roger Wilking , NUS deputy general secretary (one bloke havind said in a popular paper that Dover pickets were the'ugly face of trade unionism') declared ; 'Sealink should join forces with the NUS to launch commercial war against P & O ' ,We were very far from the class struggle raging in the ports ,Writing about Mac Cluskie , the Financial Times could write (9/5 88);'Behind the quick tempo and the fighting rethoric lies a non revolutionary general secretary anxious to reestablish his union hierarchical structure at a time when the

ferry dispute is being increasingly run at local and grass root level ,'It was evident , at that time , that effectively the main issue was to get back control over the workers and that the only way to get it was to break the Dover core of strikers either by way of P & O strong-arm methods or of collaboration with Sealink.The proposed deal was strongly opposed by P & O shop stewards and rank and file strikers.They were right because they knew nothing good was in store from any solution coming from the unions .This was precisely what happened with the lorry drivers blockade .

On the 9/5 the lorry drivers fed up with the crossing delays both sides of the Channel completely blocked the ports of Dover and Calais with their lorries , soon extended to Dunkirk and Ostend.What the seamen had not succeeded in doing, a complete blockade of the ports ,burst out as an indirect consequence of their action because ,other categories of workers were taking ,not a solidarity action, but a different kind of action according to heir own interests ; a P & O picket at Dover expressed exactly this opinion ; 'It does not matter whether the drivers are taking action in support of us or themselves ...It means a lot to us ...'.Apparently it was echoed in the same language used by a dutch driver ;'Now , all the nationalities get together.We are strong.We have to stay like that because it is a problem for all of us '.It was precisely this strength and the growing conscience of this strength- a potential one - that provides the basis for the prospect of a larger wildcat action overcoming the divisions between capitalist categories ; it was not the action of 'conscious ' workers for a solidarity action ,it was the consequence of the primary action of a narrow core of workers ready to go to the last limits of their fight for their own interests .This potential for something else more damageable to capitalists commanded a prompt solution from the government, company and unions side .The solution came from Sealink which the NUS was already courting to find a capitalist way out of the strike(5).On the 11/5 , Sealink offered to provide the lorry drivers a priority crossing of three services for 48 hours to carry the freight only to clear the backlog of vehicles; it was clearly the end of the seamen hopes because the blockade in Calais and Dunkirk was quickly lifted .As the Sealink seafarers drifted back to work the NUS,once again called off all secondary actions .So , at the end,

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(5)The boycott of P & O organised by the NUS supposed the same choice to support one capitalist against another one .Sealink could claim in january 89 having increased its market share by 10% .It was planning a big spending programme to gear up for competition from the Channel Tunnel

after all these manoeuvres , the I,000 P & O Dover seafarers were left alone , only a few days after having hoped for a big extension of their strike,Anyway their determination was so strong that on the 14/5 they voted unanimously to continue the strike having got over their disappointment ,Picketing were very strong, getting the support of all kind of workers or politically involved people,Yet they were deserted by the P & O shop stewards;one of them declared to Mac Cluskie at the NUS conference : ' You can't expect us to stand firm if you are not prepared to ' ;in a certain way , the leaders had suceed in 'reestablishing the union 's hierarchical structure '.

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Even if the P & O strikers were isolated , the presence at Eastern Dock gate of an active and numerous picket was a constant threat; any incident could bring about the same kind of situation that have just ended,P & O - and the government in the background tried to limit picketing, though on a smaller scale,in the same way they had tried out during the miners strike,Ase the union was unable to tame the workers , the court and the police would do itOn the I8/5 the High Court decided, at the company request that ' all unlawful industrial action in connection wtih the P & O dispute including intimidation ,picketing would have to cease of the union is to regain its assets ',So the NUS was required to have its members obeying P & O requirements and to order Dover seamen to stop 'unlawful picketing ' ,What NUS did immediately and P & O magnaminously told the strikers was that they could reapply for their jobs,..with the new conditions they have previously and stubbornly rejected ....The main consequence of this injunction as not the end of the picketing ;the strike was already in the hands of the P & O unofficial port committee in Dover and supported by the strikers who decided not to stop picketing; if it was possible , the gap between the strikers and the NUS was even more clearly visible but the NUS decision had no effect on the fact of picketing in itself ,The effect was on the character of the picketing : the court order and the union agreement gave the handling of the strike to the police who could impose the rules according their own interpretation ;pickets were prohibited from using not only any violence or disturbance but megaphones as well, and told that any 'vociferous protest ' (e.g. shouting 'scabs') or 'physical intimidation ' (a raised fist for instance) could lead to their arrest ,

