

# THE REFUSAL OF WORK

*Health is the complete  
basis of geography*



*Method of furnishing the IDLE in the  
Public House at Hindmarsh, by suspending  
them in a BASKET over the table  
where the more Industrious are at  
their work.*

ECHANGES ET MOUVEMENT

# THE REFUSAL OF WORK

# **THE REFUSAL OF WORK**

**Facts and discussions**

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## **FOREWORD**

This pamphlet is the translation of a pamphlet published in 1978 in France. It is neither a complete nor a definitive study on the 'refusal of work' (this title itself seems not very relevant to the authors). It must be considered as the opening of a debate on this subject with a view to a more developed work.

Already some serious criticism has been directed against the theoretical background. These contributions don't appear in this text but will help — with any other information and discussion — to carry on that work.

**April 1979**



## 1 THE ORIGIN OF THE DEBATE: the traditional workers' movement and the new movement.

Debates don't fall out of the sky just like that, by chance, or through someone's or some people's imaginative fancy. The special circumstances which gave rise to them or those involved in them are not very important. What is essential is to know what experiences brought such debate, in other words, to what social reality they refer.

In April 1974 a group of people from several countries met together at Boulogne sur Mer (France) to discuss the following problem:

*. . . The management of production by the producers and the collective management of their affairs by all those concerned in all areas of public life [is] impossible and inconceivable outside of a display without precedent of the autonomous activity of the masses, which means to say that the socialist revolution is nothing more nor less than the explosion of this autonomous activity instituting new forms of collective life and eliminating little by little from its developments not only the manifestations but the foundations of the old order and in particular all separate categories or organisations of 'leaders' in creating at each of its stages points of support for its future developments which will be embedded in the social reality . . .*

*. . . If socialism is the full flowering of the autonomous activity of the masses and if the aims of this activity and its forms can only flow from workers' own experience produced by exploitation and oppression, there can be no question either of inculcating them with 'a socialist consciousness' produced by a theory or of substituting ourselves for them for the leadership of the revolution or the construction of socialism . . .*

*. . . Two factors seem to me to have been determinant in my attitude at the time. The first was that I measured in all its breadth the extent of the problem of centralisation in modern society (I still think that it was underestimated by those in the group who opposed me on this question). The second was the contradiction implied in the very idea of organisation and*

*revolutionary activity: the contradiction is how, when we know or think we know that the proletariat should arrive at a conception of the revolution and of the socialism which it can only draw from itself, not to sit back and do nothing because of this . . .*

*. . . The only political problem is precisely this one: how men can become capable of resolving their problems themselves . . . It became definitively clear and it was clearly affirmed that at no time and in no way could such an organisation (which remained and remains indispensable) claim to have any sort of 'leadership' role whatever without ceasing to be what it wanted to be. The only coherent position was and is still for me that the function of a revolutionary organisation is to facilitate both daily workers' struggles and the accession of workers to the consciousness of universal problems of society . . . and that the organisation could only accomplish this by waging war against all ideological, reactionary and bureaucratic mystification, above all by the exemplary character of its manner of intervention, always orientated in the direction of the management of struggle by the workers themselves and of the group's own existence as a self-managed collectivity . . .*

Castoriadis — *La Societe Bureaucratique*, tome 1, pp.22, 23, 38, 39, edition 10/18.(1)

For those who wanted to discuss this problem, it was not an abstract question. It was a very concrete problem concerning their past life as militants, the activity of the political groups or unions to which they had belonged, the observation of events in the struggles which had taken place in the 1960s, the relation between the activity of these groups and the struggles themselves and their reflection on all these things, and particularly the splits inside these groups around this same problem.

What therefore seemed natural to some was perhaps considered too 'dangerous' or uninteresting for others. An English group, 'Solidarity' (London) had said it would participate in this meeting but withdrew as soon as they learned that the text we have just quoted (overleaf) was proposed as the theme of discussion. They nevertheless left their members free to participate on an individual basis and therefore by the same occasion left each person free to make their own conclusions about this type of attitude.

The discussion at that Boulogne meeting was both concrete and fruitful. The ideas which came out of it were systematised in a text entitled *The New Movement*. We will only reproduce one paragraph of this pamphlet here. It puts in context in an effective way all that is dealt with in the pamphlet in question:

*. . . One essential characteristic of the New Movement is at the present*

(1) Castoriadis — *La societe bureaucratique* tome 1 ed. 10/18, pp 22, 23,38 and 39. These positions are developed and criticized in *Interview with Castoriadis*, (APL Basse Normandie) translated in English in *Telos* and in *Interview with Simon (Anti-Mythes* no. 6) see bibliography.

*time the attitude of those who struggle and who no longer just demand things from people, groups and institutions which are outside them, e.g. from their parents in the family, from their husband in marriage, from the teacher in school or university, from their boss in the factory, from the union in conflicts, from parties and groups in the organisation of actions or the provision of theories, etc. . . . The form of struggle tends very often to be the very doing or taking of the thing demanded. The new tendency is towards people doing what they want by themselves and for themselves, towards taking and doing instead of asking and waiting . . .(2)*

The problem set by Castoriadis was answered in another pamphlet; we will reproduce this extract summing up the common position:

*. . . The organisation of the revolutionary struggle will rise from, the struggle itself, according to its necessities. It is a practical answer to practical situations given by these people who have to struggle because they are involved in the whole process of capitalism. If we think that these people acting in such struggles are able to 'decide by themselves their own problems', we have to consider they have no need of any help (which implies a hierarchy); what they need is to be in relation with other people placed in the same condition, in the same situation, at the same level. This relationship is at the same time the revolutionary organisation (not with the meaning of a conscious organisation of 'revolutionary' people) and the building of a new world. Everybody can be involved in such an organisation, where he is at the moment, in equal terms with everybody else, in the same kind of organisation that everybody builds with all those involved in the same event as as collectivity . . . The egalitarian relationship rises precisely from the needs of these collectivities and from what they can bring each other. The whole process can only be achieved by these means, and never through the assertion of a group, even less of an individual, that he has reached that level . . .(3)*

(2) *New Movement*, see bibliography.

(3) *Anti-Mythes, From the scission of Socialism or Barbarism to the break with ICO*, see bibliography.

## 2 A discussion about consciousness and organisation, on individual and collective behaviour.

In November 1975, eighteen months after Boulogne, the same group of people and others had another international get-together in Paris. The debate was supposed to centre on present-day struggles in order to examine in what way they did or did not express tendencies analysed in the 'New Movement'. Several of those present quoted many example of such tendencies. Many of these examples were taken from Great Britain, e.g.:

– The movement of 500,000 building workers (half the labour force) who through a special institution – the 'lump'(4) (in which they contracted themselves out as self-employed labour only workers) escaped all fiscal, economic and union control.

– The General Strike of Protestant Ulster workers in Northern Ireland, which despite its reactionary motives at the outset, because of its widespread effect forced all workers, Catholic and Protestant, to organise together simply in order to survive.

One of the English participants asked: "Do we(5) agree that people have the right to organise their own struggle and have the right to restrict their perspectives?"

Absenteeism was also at the centre of the discussion. The most important effect on the economy has not been caused by strikes and open conflicts but by guerilla action which takes place at all levels of the economy. Can this action be considered as an 'organised activity'? To quote:

*... An example for industry can be given to illustrate this ... If you want to be absent in a large firm, e.g. a postal sorting office, everyone can't take a day off the same day. It's a very organised activity inside each sector, each one decides, after a discussion with others, which day he will take. This is just a small example of a whole load of actions on a much larger scale. This movement has never as yet found expression in organisational forms. If we want to define this movement in organisations which recruit members, if we want to*

(4) The subject of a *Solidarity* (National) pamphlet, see bibliography.

(5) Members of a group discussing in a vacuum events in which they are not personally involved.

give figures, we can't for the present. There is no strict organisational expression. The origin of such movements can be a very trivial thing. A question of manning, e.g. how many men per machine or how many workers to a job. At Ford's factory near London, among the door hangers, a small section of the work force, the conflict began over a question of manning and this led to a conflict which involved the whole factory and the entire organisation of Ford in Britain just starting from the door hangers only.

We can compare union activity in the past and what we call the New Movement. In the past the unions also began with very limited actions before they were able to extend their activity to a wider sphere; they were forced to have such primitive activity. With the New Movement, it's exactly the same thing because the New Movement is still in its embryonic stage, and that's why it's so difficult to work out what it represents and why it's difficult to say to a certain point what one action is worth or another action . . .

