How one can still put forward demands when no demands can be satisfied

On the desperate struggles in France

After a short wave at the beginning of the century, instances of proletarians taking their bosses hostage or threatening to blow up their factories reappeared in 2009, and have since become something of a trend. We can now count as many as twenty cases since the beginning of 2010.

What took place at Siemens is quite representative of the context in which such struggles emerge. In September 2009, the management of this metallurgical engineering company announced 470 redundancies at the Montbrisson site and the outright closure of the Saint-Chamond site. In keeping with an agreement signed on February 12 the trade-unions prepared a counter-proposal to save jobs, but the negotiations came to nothing. 'The management no longer listens,' one employee noted. The workers then organised demonstrations, blocked the motorways, and went on strike at the Montbrisson site, but these efforts were fruitless. Then on Monday March 1 2010, the employees at the site of Saint-Chamond took two of the group's executives hostage in order to force the resumption of negotiations. The employees announced the actions were 'mandated by all of the staff', in response to 'the blockage of all negotiations'. Reached by telephone the executives taken hostage described their situation in the following manner: '[The employees] have let us know that we are going to be held as long as there is no progress in negotiations, especially over the increase in compensation beyond the legal minimum for those who have been discharged.' After being locked up for one night they were released and the following day an agreement with management

was reached. It confirmed the closure of one of the sites, reduced the number of jobs to be cut and accepted an increase in compensation from 35,000 to 45,000 euros.

Cases of threats to blow up factories have also been repeated in 2010, following the example of New Fabris the year before, a struggle which enabled the employees to receive a compensation over the legal minimum of 12,000 euros. This method was used in 2010 at Sodimatex, an automotive equipment manufacturer, and the same month also at the Brodard Graphique printing house and at Poly Implant Prothèse, a manufacturer of breast implants, where on April 12 2010 the employees threatened to set the premises on fire. Eric Mariaccia, a representative of the CFDT union, stated the following: 'We have made Molotov cocktails and placed highly flammable products at the site's entrance.' The workers also spilled several thousand prostheses in front of the site and set fire to tyres.

Even though the usage of such methods seems unthinkable in other Western countries, in France they are considered acceptable by a large proportion of the population.[1] Abroad, such occurrences are regarded as an expression of a 'certain French mentality' and a tradition of revolt that can be traced as far back as the revolution of 1789. If the stupidity of such a view is obvious, the reasons behind such a specificity cannot be explained without both a study of the concrete cases—the most recent ones as well as those before—and also an analysis of the development of the mediations between the classes that were established in France after the end of the Second World War.

The questions that we seek to respond to by going through these moments are: Why do these forms of illegal struggles reappear today? why in France? and why only in the context of a redundancy plan?

---

[1] In the spring of 2009 a survey showed that close to one Frenchman in two, 45 per cent, consider taking bosses hostage as 'acceptable' in the case of a factory closure. See 'Sondage choc sur les séquestrations de patrons', *Le Parisien*. The entire survey can be found at www.csa-fr.com/dataset/data2009/opi20090402-l-opinion-des-francais-sur-les-sequestrations-de-patrons.pdf

Illegal struggles in France

While cases of bossnapping or physical violence against employers can be traced back to the Popular Front of 1936, they are very unusual in the boom years from the end of the Second World War to the years immediately preceding May 1968. In the few examples that do occur in this period, such as at Peugeot Sochaux in 1961 (the employer manhandled), or in 1967 (bossnapping), we do not find any that are due to the closure of a factory. These forms of action were taken with a view to obtaining better working conditions and wage increases.[2]

In May 1968 we see the first appearance of a wave of bossnappings (there are no less than eleven cases from the 14th to the 20th) and they also mark the beginning of the 1970s. But as the economic situation in France was still relatively sound, at least until the oil shock of 1973, bossnappings were then still primarily used in order to obtain higher wages. In 1971 at the Egelec-Somarel factory, the employees detained two bosses in the factory and kept them there for 24 hours with the aim of increasing their wages by 50 cents an hour. At Flixecourt, in the Somme, the employees held captive the personnel director and four executives to achieve wage increases and retirement at 60 years. In the company Le Joint Français, in Saint Brieux, three managers were held for 24 hours. The workers demanded a wage increase of 40 cents an hour and a thirteenth month. The actions by Maoist groups implanted in the factories in this period also favoured the choice of this type of action as they were sometimes carried out only by these groups. (In 1972 a boss at Renault was held hostage by members of the Gauche Prolétarienne.) What is certain is that these actions are difficult to compare with the 'desperate struggles' that appeared in the steel industry at the end of the same decade.[3]