The union played its usual role but with the pressure of the rank and file and not to be completely alienated from the workers (and then

useless for the companies) in a very tortuous way.On the 16th of june , Mac Cluskie could declare he had 'no intention of calling off the pickets'.But , on the 6th of July ,when the Dover strikers called for a stoppage of all ferries and cruise ships belonging to P & O ,sending letters signed 'the rank and file ' to other seafarers and flying pickets to other ports ,they were not backed at all by NUS; when the High Court ordered the NUS on the 25th of July to call off mass picketing, Mac Cluskie obeyed immediately.On the 23d of september the NUS agreed to company bargaining with Cunard and Sealink out of the NMB .It was not double-crossing but the normal way of working for a union .

Even all that was not enough ; such details of the repression might seem rather ridiculous; they were in fact proof of the size and the level of class struggle which using any practical opportunity might burst out in such a way that any possibility had to be investigated and repressed.At this time five P & O vessels were sailing.Out of the 1704 posts available, P & O had filled 1,450 but only with 900 former P & O seamen (from comparison of the figures, we can conclude that some of the 'scabs ' had accepted the new conditions not to get back to work but only to get the redundancy money offered by P & O).On the 27/5 , 800 P & O strikers rejected NUS advice to settle and threatened to increase picketing.A new High Court order had then decided on the 1/6/88 that the NUS had to start disciplinary procedure against strikers exceeding the legal limit of six pickets;being disciplined meaning being expelled from the union would have a dramatic consequence;being thereby removed from the MNE and so losing all possibility of remaining a seafarer.This last threat had already been used separately against the Dover strikers and was renewed on the 2/9/88 as 700 seamen were still on strike refusing to bow .One of the 'leader ' of the Dover strikers , John Wood could declare ; 'if the union abandons mass picketing it might as well pick up its bag , go home and become a tiger paper '.In september , there were still 150 pickets from 7 am every morning in front of Dover Eastern Docks gate.

At this point ,it is not important to know that the NUS has recovered its offices and a diminished asset, that P & O European Ferries is hesitating to recognize as a scab company union 'Eurpean ferries men 's association ', it is more important to se why a hard core of workers have refused to agree with such a drastic restructuring and how they have organised to maintain their refusal and managed to survive through more than ten month of strike.

The ferry strike can be compared with the miners strike and with the fight against Rupert Murdoch's News International; we have mentioned

somme common points above,In all these workers struggles , the fight was against the consequences of restructuring pushed for by capitalist competition ; in order to survive , capital has to implement new technology with drastic transformations of conditions of work; for the settled capital , it was a matter of surviving or of disappearing ; for the workers too it was a matter of surviving , but not at all on the same way ,Every restructuring of capital is not only a matter of redundancies , it is also a matter of worse conditions of exploitation ; profits could only be maintained with this new balance of new technology and new work content and pay ,The more the workers involved have gained through their fight and the peculiar conditions of their situation in the past ,the more they have to preserve , the more they are motivated to fight tooth and nail to preserve the lives which they have built ,Beyond these generalities ,differences spring up from the differences of size , of situation and of location ,

At first glance,we can compare the ferry strike to the Wapping fight, even though 6,000 printers were involved in London and only 2,000 seafarers at Dover; same drastic change of technology and of conditions of work,same sacking of all the workforce and reenrolment based upon new conditions , same concentration of the fight on one spot , Wapping or Dover Eastern Docks, same determination at the beginning to refuse the management diktat ,same attempt to preserve a 'privileged 'position ,The comparison has to stop here because Wapping was in London , close to the centre ; sacked printers were scattered all over the huge London community ;print unions had already been muzzled previously and any solidarity strike was very difficult even impossible to start from or outside the unions ,So the strike moved quickly to street fighting in front of the gates of the new factory , attracting numerous supporters and seeing the building of small autonomous sui generis fighting groups ; actually the fight moved at the same time to a kind of political more general fight, of which the government could only rid itself of after one year with the help of the unions and some kind of a settlement for the sacked workers ,The ferry strike was organised not at all like that because it involved a whole community around the seamen concentrated in one place ; Dover , because it could bring with its consequences the effective solidarity of other seamen and from other ports or transport workers;alike ,the ferry strike and the miners strike were on the verge of bringing about a more general strike in the country ,So the comparison which comes to mind is the miners strike of 84-85 ,The difference was only of scale ; 2,000 ferry men out of 21,000 NUS seamen scattered all over english coasts, 200,000 miners mainly in

three big concentrations in UK.But the Dover seamen reproduced on a small scale what could be seen in a mining district;people living in the same place , doing the same kind of work , affected more or less the same way and with the population of the town more or less dependent for its livelihood on their activity.