The New Movement is characterised and elaborated by itself . . . it manifests itself at certain moments in certain places, at other moments in other places. These manifestations and these places are different from one moment to another . . . Take the question of absenteeism. You can look at it from the point of view of the personal interest of the person absent so that he can better organise his own life, or you can look at it against the background of the workplace and reaction to alienation experienced there. On the level of personal interest we know very little about real motives. It's impossible to say if each case is individual or collective in a pure sense. During the three day working week, British Leyland car workers at Cowley, or at least 70 per cent of them, took one of these days off to see an important football match. Was theirs an individual or collective attitude? They went perhaps individually, but to participate in a collective activity. (6)

On the level of the workplace, for the boss, absenteeism is individual but after it reaches a certain level it's also collective, because he has to take co-ordinate measures as a whole against it. Those acting individually are forced now to reply collectively to collective repression. Things are not fixed; they evolve from an individual to a collective level, from an unaware level to a conscious one . . . (7)

One of the French participants from Paris disagreed firmly with these analyses; he answered that:

— All the present struggles have not overpassed the trade union stage. They have not evolved beyond the immediate level of the personal interest.

— The workers remain trade unionist in spirit whether they demand wage rises or better working conditions and they don't really challenge the system.

— If some events take place in the context of mass movements, they don't involve any kind of collective organisation which could have a political meaning. (8)

(6) All these events happened during the miners' strike (end of 1973—beginning of 1974). The government decided a working week of three days, arguing the need to reduce the energy consumption, but actually with the idea to provoke a reaction against the miners (in vain) (see *Lutte de classes autonome en Grande Bretagne 1945-1977*—Cajo Brendel, see bibliography).

(7) From an account of the get-together, unpublished because of lack of money.

(8) From the same account quoted in (7).

### 3 The critical contest: organised labour versus 'the revolt against work'.

This is the title of a pamphlet containing two articles by John Zerzan(9). Its interest – it gives lots of examples, especially for the USA: (a) of the way in which American workers react against work, in an autonomous way, either individually or collectively; (b) of the efforts of the labour unions to help employers resist this general movement which clearly hinders the efforts of capitalists towards achieving higher productivity.

In the French edition, an afterword by the translators tried to clarify the present facts of the class struggle as they seemed in the light of events described in the pamphlet, as well as those they knew about in other countries, like those quoted above. The afterword concluded:

*... Repressed in frontal attacks on strikes and their prolongations, dispossessed of the seemingly most radical initiatives by capitalism and its innumerable 'reformers', 'surpassers' and other modernists, denied in its very existence by these permanent recuperations and repressions, class struggle resorts slyly to absenteeism, sabotage and other forms of refusal to re-emerge in other wildcat strikes in other places in the daily round of work and life under capitalism. No one can say for sure what these new forms of struggle are creating; but what the text that has gone before has shown is that the employers, the unions, all those in power united to a man are making super-human and vain efforts to stop up the flow of an irreversible movement whose development they know well carries within it the seeds of their own death ... (10)*

'All this is an ideological affirmation coupled with a value judgement.' This was the opinion of two comrades from Paris (one of whom had already expressed his disagreement which we quoted further back) who made this (9) J. Zerzan, see bibliography.

(10) J. Zerzan, see bibliography.



disagreement the motive for their break with 'Echanges'. They added:

*. . . In what way and who can decide or judge this? Does class struggle become stronger, more alive to the extent that it becomes 'ungraspable' and refuses all organisation, a refusal which, if we are to believe rightly, is the result of the efficiency of employer and union repression. This affirmation which wants to show that the working class acts correctly in its best interests, destroys itself. In fact one could very well interpret the facts in a totally different way. Because it does not want to really challenge the system itself, precisely because that challenge requires an organisation, a self-organisation of the exploited class, i.e. a deep engagement, a reflection which is mixed in with action in a constant way, in a word, which required a conscious development of class consciousness (to take up the old terminology which is always on the agenda once again), the exploited class refuses the frontal attack and goes in for skirmishes . . . It is possible that its well-understood self interest is precisely to stay with this type of struggle because the self interest of the exploited class depends on its true strength at a given moment . . . Certainly there are people about ready to push others into movement by force . . . But is it that which should lead us to produce this old interpretation which justifies immobilism? . . . We are afraid that such condemnation without nuance is made of all those who refuse present society in an active and open way and to whom is given the defamatory adjectives of 'leftist' and 'political' . . .*

*. . . For present day struggles where there is 'perhaps a return to sabotage and a development of absenteeism' . . . to affirm that it is 'an irreversible movement which carries within it the seeds of the death of capitalism' seems to us to be pure fantasy . . .*

*. . . If the American movement of struggle (not against work as the title wrongly says in order to be fashionable, but against the conditions of work) can carry within it the death of the bosses etc. . . ., it is in the sense that it attacks a certain rationality of capitalist work, forcing the employer to take certain demands into account like safety etc. . . . which do not fit in with the demands of profit and that because these types of demands, if not satisfied, result on the one hand, in the first stage, in preventing the rise of productivity and on the other hand, in any case, in raising production costs and forcing capitalism to accept a little more control over production by those who produce . . . (11)*

(11) Extracts from unpublished letter

#### 4 The 'revolt against work, or fight for the right to be lazy'.

Some months later, in July 1976, the French review *Spartacus* published an article with the above title written by C. REEVE. We give here the whole translation published in *Fifth Estate* – December 1976.

During the last year the Fifth Estate has published numerous essays by John Zerzan (and others co-authored with Paula Zerzan) on the decomposition of daily life, the revolt against work, and the police role of unions. The following essay challenges many of the author(s)' contentions about the importance of sabotage, absenteeism and other daily acts committed by a frustrated and distraught working class. The article originally appeared as ' "Refus du Travail" ou Lutte pour le Droit a la Paresse' in *Spartacus* juillet-août 1976 (5, rue Ste-Croix-de-la-Bretonnerie, Paris IV).

Examples of the Zerzan perspective under discussion are available in back issues of this newspaper or the specific article mentioned in *Unions Against Revolution*, Black & Red (\$50 from Ammunition Books).

One further note: we reprint this piece to continue the discussion regarding the role of unions, the state of capitalism and the forces confronting both. However, it is difficult for us to associate ourselves with several of the remarks contained within it, particularly those referring to 'principles of revolutionary action', 'collective, organised... conscious action...', the the author's attempt to speak for 'revolutionary' workers and his assurance that coercion will be used to force 'parasites' to do 'productive' work after the revolution. His conclusions are fraught with authoritarianism, but his critique of the revolt against work is a substantial challenge to the Zerzans' major perspective. Our January issue will contain a response from the latter.

(These three paragraphs are taken from an introduction in *Fifth Estate*)

Have you ever heard of a boss satisfied with his employee's labour? Certainly not and, if we are to believe John Zerzan's text on 'The Critical Contest', this even holds for today's American capitalists as well as for their faithful servants, the unions.

According to its author, the aim of this text is to discuss 'the conservative nature of official strikes, the growth of union centralisation and autocracy, and the increasing institutionalisation of business-labour-government collusion

and co-operation . . . against the backdrop of such manifestations of heightened workers' resistance as rising absenteeism and turnover rates, declining productivity and a much greater anti-union tendency'. However, after reading it, one feels the absence of a critical analysis of these questions. In its place one finds a long list of quotations and thoughts of the American ruling class and its faithful sociologists.

Of course, the author tries to use all this 'thought' of the ruling class to show how the revolt of the American working class is today reaching a critical point. These are the limits imposed by the academic approach of the author. The article was originally published in a radical journal of an American university. Neither the text added to the English publication, and certainly not the quotation from A. Pannekoek inserted among pounds of reflections of industrial sociologists, can compensate for the absence of reference to the experiences of struggle and to the way in which they are perceived by American workers. And when the author promises to say something about the 'state of mind of the American wage-earner', we remain hungry.

In short, the objective of the text—to show how the revolt against work constitutes the new, radical tendency of the class struggle—appears to me to be far from achieved. Uncritical confidence in the opinions of the ruling class on this subject don't seem to me to be a sufficient argument for accepting such a thesis.

Nevertheless, this text presents, in my opinion, two interesting points. First of all, in a condensed but clear form it refers to the most recent struggles of American workers and shows the existence of ever closer relations between the union machines and the capitalist state apparatus. Secondly, with reference to tendencies which it claims to discern in the current phase of struggles in the USA, 'The Critical Contest' provokes a discussion of some questions now fashionable in a number of radical circles.