---

[2] See *Le Monde*, November 11, 12, 14, 16, 1961, and Xavier Vigna, *L'Insubordination ouvrière dans les années 68: Essai d'histoire politique des usines*, Presses universitaires de Rennes, Rennes 2007, p. 103.

[3] See Christine Ducros et Jean-Yves Guérin, *Le management de la colère*, Éditions Max Milo, Paris 2010, pp. 173–174.

It is only in the 1970s, when mass unemployment became a reality throughout the country, that bossnappings became a form of action specific to struggles around factory closures. In this period very violent struggles broke out. They often persisted for a long time, gathered a large number of workers in whole regions, and were supported by actions of solidarity from further afield.

At the end of the 1970s a European agreement on the restructuring of the steel industry threatened hundreds of jobs in the region of Lorraine. In this context, in January 1979, at a factory in the city of Longwy, 300 of the 1,800 employees took the manager and two executives hostage at the time of a meeting deciding on layoffs. When the police intervened to free the manager, the steel workers responded by attacking the city's police station. Their struggle went on for five months, making use of a variety of means of action (strike, free radio, destruction of material…) and mobilising throughout the whole region. After this the workers obtained, among other things, an early retirement at fifty years with 84 to 90 per cent of the salary.[4]

At Pointe de Givet on 9 July 1982, workers held the manager hostage for 48 hours to protest against the closure of the factory at Chiers in Vireux, in the Ardennes. The workers' struggle lasted for almost two years, in conjunction with a struggle against a nuclear facility in the region. Violent clashes with the police took place every month (involving Molotov cocktails, and even gunshots) as well as violent actions: the burning down of the managers' mansion, occupation of banks, the public treasury looted. After many years of struggle the workers obtained a 'historical' severance package that allowed some to keep their salaries for ten years.[5]

After 1982, for almost twenty years bossnappings and threats of destroying workplaces were almost nonexistent. This explains the great surprise that the actions taken by the workers at Cellatex and Moulinex caused in the early 2000s.

---

[4] See *Le Monde Diplomatique*, October 1997 www.monde-diplomatique.fr/1997/10/RIMBERT/9295 (in French).

[5] See the radio documentary *Ça leur coûtera cher* available at http://reposito.internetdown.org/videosetsons/vireux/ (in French).

In July 2000, the closure of the Cellatex factory in Givet (the Ardennes) inaugurated the return of violent social conflicts. After the company went into liquidation the workers occupied the factory. Negotiations were then held with the state. When on 17 July the prefect of the Ardennes region announced his offer of economic compensation the reaction was violent: during the evening, the workers poured 5,000 litres of sulphuric acid into the nearby river, and within the building there was still 47,000 litres that they threatened to use at any moment. The offer that was proposed to them was 2,500 francs instead of 1,500 (the legal minimum). Shortly before midnight the prefecture announced that there would be a new meeting for negotiations and asked that the workers cease their actions. In the end the workers obtained a compensation of 80,000 francs, far above the legal minimum (on average one year of minimum wage).[6]

On 19 November 2001, after two months of occupying the factory (which was to be closed permanently with more than 1,100 layoffs), the workers at Cormelle, one of the sites of the company Moulinex, took extraordinary measures to attract attention to their situation. Since 11 September a banner had been hung on the factory wall saying 'No to the closure—money or boom'. Now the workers tried to prove that they were not joking. They set fire to a small storage building and started to carry up gas cylinders and cans of sulphuric acid to the roof. Fire-fighters arrived but were at first prevented from entering. A group of female workers holding on to the entry gates started to shout 'It is burning firemen, it is Moulinex that is burning!' One of them continued: 'We warned you, it is exactly two months we have been waiting for something concrete. They easily find money for private clinics. But for us, nothing. After thirty years in this place we earn 6,500 francs and they fire us with 50,000 francs. It is out of the question.' The police chief then appealed to the workers: 'Do not burn your factory. Negotiations are underway in Paris. Please be reasonable people.' A man shouted back: 'If Paris doesn't contribute a thing we will in a flash turn to the weapon of sabotage. They will listen to us, the news never speaks of us.' The next day a new offer