So it is not by chance we saw in Dover the same kind of rank and file organisation built during the strike , not only to fight but also to survive. We saw , though on a small scale , the same attempt to build a support network in U K . Not because the miners strike was an 'example ' or because a core of militants tried to build it according to some pattern but because the same context in UK to day is bringing the same kind of need if workers have to fight for themselves .Like the miners , seafarers had to fight and to organise themselves .We have described the gap between the NUS leaders and the rank and file sufficiently to make clear and obvious the comparison with the NUM and the miners grass roots organisation ; we might say it is even more clear for the seafarers .

The Dover seafarers were not numerous enough to travel all over U K and abroad to get the support of other workers either through picketing or through support groups; they have mainly to rely on other people's activity and to concentrate their organisation on Dover .On the one hand picketing ; we have seen that this was taking a more and more an autonomous route away from the union , very efficient for a time , and that only the collusion between the companies , the courts , the police (i e the government) and the union could put the straightjacket on picketing to reduce it to a still ongoing symbolic one.This can be seen as the 'classic' part of the workers fight , the part not easily but finally emasculated as it was when reduced to its own force and tempo .It is also the most widely known because it is the most spectacular aspect .Even so it is possible only because , as in the miners strike ,it depends narrowly upon another kind of organisation , less well known but more effective; the organisation of collective life during the strike , of the survival of strikers and their families ,based in the midst of the strikers themselves and the source wherefrom still rises the strength and formal organisation of the fight .

Feeding centers providing free meals for the strikers families were built in Dover ; they became more or less strike centers and around them a network of support groups collecting money and food ,trying to spread information about the fight , ... began to be built around the country .These groups or centers had the same kind of problems as the support committees during the miners strike ; difficult relationship with the union, NUS, even more difficult after the sequestration ,

impossibility because of the closed shop to be a distinct organisation from the unions so that the autonomy of such groups appeared not in their form or label but in their horizontal links and in their actions directly to contact other workers or supporters .We must say that ,regarding the miners strike , very little is known about the actual activity of these centers or groups because they don't care to write their history or to speak of it ; it is part of their life and their life at that precise moment moved over from the world of work to the world of refusal of work conditions , of work and of a kind of reorganisation of their life on a new basis, survival and fighting .As in the miners struke , women were at the forefront of this reorganisation of life .When some journalist was talking about a 'siege mentality ' at Dover , he was describing how part of the population - workers and their supporters was leading a very different kind of life from 'usual ' and were under constant pressure to come back to the 'normal life ', not a real siege but the kind of feeling you have when you try to escape a domination and you are isolated from the 'others ' around you .

Most of the comments on the strike did not mention the activity of the seafarers and of their families , their self organisation and the consequence of their action on the balance of struggle for all the seafarers still working,even if apparently the strike was a failure .These comments concentrate only on what seafarers have not done or could have done ,completely neglecting what they have done and still are doing .What is the need to say that the strike was 'sabotaged from the start by the NUS '(World Revolution -Juillet -Aout 88);the role of a union is to work for the 'social peace ' and to have the exploitation of work going on ; workers have to cope with the constant presence of the union ,even more for the seafarers prisoners of their special system of work.P & O seafarers tried to push their strike as far as they could ;why some can write that they'did not try to extend their struggle ' They know perfectly well that 'No sector of workers , however self sacrificing can win on their own '(Workers Voice 8/9/88).As they are prisoners of their working conditions closely involving the unions , they are prisoners of a lot of objective conditions imposed by the capital (and described above);the extension of their strike is not the consequence of their own will or consciousness or any kind of effort in the 'right ' direction (or under the 'right direction 'or advice of some well intentioned 'revolutionary group');it is the consequence of their struggle itself , of what they are doing in their narrow limits to get an immediate aim.Only if these consequences bring other workers to fight for themselves that altogether they overtake their present conditions and the limits of their isolated strike. H S -january 89

As the ferry strikes seem directly linked to the recent lost struggles against restructuring (car ,steel , mines , telecom , print , etc,,,) the postal strike seems more a recurrence of the english disease that english capital pushing the tories was supposed to have eradicated over the past eight years .It was indeed the same basic fight by capital against 'working practices' i.e, the day to day resistance to work ; but beyond that , huge differences sprang up because , on one side there were branches of capital pushed ahead by fierce competition - a matter of survival for firms or branches - , on the other side, the postal monopoly which ,though threatened was impossible to break for various reasons; of course for the Post Office (PO), as in any other industrial branches , publicly or privately owned , to make profits was the direct law as the State was getting poorer and poorer (because of the crisis increasing the minimum necessary charges for social peace and diminishing income).So as everywhere the attempt in the PO was to modernize, to rationalise , lowering wages and increasing work loads .Thence , workers struggle at first in the day to day local level .