This 'revolt against work', absenteeism, sabotage—are these new tendencies within the workers' movement? Does the absence of the work ethic ideology among young workers imply a radical attack on the system? Do these forms of revolt go beyond the traditional forms of struggle to call into question the very functioning of the system? Today there exist everywhere little leftist tendencies who would answer 'yes' to these questions and who erect the 'revolt against work' as the principle of the new revolutionary movement.

### *Is sabotage new?*

First of all, is sabotage of production a new aspect of the class struggle, or is it one of the forms of resistance which workers have always used against the violence of wage-labour from the very beginnings of industrialisation? In *Dynamite*, his extraordinary book on class violence in America, Louis Adamic

(a former Wobbly) describes how sabotage became one of the favourite forms of action of revolutionary American workers around the turn of the century. For American and European revolutionary syndicalists sabotage was a conscious class response to capitalist barbarism.

In addition to the IWW's black cat, we can remember the famous text on *Sabotage* by Pouget, the vice-secretary of the French CGT union when it was a revolutionary syndicalist organisation. To present sabotage as something new in the working-class movement can only suggest little acquaintance with that movement's history.

It is nonetheless true that with the integration of the unions into capitalism, that which was a principle of union action now appears only in wildcat actions. Sabotage has changed its form and also its meaning, while other forms of 'revolt' appear. With the transformations of capitalism, with the end of liberal capitalism and the development of the modern form of state intervention, the union movement takes on a new function, that of managing the 'social services' permitted by this new development.

The violence of wage labour increases together with the integration of the workers by the setting up of systems of social security and various sorts of relief. All this has the aim of reducing conflict in the process of reproduction. But these systems of social aid (the 'social wage', as they've been called) also offer the workers new possibilities for resistance to work.

Absenteeism, use of unemployment insurance, etc., appear to a growing number of workers as new possibilities for resistance. The system permits this as long as capital accumulation continues without serious disjunctures, for these forms of resistance are lesser evils for capitalists. After all, isn't the struggle against capitalism superfluous as long as one can 'profit' from unemployment and welfare?

It appears to me very questionable to claim, as Zerzan along with many others of the 'revolt against work' school do, that absenteeism and other anti-work activities are the principal source of capitalism's current crisis of productivity. The falling profitability of capital, the low level of investment in new productive capital, the low rate of utilisation of existing productive capacity are so many sources of the productivity crisis.

The strike at the Lordstown GM factory, of which Zerzan speaks, is a good example. Driven to the wall by a drop in profitability, the automobile sector, in which Taylorism pushed the division of manual labour the furthest, still sought, by means of a sizeable investment in new machinery, to increase the division of manual tasks, that violence of labour. It is this capitalist need to surpass a formerly sufficient level of productivity that preceded and provoked the revolt of the workers at Lordstown. The failure of this attempt shows the limits of Taylorism and poses as a question fundamental to the survival of the system: whether or not it has the capacity to completely reorganise industrial labour on a new basis.

### *Does revolt depend on 'social wage'?*

From another point of view, one can say that the apparent permanence of the present day crisis of profitability will not fail to call into question the famous 'social wage' which, like all state expenditures, depends on the steady functioning of productive capital. In all capitalist countries, the necessity of tightening the social welfare belt is freely discussed with appropriate steps being taken as they are politically feasible.

Once the possibility of drawing on the 'social wage' is reduced, we will see the collapse of the myth of absenteeism as a radical form of struggle, in the same way as today already the slogan of the 'revolt against work' is collapsing in the face of rising unemployment. As always there will then remain for the workers only an open struggle against the wage system or else submission to it and to the barbarism it engenders.

This leads us back to the question of absenteeism and sabotage as forms of struggle. Where these have become in the last few years mass phenomena (as in the automobile industry in Italy), some revolutionary militants, after a period of euphoria, are beginning to draw some critical conclusions. Thus, in an analysis of mass absenteeism, we discover that:

*Although it represents an important form of labour action, it has contradictory consequences on the level of organisation. To stay away the workers must establish an informal organisation; but once they are out of the plant, they find themselves isolated in their neighbourhoods and in practice they lead individual existences. It is common, for example, for absenteeism to be allied with holding down two jobs. . . or for it to isolate workers who practice it spontaneously from their shop and thus open the way to employer repression. . . This form of action should not be confused with the revolt against wage labour, a revolt which can express itself only inside the factory in a collective fashion and the action of the proletariat as a whole. (Collegamenti No. 7, bulletin of the 'Communist Centre for Research on Proletarian Autonomy'.)*

This poses in a clear way the essential question raised by these forms of refusal: their relation to the collective and conscious action of the workers. Certainly the productivist ideology and the work ethic are in crisis, a crisis inseparable from the development of the division of labour. This attitude can have revolutionary significance if it is expressed in connection with collective and autonomous working class action.

But it is also true that this revolt often manifests a privatistic desire to 'take it easy' (itself a product of the increasing division of the workers by modern organisation of the labour process), a desire which, while understandable, is without any consciously radical meaning. Ultimately, what counts is the desire and determination to fight capitalism and, in this regard, the atti-

tude towards work is not, to start with, decisive.

If for the revolutionary worker at the beginning of the century sabotage went hand in hand with a 'craft pride', today the absence of the work ethic often accompanies a rebirth of working class privatism. Already in the late 1920s survivors of the American revolutionary syndicalist movement stressed the privatistic content of the new forms of sabotage, the loss of what they called the 'social vision of sabotage'.

Adamic notes in this connection that sabotage then became the expression of 'individual radicalism', 'forms of vengeance that the American working class used blindly, unconsciously, desperately . . .' and no longer 'a force controlled by those who practiced it and the consequences of which did not escape them'.

Rather than a new form of struggle, sabotage and the rest of the 'revolt against work' are in fact the result, the manifestation of weakness of the workers, a demonstration of their incapacity to take on capitalism in a conscious, independent and collective fashion.

### *Individual or Collective Action?*

Its privatist content marks the 'revolt against work' as an inevitable consequence of the violence of the wages system, a product of the defeat and division of workers in capitalism. The principles of revolutionary action remain unchanged. Only the collective, organised, autonomous and conscious action of the producers can lead to the end of wage labour. Such action alone creates solidarity, the spirit of initiative and imagination, a readiness to frame desires and to make decisions, the mental qualities necessary to get rid of the world we know.

When someone says, as John Zerzan does, that workers today exhibit a tendency in their struggles to aim at taking control over the forces of production, it's hard to see how the 'revolt against work' and sabotage can be 'critical' forms of the modern revolutionary struggle! In fact, it's only from collective struggle that these new tendencies to re-appropriate power over the productive apparatus can arise.

The confusion made in the slogan 'revolt against work', between work as labour, and work as wage labour, only conjures away the real issue of the revolutionary transformation of society. The 'revolt against work' (or 'zero work') has no originality as a slogan—it has been that of the bourgeois class and its flunkies since the beginning! How not to smile when John Zerzan teaches us that the 'contempt for work' is 'nearly unanimous' 'from welders to editors to former executives' (p. 3). Overworked bosses are certainly a new feature in working class solidarity!

Among revolutionary workers, the daily horror of wage labour only reinforces their conviction that the radical transformation of society consists



essentially in the reorganisation of production and in the putting to productive work of that whole mass of people who now live off our exploitation; bourgeois, bureaucrats, cops of all sorts, military men and women, and other parasites.

For, contrary to what goes on in capitalist society, it will be on the basis of participation in socially necessary labour that we will be able to work out principles of production and distribution in the new society. Only in this way will we realise the old desire of the working class movement, whose meaning is today much clearer—the abolition of wage labour and . . . the right to be lazy. (12)

Charles Reeve

(12) *Spartacus* (France), July-August 1976, see bibliography.

## 5 Political ideology and social reality.

A short while afterwards a slightly altered version of C. Reeve's text was used as a preface to a re-publication by *Spartacus* (Paris) of 'The right to be lazy' by Paul Lafargue.(13)

In 1880 Paul Lafargue thrashed capitalist morality whose ideal was 'the transformation of the producers into a machine doling out work without respite, without mercy . . .', but he attacked workers just as much in declaring that a 'strange madness possesses the working class . . . The madness is the love of work, the furious passion for work pushed to the limit of the exhaustion of the vital strength of an individual and his progeniture . . .'