[6] *Le Monde*, July 19, 2000.

was given to the union representatives containing much higher compensation: 80,000 francs for everyone. In the following week an agreement was signed by the major unions. In contrast to Cellatex, the economic compensation varies between 30,000 and 80,000 francs according to seniority.[7]

However, it is really only in 2009, with the crisis, that we see the reappearance of a veritable wave of bossnappings: 6 cases in March–April 2009, then another 4 cases in June–July 2009. It must be said that the restructuring and plant closures have increased since late 2008. Thus, according to a group in the Ministry of Finance assigned to analysing the crisis, there were between 1 January 2009 and September of the same year 1,662 severance plans in France, compared to 1,049 during the whole of 2008 and 957 in 2007.[8] In 2010, the bossnappings resumed in January. There was one case that month, 3 in February, more than 4 in March, 4 in April, plus three threats to blow up factories, three bossnappings in May and one in June. The majority of these actions took place in subcontracting firms, and many belong to foreign groups, in which case it is difficult to find an interlocutor. They are all due to redundancy plans or restructuring and take place in areas where the possibilities of finding employment are bleak.

These bossnappings rarely last for more than one night. However, they always lead to a return to negotiations, whatever the final result might be. In general, at the end of the negotiations, the jobs that have been threatened are not saved, but the compensations offered a lot higher than that prescribed by law. The employees at Continental, who, apart from taking their boss hostage also looted the town hall, gained 50,000 euros after their struggle, something which convinced others to make use of their methods. The announcement that this sum was being paid was followed by new bossnappings. The media plays an important role in these conflicts. Often it is the workers who contact them as soon as they have taken a boss hostage, and they express their grievances to them, while management remains silent on the subject. The support of public opinion then

---

[7] *Le Monde*, November 14, 2001 and *Libération*, November 19, 2001.

[8] See Christine Ducros and Jean-Yves Guérin, op. cit., p. 9.

forces the state to intervene publicly, and it is often this which forces the representatives of the foreign groups to sit down at the bargaining table.

The cases in which there have been threats to blow up factories have also proved themselves effective, after the example of New Fabris in 2009. On 12 July 2009, the employees at this company, which is specialised in the melting of aluminium for the auto industry and a subcontractor for Renault and PSA, installed gas cylinders at the site and made their intentions very clear: 'We will blow up everything if we are not granted a plan of compensation of 30,000 euros above the legal minimum.' Compared to the workers at Rencast, who were in the same situation and destroyed pieces destined for Renault by throwing them into a furnace, the workers at New Fabris threatened to move up a gear. Even though they did not execute this threat, the 366 workers got a severance bonus of 12,000 euros, net, in addition to statutory compensation.

On the other hand, in the context of redundancy plans, attempts of workers to self-manage production have been almost nonexistent. The media has often mentioned the Phillips factory in Dreux, where the employees restarted production 'under workers' control' after learning about the closure of their site, where they produced flat panel displays. However, the TV sets produced in this way were never intended for sale, but to be stored in a warehouse under lock and key for 'use as bargaining chips'.[9] Ten days later, the management intervened with bailiffs and threatened with dismissals. The workers then returned the TVs and that was the end of this experiment in 'self-management'.[10]

Among those companies affected by violent actions in 2010, there are several sub-contractors for the auto industry (Proma France, Sodimatex,

---

[9] Cf. the comments by Manu Georget, a CGT union representative of a dissident section, who acted as a spokesperson during the struggle at http://onvaulxmieux-queca.ouvaton.org/spip.php?article444&calendrier_mois=09&calendrier_annee=2010 (in French).