The size and character of this struggle were not provided by direct reports of workers attitude to work but by the consequences of this attitude and by what PO and the union , UCW (Union of Communication Workers) tried hand in hand to do to overcome it .Actually ,PO workers answer to the pressure on wages and conditions of work took place not only inside PO but at a more general level.Workers used the possibilities to escape PO work not only fighting directly but going through the possibilities given by the system itself to move elsewhere when they were fed up or powerless against PO exploitation, getting another job or the dole.So the PO's problems became more and more acute in the districts where these possibilities of escape were better (South East of England) which were ,also, the precise districts where "good " PO services were required; PO could have more or less a control on what was going on inside its offices, it was powerless on these more difficult problems because of the pressure of capitalist competition about labour force(local lack of skilled workers , higher cost of accommodation, higher wages offered)

Behind the immediate cause of the 1988 strike lie five years of hectic changes in the PO.In order to improve productivity , to manage according to results and to bring it closer to privatisation prospects , PO was split into four parts ; parcels , letters , counter and Girobank,Each branch was allowed more managerial autonomy and parcels and letters developed a more aggressive commercial approach as private firms were allowed to carry parcels and letters above 1£ ;that means more of a different work for post workers,mainly at the heart of the post office , the sorting offices .In 1987 ,51 million letters were carried each day , 8% more than in 86.In the past five years, the productivity increased of 25%, the mail volume by 30%.In the past two years PO had to engage 18,000 more workers to cope with the traffic .

This development was got through new machinery and this increased labour force.The leader of UCW (Union of Communication Workers) , Alan Tuffin could declare proudly (Sunday Time 11/9/88) ;'None of this would have been possible without the full cooperation of the staff and the UCW in particular . New technology, including mechanised sorting offices has been introduced by agreement ....,the UCW acted as a moderating influence on local members'feelings '.So everything was clear for the workers from the very beginning and Michael Prowse (Financial Times 10/9/88) could write that the 'UK Post Office is the only unsubsidised EC postal service to have made profits for 12 successive years .It has reduced real net costs substantially since 1982.Stamp price inflation has lagged well behind general inflation and the volume of business has surged .These are hardly signs that the consumer has been exploited'.

There are of course a lot of signs that the workers have been exploited ,if the consumers were not.So after having noted the 'good health ' of the PO , it was less understandable that the same journalist , studying the possibilities of PO privatisation could write that 'the market forces would be a cure for the ills of the postal service'; though saying not much more , he was putting his finger on the 'postal diseases'.The list was yet very impressive ;it was not the general strike looming at this time , but the actual situation having brought this present conflict , what has happened for the past few years . Open local wildcat strikes at first ; 2,000 working days lost in 1984 ,64,000 in 1987 in the PO ; 219 strikes in 1987 , only 4 official strikes (recognised by UCW).From april to july 88 , 24 wildcat strikes.As pointed out an article of the Independant (13/7/88);

'The high level of unofficial disputes points to the union's inability to exercise control '
What were these numerous local wildcat strikes about; some examples might provide some ideas :
-at Christchurch (Hampshire) 62 postmen walked out because one of their colleague was suspended following an internal inquiry into theft ,
-end of june 88 , 36 are on strike ten days because one casual worker was taken on ,
-at Brentwood two postmen are suspended for refusing to attend a 'team briefing '; a 24 hour walk out followed ; to clear the backlog of 70,000 letters,some casual workers are taken on ; 75 postmen walked out immediatemely against ,
-on a strike at the main Bristol office , on the 14/3 over the Christmas bonus it is clear that the strike involved all kinds of grades and that all have to fight the local UCW officials who tried to stop the strike before going for an agreement (Letter to World Revolution march 88)
-Liverpool (one of the most depressed area in England),is said to have the worst industrial relations record in the PO,In the nine months of 88 before the general strike , this sector saw 11 wildcat strikes with the loss of 15,700 working hours.
Even these local trikes , decided and controled by the rank and file ,were the tip of the iceberg .They are only what individual groups of workers are obliged to do to maintain the balance of struggle against the constant attempts of the management to break through a general situation they can't control .Against productivity pressure and low wages ,the postmen had adopted a dual attitude ;resisting as far as they could in the day to day fight against work and working conditions , moving elsewhere when they could and when the situation became more or less unbearable, so in one way or another , having the last word and leaving PO in a rather messy situation and with a real headache for the management and the UCW.
Writing about the fight 'inside ',a journalist noted so nicely that,' a decade of success in terms of business expansion and productivity has exacted a heavy toll on morale ' .The usual way of resistance was to reduce the pace of work as much as possible and to get more overtime to compensate for the low wages.The management's answer was exactly the reverse :
- giving productivity bonuses to increase productivity and reduce the need and the cost of overtime ;
-engaging casual workers to get more flexibility ,reduce overtime and the costs,and have a mean of pressure on permanent workers.