Reading this, one is tempted to ask why on earth a new publication was deemed necessary. Already in 1880, if the action of employers (and their morality which justified it) was indeed that described by Lafargue, we cannot fail to find in contemporary accounts inexhaustible complaints by employers of the 'carelessness of workers, the bad habit they have of taking days off in the week', these workers who 'are incited by the slightest pretext to take the day off . . .'(14)

The bosses of the period didn't yet have sociologists to tell them what was happening in their factories. They also had a powerful aid, poverty, to force men, women and children to work seven days out of seven, twenty-four hours a day if they could have. But if the bosses complained so much, it is precisely because the workers did not espouse their morality as lightly as Lafargue would have us believe. Hadn't Lafargue rather need of this made-to-measure ideology in order to elucidate his 'right to be lazy' guaranteed by the programme of the French Workers Party (POF), the Socialist Party of 1880?

Can we transpose the 1880 situation a century later? C. Reeve feels himself that this won't do and tries to transform what Lafargue says into a moral critique of 'illusions' and 'spiritual brutalization', which then allows him to develop his ideas on the awakening of 'consciousness' just as Lafargue developed his on the Party's programme.

In the 1960s a host of theories sprang up about the conditioning of the

(13) P. Lafargue, *Le droit à la paresse*, Spartacus (France).

(14) *Code manuel des ouvriers*, Louis Bellet, Paris 1849.

working class (even its disappearance), the development of political 'apathy', 'privatization', integration into the consumer society, etc. Paradoxically, C. Reeve has taken up these same ideas again, which were wisely shelved after 1968, to use as the basis of his argument.

On the one hand he finds that Lafargue is 'implacably contemporary and subversive' when he denounces 'the strange madness, the love of work, which the working class possesses'. But in the same text, he affirms that 'the refusal of work is a slogan of the bourgeois class' and of 'its ever-present lackeys'.(15) How can these two statements be reconciled? If I understand well, Lafargue's workers were degenerates (and capitalist lackeys) because of their 'depraved passion for work' and a century later C. Reeve's workers are degenerates (and capitalist lackeys) because they 'refuse work'. Can anyone explain this to me with a diagram or something?(16)

We will come back to C. Reeve's article later. But we leave room now for two replies to it coming from the USA. (17)

(15) You can get an idea of the idea that workers themselves have of their work in the US by reading *Working* by Studs Terkel; see bibliography.

(16) C. Reeve refused any public or semi public discussion or even internally with Exchanges after the publication of his article.

(17) Neither of these articles has been published in *Spartacus* as replies following on C. Reeve's article although both were translated into French and sent in as replies.

## 6. 'Revolt against work' or the end of leftism?

The December 1976 *Fifth Estate* carried a critique by Charles Reeve of the contentions of John and Paula Zerzan that the crisis point in capitalism today revolves around worker alienation, job refusal, sabotage, absenteeism, etc. Reeve asserted that on one hand, the significance of this phenomenon is overplayed by the Zerzans and on the other, that to the extent that it does exist, it represents nothing new in workers' struggles.

The following is the Zerzans' response to Reeve.

*In an effort to exorcise the deepening crisis facing wage-labor, a crisis quite immune to leftism, Charles Reeve adopts two lines of approach.*

*The first is to assert that the (for lack of a better phrase) 'revolt against work' does not exist. As moronic as it sounds, this is how our learned councilist begins his attack on us for having expressed some of the obvious facts of the matter. Industrial sociologists, who report much of the data on rising absenteeism and turnover rates, declining productivity, sabotage, anti-union feelings, etc. in the first place, are bourgeois lackeys and hence quite unreliable, according to Reeve. This is simply too goofy to merit serious comment.*

*It is unimaginable that anyone with an interest in the reality of industrial class society could be either so mentally deficient or so blinded by ideology as not to see what is more than obvious to any normal observer.*

It isn't any longer merely the personnel and management journals that teem with new work reform schemes. The daily newspaper now constantly comments as well on the various 'job enrichment', 'codetermination', 'industrial democracy', 'worker participation' plans, which by their continuing proliferation are perhaps the best testimony to the depth of the spontaneous opposition to wage labor. To a champion of the work ethic like Reeve, however, this is apparently all a dirty trick played by establishment social scientists!

*Perhaps he only lacks a subscription to a newspaper, wherein he could read for himself, as we did on December 18, for example, that English industrial relations are, according to the London Observer, characterized by 'high absenteeism, a propensity to take industrial action for trivial reasons, and the ignoring of work procedures'. Or, for another random example, on December*

*22, that the Insurance Information Institute estimated the US property losses from arson to have doubled during the past two years. But why attempt the elementary education of one so resolutely self-bamboozled?*

*The second part of Reeve's 'argument' follows from the total failure of the first. Tacitly admitting, then, that the 'revolt against work' does exist, he goes to great lengths to assassinate it as backward and contemptible.*

*In common with every other leftist, Reeve sees uncontrolled activity as a threat, to be either controlled or destroyed had he the means. This is the reason for the vicious charges of the workers' 'weakness and incapacity', their lack of the necessary 'mental qualities'. His elitist, collectivist schemes are ignored by the self-activity under way, the vital movement of the negative that will finish off bourgeois values such as sacrifice, discipline, and hierarchy.*

*The growing crisis and the 'privatistic individuals' creating it call to mind the breakthroughs enacted in Watts, or in France in '68 – or, in a very important sense, in any office, factory or bar today – where no one has time for academics or antique dealers who trade in stifling, inert theories. The reckless abandon and brazen expectations of those 'non-schooled' may leave all ideological achievers back in caves, tooled only with religious hieroglyphics.*  
**(18)**

**(18)** John and Paula Zerzan, *Fifth Estate*, March 1977; answer to the publication in the same paper of a translation of C. Reeve's article (12.1976).

**7 Anything new in the 'Revolt Against Work'?—The job, the wage itself, are forms of social control, both at the workplace and during the rest of the day.**

Charles Reeve has raised a number of important questions in his critique of John Zerzan's *Unions Against Revolution*. These questions should not be tossed out of the window, nor should they be viewed as the only or most important questions which can be raised. For the moment, I would like to probe certain areas, in the hope that others will go even further in their considerations—or take issue with mine.

Reeve's critique hinges on several major points: (a) that there is little in fact which is new about the 'revolt against work'; (b) that absenteeism, sabotage and job refusal or quitting are essentially escapist alternatives to open collective struggle, made possible by relatively full employment and the state's continuing ability to fund a 'social wage'; and (c) that the 'revolt against work' is misplaced, in that it is directed against 'work' rather than 'wage-labour'. I want to take up each of these points in turn.

*What' new about the 'revolt against work'?*

Reeve is certainly right to point out that sabotage (and here we should add absenteeism and job refusal/turnover) emerged as forms of resistance in the early part of the twentieth century. Moreover, he correctly adds that what was then a union tactic (but only among certain unions) has now come outside the pale of official union actions. Yet we must push deeper if we are to see whether contemporary practices differ more fundamentally from those of the past.

Two major differences appear upon closer examination. First of all, the workers to whom sabotage made sense were seldom the same as those who practiced absenteeism and job refusal as forms of struggle. In the first decades of this century in America, sabotage was primarily engaged in by unskilled workers, in factories, common labour and service trades. Textile operatives, migrant farm labourers, waiters and waitresses, lumberjacks, dockers etc., were the major social groups within the Industrial Workers of the World—and outside of it—who used forms of sabotage to fight back against their oppression.



With brutally low pay and irregular hours, they could little afford to take days off from work (absenteeism), and, facing steady competition for jobs they could seldom afford to quit of their own accord. With no unemployment benefits and little if any savings, they could not afford to quit work altogether. Financially unable to support lengthy strikes, they often turned to sabotage as a form of 'striking on the job', in fact, as a bargaining tool.

Skilled workers, on the other hand, often had some personal savings as well as union out-of-work benefits to rely upon. They were often quick to quit a job, knowing full well that they could fairly easily obtain another. Not only could they afford to take a day off when they wanted, but they also knew that the boss could not afford to fire them, as he needed their skills to maintain production. Rather than sabotaging production, they often practiced restriction of output, which was primarily a means of securing their jobs and perhaps even creating additional skilled jobs. (Machinists and building trades workers were particularly well-known for such activities.)

In short, far from being a revolt against work, this restriction of output sought to maintain work. Proud of their skills, few could contemplate sabotaging a product. Indeed, many of the complaints they raised about the introduction of scientific management revolved around the deterioration this wrought in the quality of the products.