[10] One may indeed wonder what prospects of self-management there were as the goods produced didn't lend themselves to being sold to activists (which was the case with the clocks that were made at Lip in the 1970s and sold all over France at solidarity booths to support the struggle). And if plasma screens of a brand like Phillips already lend little, then what about goods produced by a subcontractor for the car industry?

EAK), but also two metallurgical companies (Akers, Siemens); a manufacturer of elevators (Renolift-Meyzieu), of pneumatic utilities for BTP and the industry (Sullair-Europe); a manufacturer of breast implants (Poly Implant Prothèse); a factory of enamelled copper wire (Usine Essex); an industrial bakery (New Society bread); an industrial maintenance company (Isotherma); and a manufacturer of telescopic handlers (Bobcat). Increasingly however the service sector is also affected. This year, to refer only to cases that have appeared in the media, bossnappings have taken place at a surveillance company (Vigimark Surveillance); a bank (Caisse d'Epargne); 4 hospitals (Cochin, Emile-Roux, Henri-Mondor and Foix-Jean Rostand); 2 printing houses (Brodard Graphique and Hélio-Corbeil); and a furniture store (Pier Import). Yvan Lesniak, CEO at Circle Printers, even claims to have been kidnapped seven times in all. This is how he describes the atmosphere that reigned when he tried to announce a lay-off plan: 'When you during a conflict start to see crosses, coffins, gallows, your portrait hanging from a tree, when a price has been set on your head together with the word "Wanted" and a photo, and you still have to go into the building, you know that you run a risk.' Even-though the bosses are in general not maltreated, the hostility they are facing is often palpable: 'They have thrown rotten tomatoes in my face, eggs, I have been spat upon, prevented from sleeping. […] I had to ask for permission to go to the toilet, I've been insulted, I came to a place of hatred, of aggressive people.'[11] Some employers have come to be accompanied by bailiffs during the negotiation meetings, and anti-kidnapping training courses are organised for them by the GIGN (National Gendarmerie Intervention Group)… Yet the majority of the bossnappings and threats to blow up the factory are spontaneous and organised by the workers on the shop-floor. For example, a representative from the CGT union at Caterpillar, Pierre Piccarreta, who played the role of media spokesperson at the beginning of the struggle, was not aware that a bossnapping had begun, and was only informed of it as he was hosting a meeting at another factory. The FO union secretary of the factory said that 'In any

[11] Christine Ducros and Jean-Yves Guérin, op. cit., p. 77.

case, during the whole conflict, it was the shop-floor who directed us, who made the decisions.'[12] For Jean-Claude Ducatte, the founder of the consultancy Epsy and a specialist in business strategy, it is clear that 'in 9 conflicts out of 10, the unions run behind the employees who let their anger explode.'[13] And as the grassroots unionists participate in these illegal actions they are clearly dissociating themselves from the line followed by the central trade union. For instance Xavier Mathieu, a CGT delegate at Continental, appeared a lot in the media during the conflict and publicly dismissed Bernard Thibault, the CGT's general secretary, as 'riff-raff' and a 'parasite'. It must be said that the central unions, whether they are the CGT, CFDT or FO, want to focus on defending jobs rather than the demands for increased compensation and declare that they do not approve of means of action such as bossnappings and threats to blow up plants, even though they do not condemn them in public. During the conflict at New Fabris, Marise Dumas (CGT) declared on the radio station Europe 1: 'I understand that the employees believe that it is the only way to let themselves be heard. Mostly these are means of action that I would not advise to employees because they lead into dead ends.'

The grassroots unionists, if they do not want to be completely overtaken, are thus obliged to take a critical stance towards their representatives. It has to be said that they have a very hard time proving their legitimacy as in the private sector they have got only 5.2 % of the employees as members. The structures that in other countries allow for this level of conflict to be avoided have limited effectiveness in France, and the basis for this French exception has to be sought in the way the Fordist model developed here after the Second World War.

---

[12] Christine Ducros and Jean-Yves Guérin, op. cit., p. 142.
[13] Christine Ducros and Jean-Yves Guérin, op. cit., p. 149.