-generally trying to get a tighter control on work,
During the general strike some post workers will witness what has brought about for them modern technology , mainly in the sorting offices ;'We are treated like rubbish ,Policies on sickness and discipline have been tightened 'said a sorting office worker; others complained of the use of videos as work spies ,of the taping of interviews, opening of individual lockers with UCW officials help....Roy Ives 46 , a Mount Pleasant worker(central sorting office for London) could say ;'We are constantly being pulled up for disciplinary offences ,If you want to go to the toilet you have to ask permission and you can only go twice in every shift ',The same about wages ; ' Overtime is not there any more...to boost up pay I would have to work nights and who wants to work nights ?'(we can observe here a general resistance , even with the pressure of unemployment,to certain working conditions and a general refusal to work under any conditions),A 28 years old postman says his take-home pay has fallen in the last year from 140 a wek to 121,This situation could be different according to the localisation ; management antonomy aimed at more efficiency when needed but also at dividing workers in their resistance,Local strikes were the answer to management autonomy ; as far as conflicts could stay local and resolve at local level there was no generalisation of these conflicts,We will see that this generalisation came , not from the UCW , not from any kind of 'militant intervention ' , but from the attempt by central PO management to solve their problems by a more general approach and so unifying the resistance,then localised into a dialectical process of class struggle ,
The other point we mention as an aspect of workers' resistance - moving elsewhere everytime they could do so- is not normally considered a method of 'workers'resistance ',But , to judge it at a general level ,we have to examine the use by the workers of all possibilities offered by the system on one hand by the measures aiming at the preservation of the social peace , on the other hand by the fierce present competition on the labour market to cope with the fierce international capitalist competition ,As the work pressure piled up in the PO (partly from the capitalist pressure of less State subsidies , partly from the competition of privatised high level parcel and mail transport), new possibilities were offered by the economical development of the South East of England and chiefly the London area (further competition is developing as well now for school leavers because of the lower and lower birthrate for twenty years and the stopping of immigration),Over past years ,post workers have

begun to move ,which has brought even more trouble and harassment for the remaining workers and new ones .It was even more difficult to get new recruits;as we have already said above ,the unemployed were not ready to take any job at any conditions even for more money ; it was part of the general resistance to work .New recruits had to work 43 hour a week starting in the sorting offices at 5 am for take-home money of 85£.If you were pushed to take such a job , it was only to wait for any other opportunity. PO achieved another record, a very high turnover rate:'Mayo started working in the PO five years ago along with 14 other new recruits ; only two are left in service, the rest have left for other jobs ' .4/5 of the new recruits are leaving before one year in some offices , the average turnover is 55%.In the most depressed areas , the situation is perhaps better,but the new recruits if they stay don't want to move from one district to another where more workers are needed because they will have to work harder even if they would get a bit more money ,money that would not at all compensate for the far more expensive needs required to live in the South East (mainly the cost of accommodation and transport).

To match such a situation , the PO had to look for 'solutions ' aiming at the same result-to get a minimum regular post service - but with divergent methods.One of them was to try to improve the 'morale ' of workers , to bring them to 'cooperate 'with the management to get from them a better productivity and to persuade them to stay ;the other one was to try to bait PO workers to the South East or getting new recruits there with special benefits.These methods were worked at the same time.They were indeed complementary in the management mind; money would attract workers and 'cooperation ' would lure them to stay and to work harder.Another way to solve for a time the immediate problems was to develop the use of part time workers ; this was was not really new and had always been a source of conflict in the PO as part of a general politics to bring 'flexibility 'of the labour force ; as casual workers , part time workers could be a manipulative threat against the permanent full time PO workers.All these measures apparently were to be implemented at local level by the local managers ;they were supposed to bring local conflicts to be solved locally ; indeed this situation prevailed in the first nine months of 88.But these local strikes were all the same and expressed a general resistance to general measures , so , the management answer had to come , not locally but at a general level ; central management of the PO as well as the central bureaucracy of UCW had to be involved directly to try to find a