#### *A new perspective*

Today a very different situation exists. It is the same workers who practice sabotage, absenteeism and job refusal. This is to no small extent the product of the second major difference between the early 20th century and the present—the incredible changes in the actual processes of production.

This century has seen the decline of both skilled and unskilled jobs, and the rapid emergence of 'semi-skilled' factory operative positions. These machine tenders, the modern embodiment of abstract labour, care little about the quality of 'their' products, earn enough (and have state-provided unemployment and welfare benefits to fall back on) to take time off or quit altogether, and are able to find jobs in a great variety of industries, as their 'semi-skilled' tasks can often be learned in a matter of days if not hours.

Sabotage, absenteeism and quitting are now much more widely diffused as social practices throughout the working class and are closely related to a new perspective on work itself—it is seen as a means to an end, a way to gain income. Within this perspective, the existence of other options—unemployment benefits, sick pay, workmen's compensation, welfare, theft—increase the desire to subject oneself to work as little as possible.

The job, the wage itself are forms of social control, both at the workplace itself and throughout the rest of the hours of the day—your life-time is shaped by someone else. Thus, sabotage, absenteeism and job refusal take on a new importance today—as manifestations of the refusal of this social

control, the attempt to define one's own needs autonomously of the demands of capital. Its significance is markedly increased by its widespread practice and legitimacy in every form of wage labour. This is indeed new and must be seen as such.

*The 'revolt against work' and 'collective struggle'*

Nothing could be further from the truth than to perceive sabotage, absenteeism and quitting as 'individualistic' practices. At the very least, all are rooted in shared perceptions of the job. Even when sabotage is practiced by only one individual in the shop, he/she is enmeshed in a network of collective social relationships with fellow workers—the saboteur is protected from management. Often, in auto plants for example, workers will take turns fucking up the line so that all may take a break.

Absenteeism as well is often informally organised. Pittsburgh bus drivers, for example, have so organised absenteeism that they can take a day off when they feel like and, due to others' taking time off earn overtime pay the following week, thus boosting their income while working no additional hours.

Quitting, while very much an individual decision, contributes to collective perceptions and struggles on several levels—it calls into question one's (self) definition as 'autoworker', 'steelworker', 'waitress', etc.; it concretely demonstrates one's willingness and ability to define one's own needs autonomous of the job; and it may often contribute to a willingness to fight back—for, if one is willing to quit or planning to quit at some point, why put up with demeaning shit at work?

In fact, all the forms of the 'revolt against work' both grow out of shared collective experiences and perspectives, and can fuel collective struggles. Quite often, management's response to these 'individualistic' actions provoke mass struggles. But it is important to see how these contemporary collective strategies refuse to conform to the patterns of the past.

It is here that Reeve is trapped by out-dated notions. For these collective struggles cannot grow out of the suppression of 'privatistic' personal desires, the subjection of the individual to the collectivity, but are the product of a new fusion of individual and collective needs and desires—the self-abolition of the proletariat.

The struggle against work is both individual and collective—and these two aspects of it mutually reinforce each other. The individual's refusal to be a wage-labourer is wedded to the proletariat's struggle to free itself from the constraints of its social position. On order to see this through, we must break with the traditional notions of the class struggle which posit its goal as the dictatorship of the proletariat.

This whole conception is erroneous. The goal of contemporary class struggles, the results they prefigure, is the abolition of the proletariat, the destruction of capital in all its aspects.

The onset of economic crisis in the past several years has not had a noticeable effect on the 'revolt against work'. Managers of automobile factories continue to puzzle over the fact that increased unemployment has not diminished absenteeism and turnover.

Leftists continue to seek the uprising of the unemployed—or to generate it by peddling their wares at unemployment offices—while young unemployed autoworkers take their SUB benefits and head for Florida.

Sociologists, employers, government officials, union bureaucrats and their ilk continue to seek job enrichment plans, participation schemes, new work organisations etc. in their desperate attempt to counter the 'revolt'. They know that it still exists, even in the face of 10% unemployment. We, too, know it exists—we are part of it every day.

### *Work and wage labour*

Reeve argues that Zerzan and other chroniclers—advocates of the revolt against work—confuse this with a revolt against wage labour. Here he misses the profound truth which underlies the real movement which we are here assessing. Today it is no longer desirable, even imaginable, to seize control of the productive apparatus as it exists and to manage it in our own interests. Capital has sunk its tentacles into the very nature of work itself.

The communist movement seeks the abolition of wage labour. But it is much more radical than this alone. It strives for the total transformation of 'work', both as it is performed and as it fits in with the total transformation of life itself. Reeve wants to abolish wage labour but preserve the working class. This is a utopian dream (or more accurately the continuation of capitalism. *Fifth Estate* staff note.)

Our future society, and our role in it, cannot be defined simply by the 'socially necessary labour' that we do. Rather, for the first time, we will meet as human beings and define our own needs and the paths to their realisation. While labour will be part of this, there is no way that this activity can exhaust either our desires or the solutions to our problems.

It is this future which is pre-figured by the 'revolt against work', and its comprehension demands a willingness to discard the blinds of traditional conceptions. (19)

Peter Rachleff

(19) Pete Rachleff, *Fifth Estate*, February 1977. Another answer to Reeve's article.

## **8 A few reflections concerning 'The refusal of work', 'sabotage' and so on.**

A text has been sent from Holland to all the comrades taking part in this international get-together in Strasbourg concerning the refusal of work. In this text there are references to

- a discussion that took place at the end of a meeting in Paris in November 1975;
- an article from John Zerzan on the struggle of the trade-union bureaucracy against such refusal;
- the criticism of this article by C. Reeve in the French review *Spartacus*;
- a discussion ensuing from this between three Dutch and two French comrades.

The following theses are the result of further discussions among the Dutch. They have been elaborated with the assistance of a fourth comrade and they have to be considered as a summary of their thoughts and comments. The authors take them for a starting-point for further discussions.

These theses are by no means the expression of a final opinion, nor of a collective point of view.

The phenomena we deal with usually are indicated by words like 'absenteeism', 'sabotage', 'refusal of work', 'apathy', 'omission', etc. Right here and now we want to point out that we are not satisfied with any of these words. We dislike them because all of them express a capitalist view, that means a broad hint that capitalism and its society are damaged as a result of those activities we have in mind. Therefore, these terms often don't express anything other than just what people are not doing and conceal that their behaviour is related to positive and constructive acts from the workers' point of view. We searched for other words but we couldn't find any.

Finally we put on record that the phenomena with which we are concerned are not just enacted in the factory or on the shop-floor, but also outside the factories. We may safely say that both kinds of actions—on the shop-floor or off—are connected and that each of them affects the other.

1. The phenomena which in common parlance, (i.e. in bourgeois definitions) are characterised as 'refusal of work', 'absenteeism', 'sabotage', etc., repre-

sent a form of human behaviour—frequent among workers, sometimes among other groups of the population and in combination with various types of strikes, firstly purely isolated, which become more and more significant by its dimension and its frequency.

**EXPLANATION:** In Holland, of all the people in the active population today 200,000 are unemployed; 550,000 are not able to work and 3½ millions are ill. We have no figures from other countries at our disposal but as far as we know in all the modern industrial states (including the USSR) the sick-rate is something like this. Recently it has become evident in Holland that precisely those firms which pride their good labour-relations—Phillips for example—merely because of a very low strike rate, have a sick-rate far above the average. Dutch papers inform their readers many times about factories where absenteeism has taken alarming dimensions: e.g. at the pottery works Sphinx in Maastricht, or at the blast furnaces and the motor car factory of Volvo in Born.

2. For many reasons we reject the opinion that 'absenteeism' or the present cases of 'sabotage' should be understood as a symptom of the 'weakness' of the working class. One of these reasons is the fact that both the ruling class and the trade union bureaucracy are becoming more and more anxious about what is going on. If some people consider absenteeism or sabotage as something marginal which doesn't deserve much attention, the attitude of the managers and the official representatives of capitalist society is quite different.

**EXPLANATION:** In Holland absenteeism is frequently the subject of articles in medical or social-medical magazines. It's also the subject of dissertations. For example that of a certain Mr H. Philipsen, connected with the Dutch Institute of Preventive Medicine. Many reports on the subject have been published since his on 'sabotage'; on April 3rd, 1977 the New York correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph* informed his readers that 'labour troubles plagued the United States from coast to coast and individuals on both sides of the union-management divide expressed concern over the "Luddite" behaviour of the strikers'. From the information it becomes clear that 'the Luddite charge' was directed against the danger of scabs.