Fordism and its French specificity

Fordism is a form of the relation of exploitation which has its origin in a greater integration of the reproduction of labour power into the reproduction of capital. This modality rests mainly on the extraction of relative surplus-value, which cannot come about without affecting workers' consumption. In order to reduce the reproduction cost of the class, and thus the part of necessary labour in relation to surplus labour, the cost of commodities that enter into this reproduction must be decreased, which is accomplished through mass production of these commodities, something made possible by a substantial increase in productivity. Workers can then buy more products, as their costs have been greatly reduced, and an increase in their real wages is made possible even though the share of wages in relation to added value decreases. Moreover, at a time when international competition is limited, the increase in wages has an immediate positive effect on domestic demand, benefiting companies in the same countries, that seek to sell the mass of new products on the market. *Wage demands then assume a functional role in the accumulation of capital within a national area.*

At this point, such claims can be satisfied by the capitalist class, provided they do not question the new working conditions necessary for a constant increase in productivity. Similarly, the constant revolutions in the labour process can be accepted by workers since their wages rise. Here, collective agreements play a major role in establishing these conditions at a national level.

In the United States collective agreements appear in the interwar period. An important year was 1935 when the Wagner Act was enacted. This law officially recognised the existence and activity of labour unions and forbade employers from harassing workers because of their union membership or their participation in collective action. In subsequent years a number of important gains were made in wages and working conditions. Then a new wave of struggles swept over the country once again after the end of the Second World War with massive strikes in 1945–6. The capitalist class responded to this by pushing through new legislation

in 1947—the Taft-Hartley Act—which curbed the power of the unions. Collective agreements then developed into a more and more centralised and planned form, in step with exigencies of productivity and profitability. The employers were ensured that strikes wouldn't threaten transformations of the labour process, including transformations that implied an intensification of labour. At the same time general wage guidelines were established for periods long enough to plan future investments—a necessary condition for a steady increase in productivity. Unlike the previous period, before the spreading of collective agreements, in which real wages increased during periods of downturn in accumulation (due to consumer goods deflation), the real wage was now able to move in the same direction as accumulation.[14]

In Sweden, a few years before and just after the Second World War, new institutional relations appeared that promoted the establishment of central collective agreements. Under the threat of state intervention in labour disputes, which were fierce during the 1920s, LO, the major Swedish trade union confederation, and SAF, the confederation of Swedish enterprises, struck between them a series of agreements, of which the most famous is the Saltsjöbaden Agreement of 1938. This created a unique model of understanding between capital and labour, characterised by very few conflicts, with continuous wage increases for workers and productivity gains for industry. The stability of this relation rested on the fact that employers could count on the centralised union confederation to constrain local wage negotiations so that they did not threaten the profitability of the enterprises, on the basis of a trade union discipline imposed from top to bottom.

By comparison with the Swedish example, where the unions are highly centralised and organise a vast majority of workers, thus being in a position of strength to negotiate agreements covering all workers, the French unions seem to have been in an unfavourable situation in the period after the Second World War. Highly politicised and in competition with each other, they had few members and were relatively poorly

[14] Michel Aglietta, op. cit., p. 202.

represented in firms. Unions and employers were unable to agree on definite procedures for negotiations, so demands by workers could be met only after intense struggles (struggles which sometimes led to the adoption of illegal actions), and as the balance of forces shifted the conflicts could easily reappear. Gains were won by workers after strong grassroots mobilisation, and this constitutes a major specificity of class struggle in France (which does not mean that these gains were greater than those obtained peacefully in other countries). Although collective agreements existed, they initially concerned only the firms signing them and were not extended to the branch level. The failure of the unions to extend these agreements on a national level also explains another peculiarity of the French case: the important role that the state would play in generalising these gains. In 1950, the law of February 11th on collective agreements would give the Minister of Labour the authority to extend the terms from a collective agreement to other branches.[15] Practically all French firms then fell under a collective agreement irrespective of their activity and size, thus providing French workers with fairly homogeneous conditions. It was also the state that would introduce a guaranteed minimum wage, the SMIG, in 1950, unlike the Scandinavian countries where a floor was guaranteed de facto by the unions without state intervention. Thus in France the state played a central role in ensuring a steady rise in wages and the homogenisation of its effects.