'solution ',This situation had created the unification of the struggle even if the apparently local conflicts expressed local workers resistance,On the other hand the answers to the problems actually raised by the movement of capital itself were a time bomb under its very foundations ,

The management problem in improving productivity through improving workers 'morale 'is not a very old one but has become more acute now as productivity can't be increased by the traditional methods,It is a general problem and the personal director of ICI(multinational in the chemical industry) could sum up this problem (12/1/89);'We have to get people to identify more with the company and their plants ,To do that we have to move away from a collective approach to a more individual approach to employee relations ' ,

The new idea (not so new of course) in the PO was 'work place discussion groups to improve relations between employees and management',The UCW bureaucrats have agreed with a project elaborated by the Industrial Society (a boss organisation),of whose council Alan Tuffin,general secretary of UCW,was a member ,These groups were called 'team briefings '; each month 30 minutes of discussions supervised by the local manager should be held at the workplace ,Nobody felt really concerned for two reasons ;firstly , workers knew very well what the 'briefing teams ' aimed at ,secondly what was the interest,for workers looking constantly towards the exit door?The deep contradiction of this attempt was in giving more power to management with more productivity pressure in the use of new machinery,hence more harassment , asking workers to 'participate 'in it , as a means to solve the situation created by the existing working harassment,The UCW bureaucrats participating in this 'improvement ' did not mind about this contradiction because it tried to regain for the union some union power lost through the sectional policy wherein more responsibility had been delegated to local managers and hence to local discussions,Of course there was a general hostility to 'team briefings',Though not 'organised ' this refusal was so generalised and so similar in its local reactions 'against the advice of the national leadership ' that the managing direction of PO described it as 'luddite ' ,The UCW was obliged to do a U turn and , only in words , to cover the rank and file resistance; so PO direction accused UCW of 'showing the same 1970's style union behaviour which was wholly inappropriate to day ',The accusation was not really targetting UCW but the workers; the reference to the 1970 strike was bad as an accusation against the union but was good as the 1970 strike

was a wilcat strike covered by the union (1).So the accusation against the post workers was that to be 'luddites', was not to be 'modern and responsible workers '.

In july 1988 ,the Industrial Society sent a report to the PO and to the UCW aiming at 'improving industrial relations '; it says : 'The industry has been plagued by a series of unofficial stoppages in a number of areas and some junior and middle management are finding difficulty in communicating the need for change now required of the PO with any credibility and confidence ',The Society was urging PO to suspend the reintroduction of 'team briefings ' and at improving industrial relations until the two sides (PO and UCW) can settle differences on the subject ....' .The report was wrong on this last point; the two sides were not PO and UCW but the tandem PO-UCW and the PO workers .The following events would show that very clearly.Apparently it was as if UCW opposed PO ; on the 13/7/88 PO was looking for an injunction from the High Court to oblige UCW to instruct (more correctly to order) its members to 'participate ' in the team briefings .To cope with the pressure of the rank and file , Tuffin had resigned as a member of the council of the Industrial Society .A post striker will give the right answer at the beginning of the general strike ; "It is not just for money .'Productivity ' has exacted a heavy toll on 'morale ".The workers knew they would have to fight to maintain or to improve the balance of struggle ; they have succeeded,without striking , in removing one of the attempts to get a tighter control on them but they did not know what other tricks PO and UCW might have up their sleeves .

The other 'solution' to the PO problems would be the apparent detonator of the general strike.Typically as we have already underlined , it was the answer to a more general situation inside capitalism itself and caused by its own evolution . All branches of industry tried to increase productivity not only through new investments and through some kind of participation schemes often supported by specific incentives .The present economical and political problems , the resistance of the previous structures often created problems working in the opposite direction .The capitalist competition also brought competition beween firms and industrial branches for the best of the labour market ; higher wages to get skilled people , material incentives to attract

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(1) on this strike , see the Solidarity Pamphlet n° 36 'Sorting out the Postal Strike' -Joe Jacobs - march 1971 .

people on locations where they were needed.Government policy was even exacerbating these problems ; restrictions on immoigration ,cuts in unemployment ,uneven commercial development, shortages in cheap council and private accommodation due to government cuts and rentability politics on housing ,,,.The richest firms were the best placed .For the last few years, the private sector led by banks, insurance and building societies have introduced a range of allowances to ease recruitment and retention diferentials in the South East ; eg NatWest offered a £ 3,000 a year London allowance , civil servants were offered 600£ and local authorities as well had to give special benefits.So PO had to follow offering some incentives for people working in the South East ; we will see which ones and with what result .
As we have said , the third possibility (part time or casual workers) was not a real one .It has always been resisted because it has a direct influence on pay in drastically curbing overtime .But this problem will play an important role in the rebounding of the strike.