**NOTE OF SOME COMRADES:** If one says the working class isn't weak, this doesn't mean that he automatically declares its strength. We believe that the ruling class' consternation over absenteeism or sabotage is mainly caused by the fact that the workers behave in such a way that they can't control them any longer. Strength and weakness of capital and weakness and strength of the workers are not always complementary.

3. As far as the ruling class makes an attempt to explain absenteeism, it is generally said that it is a reaction upon bad working conditions. From our point of view this is an inadequate explanation. It is also far too negative. Absenteeism is more than this. It is anything but an exception that workers report sick, not only because they are frustrated by their daily circumstances, but also because they don't have the possibility to do things otherwise which they judge absolutely necessary for the improvement of their personal life. In all those cases the reaction upon their daily situation, far from being purely negative, on the contrary has a positive content. The workers decide for themselves that at a given moment this or that has to be considered as far more important than the interest of the enterprise or more important than whatever they are charged with. If that is true, there's very little principal difference between workers who report sick and workers going on strike or workers wrecking inside or outside the factory. A worker who reports sick, at the very moment takes his own life in his own hands. That's the reason why we believe that a word like absenteeism conceals so many things which are connected with the real facts. This is also the reason why there's a direct link between absenteeism — a way in which a person decides for himself about his own time and his own activity — and what we mean by the 'new (labour) movement' (of the workers themselves).

4. Everything that has been said above about 'absenteeism' is also relevant to terms like 'refusal of work' or 'inability to work'. Those words are a plain example of a purely capitalist approach. They give anyone the wrong impression that the worker in question simply refuses to work. But as we mentioned above, a worker who reports sick (or is 'refusing work') often does other work that he normally cannot do. He doesn't refuse work as such, but a certain sort of work. Here again we notice a negative approach; a constructive element is neglected or even suppressed.

**EXPLANATION:** In an article published in Holland in the magazine *Arts en Sociale Verzekering* ('Doctor and Social Insurance'), written by J.H.R. van der Pas, the same thing was noticed in relation to the term 'inability to work'. Always, the author says, it has to be understood as 'inability to wage-labour'. 'Every day', he goes on, 'we experience a changed attitude and an aversion towards this sort of work and attempts to escape from it by the legal way of sickness as often and as long as possible.'(our emphasis)

5. It's not for nothing that the author we just mentioned is speaking about an attitude that has been changed. Certainly the behaviour and the state of mind of the workers are no longer what they used to be. Together with the growth of the factories and the technical development and parallel with the specialization and the division of labour (that started with Taylor), the relation



between the workers and 'their' factory has become weaker and weaker. In past times there was — comparatively — not so much difference between the industrial or factory worker and the artisan by whom he was preceded. Today's workers are completely different; they have nothing in common with the former artisan, and unlike their predecessors, modern workers are no longer attached to 'their' employers, neither are they interested in the results of the production. Present-day workers begin to break away from the clutch of capital and its existing order, established inside and outside the factories. This explains the official anxiety and consternation. Taylor aimed at an increasing production by eliminating the worker's mind. His methods led to productivity but by and by the disadvantages became visible. Ever since, the slogan has been put forward that factory work had to be humanized. All we mentioned hitherto proves that this so-called humanization, all the attention which psychologists pay to the man on the shop floor and so on, can't avert the arising dangers which are threatening capitalist society. The working men and women are escaping from the established order in the factories and in every branch of life. Once again we see a link between our subject and the 'new movement'.

**EXPLANATION:** A very good example — among many others — of the changing attitude of the working class is the way the British miners were acting during their strike from January till March 1972. They didn't want to take any steps to maintain pit safety. When the risks had been pointed out to them, they answered: 'To hell with the pits!'.

6. With 'sabotage' — a very characteristic word, which reveals directly a tendency towards a capitalist way of thinking — it is in principle the same as with absenteeism or the refusal of work. Charles Reeve, in his article in *Spartacus* is, we think, wrong in saying that one has to do with 'old stuff' that already existed far back in the history of the working class. In this way he has strongly misunderstood the character of present-day 'sabotage'. The Luddites in the beginning of the nineteenth century smashed the means of production, turned against the factories as such. Not a bit of it today! Modern 'sabotage' doesn't arise from a blind rage over industrial production, nor has it the ulterior motive to continue the production relations of pre-capitalist society. Modern 'sabotage' is directly related with everyday struggle (as was, for example, the wrecking of the FIAT workers in Turin who threw stones at newly finished cars the management intended to remove from a factory on strike so that they could be sold), or can be understood as an attempt to fit the conditions and the rhythm of work to the demands of the workers (as, for example, everything people undertake to slow down the assembly line or to stop it). It is easy to understand that one is finding here at base the same thing that is at the root of absenteeism: 'sabotage' too can be characterized as something that overthrows the factory rules. The workers don't accept any

longer that their daily life should be strictly arranged by technology, by the clock or by the management. They want to decide for themselves. Thus 'sabotage' as well as 'absenteeism' contains a positive element. By wrecking the normal course of production, workers create other possibilities and other circumstances in which, finally, they have the determining voice, a situation that differs from the so-called 'self-government' as practised in Yugoslavia or anywhere like that. (20)

NOTE: Some Dutch comrades think that the differences between the action of the Luddites and present-day 'sabotage' are mainly due to the fact that in the beginning of the nineteenth century capitalism had developed on a smaller scale and that working class actions then reflected in many respects capitalist tendencies, which today is no longer the case. The comrade who formulated this thinks this is only a question of formulation or accent. (21)

7. What 'absenteeism' or 'refusal of work' and 'sabotage' have in common — the fact that people take their own lives into their own hands — is absolutely not strictly limited to the factory, to offices, to enterprises, in one word, to the workplace. There's wrecking outside this. In such cases, the rules, laws and decisions of the (local or national) authorities are sabotaged, authorities regarded as an extraneous power. Inhabitants of a certain quarter 'sabotage' the decisions of planners, made up behind their backs; consumers 'sabotage' the price mechanism (as, for example, those Italians who, after buying goods in a supermarket, refused to pay for them). In general, people 'sabotage' the existing order (they don't pay any rent; they travel by public transport without tickets, etc.). And once again the positive elements are perceptible: the inhabitants of a quarter make their own playground, just where they wanted it; they install a day nursery, rejected by the municipality, in a squatted building. One could add many other examples!

8. We reject absolutely the opinion that the 'refusal of work' or 'absenteeism' should not be regarded as a resistance of the workers against the existing system because 'absenteeism' is not a conscious and collective action. We take it for a collective action because of its dimension and its frequency. If in a country like Holland the number of those off sick has risen to 450,000, isn't that a collective phenomenon? Those who want to deny this, we think, seem to understand by a collective action something which is planned consciously and organized in advance. We reject such a relation between a collective action and consciousness. Absent workers, workers who refuse a certain sort of work and occupy themselves with other sorts of things, only gradually become aware of their possibilities. Consciousness doesn't precede action, it is the result of action.

(20) See discussion on Lordstown struggles; see bibliography.

(21) See John Zerzan's article on the Luddites: 'Who killed Ned Lud?' See bibliography.

**EXPLANATION:** When there was an earthquake in the north of Italy, the inhabitants of a certain town who feared further shocks took flight on a mass scale. In the papers it was described as a collective flight. That word indicated precisely what happened. Nevertheless, the decision to leave the town was taken by each individual himself, exactly like a decision to report sick. Nobody will say, for this reason, that the flight wasn't collective at all

9. Finally we want to remark that the phenomena we deal with can in no way be incorporated in those forms of struggle which are characteristic for traditional organizations or the so-called 'vanguard'. Workers on strike, even when acting unofficially, sometimes mix up their actions with old forms or give evidence of traditional thinking. 'Refusal of work' or 'sabotage' often starts without any clear conception. Both absenteeism and wrecking represent a form of action which has nothing in common with the struggles of the past or even yesterday. On the contrary, these methods announce the struggles of tomorrow. It is not until the full development of that coming struggle that — due to its new form — a new consciousness will become manifest and that consequently the new forms of action will have a new content.

## 9 Work and capital: first outline of a theoretical approach.

*The worker is formally posited as a person who exists for himself outside his work, and who alienates his life as the means of staying alive. As long as the worker is himself an exchange-value, industrial, that is to say advanced, capital cannot exist . . .*

*If it required a day of work to keep a worker alive during a day of work, capital would not exist, because the working day would be exchanged against its own product . . . (22)*

We have put these two quotations at the head of this chapter to show that the problem of 'withdrawing from work' (in the sense of capital-producing work) and of 'refusal to participate' (for whatever motives) touches the heart of capital's existence, without those concerned having a clear 'consciousness' of the consequences of what they are doing.