It should be noted that in France too, during this period, claims revolved mainly around the issue of wages. And even when they were accompanied by other demands on working conditions, it was meeting those concerning the wage that allowed for the conflicts to end.[16]

---

[15] Benjamin Coriat, 'Wage labour, capital accumulation, and the crisis 1968–82', in Mark Kesselman & Guy Groux (ed.), *The French workers' movement. Economic crisis and political change*, London 1984, p. 22.

[16] 'As Erbès Seguin […] has perceptively noted […] throughout the period that concerns us here wages served as a sort of general substitute for all other worker demands. To take one example the change to night-shift was in many cases accepted by labour in exchange for wage concessions by the employers.' —Benjamin Coriat, op. cit., p. 23.

We have seen that the way class struggle developed during Fordism in France did not exclude a certain form of conflict that sometimes, although rarely, went as far as the use of illegal forms of action, as we showed in the previous section. The use of kidnapping can then be understood as a continuation of how disputes over wages were conducted in France. This type of action thus remains in the repertoire of collective action of the class, even if it loses its marginal character only with the crisis of Fordism.

The crisis of Fordism and the restructuring of the capitalist mode of production

From the mid-1960s onwards, the production of surplus value in its relative form was more and more hampered by its own contradictions. The enormous productivity gains achieved by the introduction of assembly line work were increasingly difficult to match; the extension of mechanisation required ever-increasing investments in fixed capital, implying the need for continued expansion of markets while the risks of depreciation of fixed capital increased. The Taylorised labour process itself ran into technical problems that showed themselves more and more clearly. The intensification of labour and extreme fragmentation of tasks appeared to have a series of negative effects such as difficulties in maintaining a regular pace of work. Nervous exhaustion led to an increase in defective products, accidents and absenteeism. The latter required management to hire excess labour-power to step in where there were gaps since stoppages and delays on the assembly line had repercussions for the whole production process.[17] More importantly, as the working conditions deteriorated, the presence of a large number of workers gathered in one factory encouraged mounting class struggle at the point of production. After the great waves of struggle of the late 1960s and early 1970s, a restructuring of the organisation of work became necessary to break these workers' strongholds.

---

[17] Michel Aglietta, op. cit., p. 120f.

But the restructuring would involve a revolution of the whole capital-labour relation. In order to overcome the constraints on accumulation that appeared during the crisis of Fordism, the restructuring aimed at eliminating everything which had then become an obstacle to the smooth functioning of the valorisation of capital. It not only dismantled the large factories and work units by the introduction of subcontracting, of a flexible labour market, temporary and part-time jobs—this goes hand in hand with the feminisation of the labour market—which grew at a spectacular rate,[18] *but the very connection between productivity gains and wage increases disappeared*. This disconnection resulted from the globalisation of the valorisation of capital and an enormous extension of the international division of labour.[19]

The illegitimacy of wage demands

From the moment when the valorisation of capital takes place on a global level, the virtuous circle of wage increases and an increase in demand at the national level disappears. 'Since the coherence of the Fordist mode of regulation lay in the relationship between productivity and distribution in a national context', in restructured capitalism, the 'production and distribution of economic value are becoming detached from the territory of

[18] 'From 1983 to 2003, the numbers of temporary employed increase from 113,000 to 361,000 (+ 316 %), of those employed for a limited period of time (CDD) from 263,000 to 1,624,000 (+ 517 %) and of those underemployed (part-time, etc.) from 148,000 to 1,186,000, whereas over the same period the numbers of secure jobs (posts with conditional tenure [CDI] or public jobs) would only go from 16,804,000 to 18,847,000 (+ 12)'—Laurent Maudruit, 'Les nouvelles métamorphoses de la question sociale', *Le Monde*, April 7, 2005.