'It is extraordinary .They are striking because we want to pay some of them more money ' (declaration of a managing director of Royal Mail Letter I/9/88)
Formally , it was true but it was also a piece of lie.At Christmas 87 UCW and PO had agreed (with the threat of 'selective strikes ') on what was called the 'Christmas agreement ' ;in exchange for reduction of hours and productivity deal , the basic pay would rise 10% for 41,5 hour a week; lower paid staff would receive between 15 and 24%; that will give an avarage gross weekly pay of 200£ ,240 £ in London with several allowances,£ 190 outside London.From may to august PO and UCW had discussions about a 'Difficult Recruitment Area Supplement '(DRAS), a special incentive for new recruits in local sectors having difficulties in finding and retaining new workers; between £ 7,50 and 20 a week in the South East .For the UCW bureaucrats ,it was a breach of the 'Christmas agreement ' because PO had decided it unilaterally though agreeing to open discussions about it; UCW considered it with some reason as opening the door to local discussions abour wages which would weaken the bargaining power at their level through the introduction of flexible rates of pay ;UCW bureaucrats were not against it on principle but only because they would lose in the process their negociating rights at national level .For the workers it was something completely different ;one worker summed up the workers position : 'I believe in equal pay for work of equal value '.

This discrimination in wages was the last straw,UCW was so conscious of the potential revolt supported by far more deeper things that it was obliged to organise a vote on strike action over this narrow specific problem of payment to new recruits, not involving any more important questions at stake and recommending very prudently any kind of action 'up to and including strikes '.The vote on the I5/8/88 gave 48,000 for , against 23,000 out of 140,000 post workers ,Apparently a minority (I/3 of the workers) had given the leaders'a mandate for organising industrial action',This minority had voted for the vague and imprecise union firebreak;could UCW rely on this to go ahead for a settlement only on this matter of special allowance? Were those having abstained or having voted against the least militant trying to discard some union trick ? On the 31/8/88 UCW called for a general strike ;it was the first call for a national strike for 17 years (see reference above under 1) but UCW did not want to go too far ; the call was for ' 24 hour action from 2,30 a,m, on the 31/8',This very day , UCW was given the answer to its very cautious approach ; 90 % of postal workers were on strike,

The day after the strike , on thursday morning a lot of postal workers were greeted with a letter whose content serve to measure the distance between management and workers (managers badly needed 'team briefings' for some faint idea of what workers could think) ;'The PO is not prepared to tolerate any further disruption to normal working,Any failure by you to heed this final warning will result in you being suspended from work without pay until such time as the PO management is satisfied that you are prepared to work normally ' (quoted by Workers Voice n° 43 oct-nov 88),Looking at the real background of the strike-nothing was said about it by the media - it was not surprising to find such unanimity,Only bureaucrats of both sides could show any surprise;actually they were bound to but not through this unanimity because all workers even the most recently engaged ,those with no care for their future in the PO were in the strike hand in hand with older mates who remembered the 1971 strike,The pressure was such that UCW had to say on the I/9 that they were thinking of further action, still very prudently defined in the union catalogue as 'selective stoppages , total action ,overtime ban , withdrawal of goodwill , etc,..yet shelving plans for further immediate industrial action after appealing to the PO for talks',

When UCW published this communiqué,..already thousands of postal workers had not resumed work , or rather had begun another strike of their own ,It was of course for something other than the