For capital, the purchase of 'labour-power' is neither more nor less than the purchase of a commodity chosen and paid for according to its use-value. Capital must always be able to buy, at the least cost, this labour-power, in the quantity and quality sufficient and necessary to ensure its own profitability. This labour-power must have the chance to restore itself, to recover from the effects of its intensive exploitation by capital; this implies partly the replacement of the power that disappears, and even its growth. This supposes that the 'standard of living' of the owners of this labour-power (understood as a certain quantity of use-values) allows on the one hand of being used again every day in the normal conditions of production, on the other of ensuring its own replacement by its descendants.

This may seem simple, but seen in this way, unilaterally, from capital's side, it poses some very complex problems. First in the manipulation of this labour-power, so that it can produce with certain characteristics, in a determined time, at a certain rhythm and used on a certain type of machine, a quantity of commodities of a certain quality, which allows the capitalist to extract the maximum surplus value. Then in the reproduction of this same labour-power; today, this supposes more and more not only the material conditions (restoration of the physical and nervous strength used in the work)

(22) Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*.

but also the 'moral' conditions (acceptance of the same situation which pertained at the previous exploitation of the labour-power). So that the sum of the exchange-values (for capital) that are given to the worker in exchange for his labour-power may be entirely and directly reabsorbed in the circuit of capital. At the extreme limit, one can say that for capital the ideal would be for the worker to provide capital with his labour-power always in the conditions that are demanded at that moment by capital's global situation, and for him to consume passively the amount that is placed at his disposition in reward as wages. To consume passively: that means without looking for a different, 'non-capitalist' use for a part of his salary, possibly increased in value by a personal use of his own labour-power. It is this situation of a perfect capitalism that is described today as the reign of the real domination of capital over the work and consumption process. In other terms, one could say that the worker becomes, both as contributor of 'labour-power' and as 'consumer' of exchange-value, the object of a constant normalization by capital (in the technological sense of the word: making identical objects that are perfectly interchangeable). For capital, the two elements, production and consumption, are closely interconnected by the need to reproduce labour-power and to realise a continuously enlarged surplus-value (i.e. to transform all produced commodities into capital).

For the worker, we find again exactly the same problems as for capital, but completely inversed, because of the simple fact that the worker is not a thing but a man who, even when 'normalized', reacts individually and collectively against the capitalist conditioning both of work and of consumption. Use-value for capital, 'labour-power' is only an exchange-value for the worker. He does not express himself by means of his work because the product of his labour is immediately taken away from him. That which he gets in return is only, in principal, the amount which he needs to restore the same labour-power; that is to say that the worker must be again in the same physical condition, and, equally, with the same 'aptitude', which implies the same professional skills and the same 'moral' adaptation. The self-identity that is demanded of him supposes a constant adaptation to the techniques of production. The worker must support this contradiction of having to stay the same and of being an object, the prop of a value for capital, to be moulded according to capital's interests of the moment, thus an object having to modify itself to suit these pragmatic interests. That which is offered to the worker in exchange for his labour-power has, for capital, only an exchange-value with the final goal of recovering what has been given in exchange for labour-power. But for the worker, what he receives as the price of his labour-power has only a use-value. There too, things might seem simple, but seen from the workers' side, they pose problems that are quite as complex as those posed for the capitalists, even when one has not taken into consideration what workers are and what they do.

Just as capital's logic tends to make it normalize labour-power and consequently to act on its prop, the worker, the latter constantly tends to 'denormalize' himself, i.e. to behave like a human being and not like an object. His physical force and his intelligence; technological conditions of labour; the strength of work and its speed; finally, the quantity and quality of his 'sold' work; he will try to reduce all these as much as possible, and at the same time to earn the highest wages (i.e. use-value) possible. His aim, conscious or unconscious, will be to utilize to the maximum what is for capital only 'labour-power' but for him 'creative life power' for his own personal use, which will have value only for himself, none for the circuit of capital. Except if the latter considers, as is the case with 'advanced' capitalism, that a part of this 'autonomous' activity, creative or not, indirectly shares in the restoration of labour-power. It is the same as regards consumption. The worker will react against his condition as a passive consumer exchanging all his wages against commodities at their exact exchange-value. He will try, by personal activity, either to limit their 'value' or to use them as elements to create non-capitalist products, escaping from or falsifying the capitalist production process. There too, the two elements of 'denormalization', producer-consumer, are closely interrelated by the fact that the utilization of commodities for their use-value is developed on the basis of what the worker 'recuperates' from the exchange-value of his labour-power.

One can write all that in much simpler terms. What is hidden behind these considerations about value is quite simply, class struggle at its deep roots, the permanent antagonism between work and capital, an antagonism with ever-renewed forms. Everyone is forced to work to live; for the great majority of the world's workers, this still means to get hold of something to eat, a place to live, clothes, and to ensure the same things for his family. For a changeable fraction of western capitalism, this can entail something other than the elementary needs; to ensure its survival and the maintenance of social order, capitalism has been unable to maintain this zone of insecurity that was for it the best guarantee of exploitation. Its enormous development in the course of the last thirty years has provisionally assured its hegemony, but at the same time has given rise to problems that were unknown before. Or rather, has caused the reappearance, in other forms and in an unsuspected dimension, of some problems which had been crucial at the beginning of capitalism (resistance to proletarianization), but which had been more or less deflected by industrialization (the control of this proletarianization). And at the same time its own dynamic can only make these new problems spread little by little to zones of backward development (which are manipulated as such by capital) where exploitation and struggles are maintained within the limits of elementary needs.

It seems important to us to come back to this basic idea of the conflict

between capital and labour to understand what is happening at the moment in the industrialized countries. Whatever it is, the worker wants to do something other than what others want him to do, both in work and outside it. Depending on the situations in which he is involved, this 'something other' takes on different forms, other orientations, other meanings. But it always has for capital the same consequence as that underlined in the sentences quoted at the beginning of this chapter: these forms of refusal tend to destroy, to deny capital itself. They strike it at its very essence, forcing it to modify its methods and the framework of its exploitation, thus provoking new changes either in these attitudes of the workers (who then express themselves by new individual and collective ways of behaving) or in open struggles for objectives that are quite different from those of traditional struggles.

One cannot really understand the meaning of these simple words 'to do something else with one's life' and of everything that stems from it, in ways of behaving and in the struggles, if one regards the worker as someone who is opposed to something, to someone. This 'opposition', this struggle 'against' is already a consequence of this fundamental attitude that we have just mentioned, but it is not this fundamental attitude itself. The worker certainly fights against his alienation in production, against his alienation in consumption, but it is only because he finds himself confronted by everything that society tries to impose upon him, and which is exterior to him. At the start, the worker is for himself neither for nor against the boss and his exploitation. All that is foreign to him, and he does not know the object of his activity even when he is 'inside' it and he is this object itself. Before fighting with his boss or against society, the worker tries constantly, in a thousand different ways, to escape them. It is then that he smashes against that which is shutting him in. The fight against the boss, against society, comes from the fact that the worker is, precisely, not the passive object to which they wanted to reduce him, and that he constantly tends to be this 'autonomous being'. It is this 'autonomous being' that rises to the top when in the struggle the workers are freed for a while of certain of capital's physical and moral constraints. Reformism consists precisely of only considering the consequences and of reducing the behaviour of the workers to this struggle 'against'. One completely sets aside the tireless attempt to do 'something else with one's life', an attempt that constantly models the content of the workers' behaviour when confronted by society as a whole, by work, by the 'social participation' that is continuously demanded of them. If, by chance, many of us look into this behaviour 'for oneself' (because it becomes too evident and one can no longer deny its existence) it is only to say straight away that it has hardly any value, this 'value' being judged in relation to the direct and 'conscious' confrontation with the organs of domination of capital, that is to say, in the end, within the framework of the capitalist system itself.