[19] Some would of course argue that capitalism has always been global, but the process which began forty years ago and has now resulted in *a global cycle of accumulation* is something qualitatively different from international trade *between* countries. The growth of multinational firms is inseparable from the phenomenon of offshoring. In the case of France, as in other Western countries, this started in the 1970s with the textile industry. (See the examples of the companies Kindy and Bidermann given in *L'Expansion* no. 691, November 2004, quoted at www.m-lasserre.com/educpop/dossierdelocs/DusecteurindustrielaceluidelaR&D.htm)

origin.'[20] 'Because the interests of multinationals no longer coincide with those of their country of origin, collective bargaining ceases to be the pivotal element in the system of national macro-economic regulation.'[21]

The same factors that enable companies in a country like France to move production to countries where labour power is cheaper, imply a strong downward pressure on the wages of workers in the centre, and simultaneously allows an increasing inflow of cheap goods in these countries. The freeze on nominal wages is then partially offset by the fall in cost of the means of subsistence. The share of imported goods in workers' consumption thus becomes more and more important and the wage level has less and less influence on the demand for domestically produced goods. From now on the wage becomes a simple cost that needs to be reduced to a minimum. When this happens any claim for overall wage increases addressed to capital at the national level becomes impossible to meet, as this would call into question the competitiveness of businesses. Since, in contrast to the Fordist era, such an agreement cannot be made locally and then extended to the rest of the sector, it becomes difficult for a single company to grant a wage increase without losing its competitiveness on the market. The workers who fight for such a wage increase cannot ignore the fact that in so doing the chances increase that the company will relocate or go bankrupt.

The struggles against factory closures are an exception to this rule. In such cases workers no longer have anything to lose, and they can lay claim to a deferred salary in the form of severance pay, without having to worry about the future health of their business. Employees who had been working at firms where bossnappings and other illegal actions would later take place had often initially accepted worsened working conditions and sometimes wage-cuts in the hope that it would prevent the closure of the firm.[22] But when this closure becomes inevitable the anger at having consented to so much for nothing in return, and the knowledge that one

---

[20] Michel Aglietta, op. cit., p. 418.
[21] Michel Aglietta, op. cit., p. 417.
[22] See Henri Simon, 'À Givet, une nouvelle forme de la lutte de classe?', *Échanges et Mouvement* no. 94, 2000.

no longer has anything to lose, translate into desperate forms of struggle in which it is clear that the future health of the company is no longer of concern, and that all the promises of retraining will not replace the one thing that remains tangible: hard currency. These struggles have shown themselves to be successful, since the employees concerned receive benefits far beyond those stipulated by law. Thus, according to Christine Ducros and Jean-Yves Guérin, the employees who resort to such forms of action receive on average four times as much in additional compensation as those who do not. Here, the fractional character of the struggles is not a sign of their inherent weakness but rather what allows them to be successful, because a generalisation would make them unacceptable to the capitalist class.

The conflicts which arose during these struggles, between the grassroots and the central trade unions, are no repetition of the old opposition between workers who defended their autonomy and trade unions who sought to mediate their interests with the interests of the capitalist class. What the workers want is in fact a resumption of negotiations, and this is also the aim of the grassroots unions who cannot have any role when the employers refuse all negotiations. Taking such illegal forms of action then becomes the only realistic way to resume negotiations. The central trade unions are for their part forced to consider the long term perspectives of employment for the workforce as a whole, but employees who are facing the closure of their work place don't give a damn about the long term.

There is however just a tiny minority that has resorted to such actions, and although the cases that we discuss here may seem relatively numerous in that they do not occur in other countries, we cannot overlook all the factory closures where these forms of action were never taken. Moreover, even as these forms of action can be described as radical, there is nothing radical in itself in what they demand. And the sums that they have obtained, which seem important only in comparison with the meagre compensation stipulated by law, cannot delay indefinitely a return to the joys of the labour market (but who would hire someone known to have kidnapped his former boss?).

What is interesting in these struggles is thus not the fact that they would constitute the seeds of a new workers' movement, but rather that they indicate what present-day struggles are confronting in restructured capitalism. Faced with the news that their factory is to be closed down, the workers have not sought to re-initiate production under self-management. Far from considering their workplace as something they would want to re-appropriate, they have taken it as a target. Their class belonging no longer forms the basis of a workers' identity on which one could build a new society. The proletarians cannot escape their class belonging, but in their struggles they experience it as a wall that stands in front of them. Going beyond this limit would mean abolishing oneself as a class while at the same time abolishing all other classes: communisation.

Jeanne Neton and Peter Åström, August 2010