initial union claim.In effect , it was not directly for money but over a wider range of things, among them the use of casual workers.To try to clear the backlog of letters and to limit the effect of the one day strike , PO engaged casual workers; strikes burst out immediately in a lot of sorting offices; I/3 of them stayed closed and there were clashes in Liverpool between pickets and the police escorting casual workers into the sorting office .It was precisely at this very moment that Alan Tuffin wrote to the PO chairman that 'provided talks were started further actions would be suspended and that UCW would not order further industrial action until it had received chairman's response'.
He would have to swallow his words because on the 2/9,15,000 were on strike , mainly in the sorting offices.In the big sorting office of London,Mount Pleasant,workers refused to handle the mail previously sorted by staff who had obeyed the original union instruction to return to work...As PO anounced that it had taken on 500 extra staff nationally, local strikes were spreading and UCW had no other choice than to make the locally based strikes official which move allowed them to refuse to pay strike pay(they should have to do it in case of a general strike).Quickly , the local strikes spread; I/3 of the sorting offices on the 4/9 ,I/2 on the 5/9 with again some fights in Liverpool with the police ,74 mechanised sorting offices out of 80 on the 6/9(90,000 on strike).On the 8/9,2/3 of the postal staff and on the 10/9 as UCW and PO started discussions to end the strike all but one main sorting office (Belfast) were off.
The situation needed a quick settlement; on the 13/9 UCW and PO got a deal that the UCW bureaucrats unanimously asked the workers to follow;
- PO will continue to pay special supplements of between £ 7,50 and 20 to recruits at selected offices in the South East hit by staff turnover temporarily to be replaced by another system to be discussed when the strike is over .
-arrangements for an 'orderly return ' would have to be made at local levels with a choice to be discussed locally with local union branches and , not even stated to have been approved by the workers , the choice between overtime (no more than 5%), casual workers , part time workers , diverting mail to other sorting offices.
-no disciplinary action
So there was no general vote for the end of the strike;it was evident that it was a general strike for the workers but UCW and the PO maintained at local levels that it was only a collection of local strikes and struck their deal up on this fiction ,To

break with this fiction workers would have had to build a coordination of their own but this they did not consider doing , considering that the balance of struggle - the real concern of the strike- could be achieved at local level, not through direct confrontation with the union.

The ending of the strike well demonstrated this situation;there was no general resumption of work in immediate obedience to the unions order.It took more than eight days before all the sorting offices came off the strike ;on the 14/9 only 4,000 out of 100,000 strikers returned to work in 5 small sorting offices out of 82 ;on the 69 reopened but still 20,000 stayed on strike all over England , 10,000 on the 17/9 ,4,000 on the 18/9 and the last ones , Liverpool and Coventry were open on the 22/9 ; in each sorting office the ending had to be adopted by the workers after local union-management agreement.

On the 14/9 the Financial Times could write :' The strike has settled very little .The pressure for change are likely to mean industrial relations will continue to be tense until some of the more fundamental issues behind the dispute ; decentralisation ,incentives ,special payments ,overtime , casual labour- are settled '.Of course the second generalised local strike was about overtime and casual work .As agreements had to be agreed by local workers about the way to clear the backlog , it was a move of the balance of struggle, if the 'organisation of work ' on this specific point has to be agreed by the workers they will ask for the same right on other matters .Some 'revolutionary papers', claiming to draw the 'lessons' of the post strike but indeed taking this opportunity to give the workers lessons ,gave more or less the same variations on the theme 'Isolation leads to defeat '(eg World RevolutIon n°118 -october 88).The same tried to explain this isolation by some obscure manipulation of the union and the management, of the bourgeoisie in choosing 'a good time for a showdown with the workers' and in being careful 'to separate the interests of the nurse and that of the postal workers '.(same paper n°117 sept 88).Looking for formal traditional organisation and situation that never exists , they missed the essential points of this strike .

Yet , on this formal side , two important positive facts could have been observed :

-the strike laws pushed at every moment of the ferry strike were not mentioned at all though the strike was from the beginning to the end between legality and illegality ; the reason is the strength of the strike , not only in its number but in the determination of the workers.Again these strikers have made a

demonstration of the point , for themselves and for other workers, that no law can prevent workers from striking when the circumstances and the evolution of their previous fight bring them to be united (and not any kind of intervention of militant group or organisation)

-the strike was the expression , the reaction of a strong local 'organisation ' and was also reinforced throughout the strike ; of course there was not any local or central organisation of the strike , no formal connection between the sorting offices , no mass picketing.But how will all these 'revolutionary militants 'will call a strike spreading so quickly all over the country if not an 'organisation' ;if the workers did not want to operate differently because of their aim (not the aim of some 'revolutionary group') what was the point in their being organised differently ; if they did not build anything else it is because they did not need anything else to go ahead with what they wanted ,

-after the strike, some papers , capitalist ones, contained serious warnings of the danger of what is called 'new realism' going too far (it was an allusion to the team briefings and the role of the union in it) ; if the 'leaders go along with deals that are unacceptable for workers they may lose control ',This loss of control is more or less the central element of the strike, the counterpart of the 'organisation ' of the workers we have just mentioned above ; it existed before the strike it still exists after.We see the proof of it in the fact that since the end of the post strike , series of local disputes all around the country have continued to affect postal deliveries in spite of agreements between PO and the UCW.It is not of course the 'outbreak of massive struggles ' foreseen by the same groups but it is the class struggle as it exists to day . (H.S. 3/89)

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