To take up again the two sentences quoted at the beginning of the chapter, it is the bursting onto the modern capitalist scene of the worker 'for himself' which causes such an important series of phenomena that are unclassifiable according to the traditional criteria. The capital of today, like that of yesterday under different forms, feel menaced, justly, by this renewed tendency of the worker to be only an exchange-value, the smallest possible one. Without a doubt, that has always existed, as long as capital and exploitation themselves. But capitalism, if it is fundamentally the same, is certainly not exactly the same, and is in constant evolution. As long as capital lasts, it is because it succeeds more or less completely in achieving its momentary objectives. The reduction of the worker to a uniformized being, planifiable at will both in production and consumption, has been in part achieved; capital survives by itself. But this success gives rise to other unforeseen phenomena which are the very consequence of its development. 'One-dimensional' man, conditioned to be interchangeable (identical to himself and to others) nevertheless stays a being 'for himself'. Motivations that have been made uniform generate an instinctive understanding and individual ways of behaving that 'collectivize' more surely and more spontaneously. The appearance of forms of collective action is less the result of a previous agreement, and still less of a previous persuasion, which would be necessary because the interests and resulting mentalities were too divergent. Here too, one must look beyond the open struggles (in which these phenomena have their place) to see the dimension of these generalised individual ways of behaving, in which a worker taken individually has the possibility to take an action 'for himself', resulting from the same possibility for everybody else to do the same thing; a situation that everyone knows because this identity that capital wills makes everyone instinctively understand others. This exists in the field of production, for example with absenteeism, but also in the field of consumption. The systematic supply of products and their easy acquisition has destroyed the 'value' they had conferred on them by their acquisition or appropriation after long and hard work. Purchase on credit also plays this role of destroying value because it enables one to appropriate without making a previous effort. Objects appear as merely tools of everyday life, no more useful than that for a given task, not only to save time (and to facilitate wage-labour, as could be seen at one time), but to find pleasure outside work, to try to organize one's life according to one's wishes, outside the circuit of capital.

One finds again here the situation at the beginning of capitalism, when the worker, relying on elements from his previous way of life, resisted as far as he could his manipulation as use-value by capital, by limiting the exchange of his labour-power to his strictly personal needs. But this time it is capital that seems on the defensive, which sees its own objects of domination taken as personal tools for escape, a very limited escape but escape nevertheless, out-



side the rules of the system. The phenomenon's dimension enables one to see at the same time its power and its fragility. Globally, one can say that all the phenomena of 'absence of social participation' are, in their motivations, situated at a sort of dialectical cross-roads between the workers' conscious and unconscious psycho-physical reactions to modern domination and the constant enticement of the escapes made possible by the institutions themselves. So everyone need only let his imagination weave the reconstruction of a life 'for oneself' according to everyone's possibility of taking on the one hand 'the time' and on the other 'the means'. Without any doubt this reconstruction constitutes a future and no longer a return to previous conditions of life as it existed at the birth of capitalism. But one can in no way deduce from these possibilities of a life 'for oneself' the elements of a communist society, for in any case they develop outside a capitalist world. They only express the tendency towards this communist society and contribute a more exact understanding of all the struggles that are engendered by the repression or recuperation (which is another form of repression) of the present forms of the tendency. This repression causes the appearance of other forms which arise from new contradictions, always expressing the fundamental contradiction between capital and labour.

## 10. Bringing the debate out of the rut.

We don't think that we are here to try to be more right than others, or before them, or to send each other direct or implied insults, those all the groups always use when they don't want to discuss or don't want to understand and try to discredit others by a few well-chosen epithets.

We think that we are here to try and understand. Before discussing some recent facts, we make some explanations, so that one may know what we are talking about: we don't like mixtures, nor insinuations, nor things with a double meaning, nor false debates.

### *The sources of information*

Why is C. Reeve ironical about the 'kilos of reflections of company sociologists'? Why do these 'reflections' exist, what do they reveal, are they nothing but hot air? The reflections themselves are for a good part, without doubt, just like those of the 'distinguished economists'. But in the works of the 'economists', and likewise in those of the 'sociologists', one finds facts, a mine of facts, which fall in with those of the press or of direct information, and which are in any case worth serious consideration. These 'sociological analyses', are they too not simply a part of capital's development? At its beginning, the technical organization of capital was preoccupied by its finances (banks and accounting), then by its sales (commercial services), then by its production techniques, principally installations of fixed capital and raw materials (technical services), and in the modern period, more especially by variable capital (organization of labour). Sociology is for 'work' (variable capital) what technology is for fixed (constant) capital.

In every field of the capitalist enterprise, information and analysis are essential to take decisions leading to the highest profitability, the best profit. Sociology is one of the essential tools for the integral planning of labour-power, to make it an element that can be manipulated at will to the desired point according to the 'needs' of capital. Should we reject the tons of financial and economic information with the pretext that they are the work of 'capitalist' book-keepers, bankers and statisticians? From where did Marx and so many others draw the elements for their reflections?

The capitalists don't know where they are going, but they have perfected

tools to bring them the elements for taking at every moment the decisions which they believe conform to their interests. The sociologists, with their jumble of facts and analyses, are for capital today one of these tools, for 'seizing' labour-power. It is our job to see what of this can be used; of course as critically as possible, but not with derision. It is only one element, but an important one, among all the other sources of information, direct or indirect, about all the forms of struggle which break the attempt at 'total planification' of the worker.

One example, concerning absenteeism. Everyone knows that to reduce the costs of production, increase competitiveness and maintain profits, capitalism must 'turn over stocks', which immobilise — with no profit — capital. For this reason, big factories usually have very limited stocks (except sometimes for reasons of speculation, for example on the prices of raw materials, or to anticipate a conflict). The consequence is that a limited strike rapidly blocks a whole factory through lack of stocks. The workers soon know this, and know how to use it. Capital tries to counter use of sub-contractors, diversification of supply, etc.).

The regularity of the supply of workers to ensure a continuous flow of production and of utilization of raw materials is an equally vital element. The stock of 'labour-power' must be reduced to a minimum, otherwise it is paid 'to do nothing', just like a heap of spare parts in a storeroom. To reduce this stock of 'labour-power' is, for a good part, to limit absenteeism. To go absent means to make the boss increase his stock. Numerous irregular absences that are not planned for can block the production line, like the lack of parts, and can be as costly as a sudden walk-out. To remedy this, bosses must have recourse to the same methods as to make up for the lack of parts: sub-contracting out work, building up a stock of temporary workers, etc.

### *Capitalist 'refusal of work' and socialist 'refusal of work'*

As one knows, we are living under capitalism and capital's power is everywhere. And its harmful effects also: the workers were the first to undergo the most important and the most regular 'pollution', that of wage-labour, of exploitation. The pollution in the atmosphere went together with it; nobody could say which was the worse.

We don't know precisely what a communist society will be like, but we can certainly say what it will not be: today's society. When one speaks of 'refusal of work' (23), one speaks of today and not of tomorrow. Tomorrow we'll see on the spot what the 'participation in necessary tasks' will be. Perhaps there will be more 'activities' than we have today, but in any case it will

(23) Like the Dutch comrades, we dislike the word because it limits to the field of work an attitude of 'social withdrawal' which includes every action in confrontation with society in its entirety and a refusal to 'participate' (elections, work, trade unions, management, etc. . .).

be different. The criticisms of C. Reeve are even less apposite, since those who don't go to work often don't go in order to 'do something else', something else which is theirs, which they enjoy, and which is usually a collective activity (and from which they return sometimes more worn out than if they had gone to work). It is true that some 'militants' regard 'work, human activity, indispensable to the functioning of every society' as an application of their 'refusal to work' to a push-button society. But there was nothing of that in Zerzan's text. And furthermore, is that a reason to refuse all discussion by means of derogatory epithets such as 'slogan of the bourgeoisie and its eternal lackeys'? C. Reeve must always, at any cost, find some 'principles', to oppose them to his own.

On both sides there is the beginning of a debate which each, at bottom, refuses, wrapping himself in this cloak of principles; an old fashioned cloak of the necessity of social labour, a new one of the rejection of social labour (beyond cleaning the bog a few minutes each day).

The first makes an abstract thing of the enormous potential of technique and of new man equipped with these techniques, which imply new relations and force one to make a constant revision of what reflections on the struggles of the past has contributed. It is still stranger that these are the same people who make the workers' council the centre of revolutionary development, thus materializing the pre-eminence of present-day development of the forces of production and of those who animate them.

The others use these techniques with a somewhat delirious imagination to make a rough description of a society 'without work', while at the same time rejecting them in the vision of a bucolic society *a la* Rousseau. Still stranger as it is they who often have an apocalyptic vision of a revolution which would destroy the capitalist development and utilization of technique, almost from one day to the next.

In the twenty lines of the last paragraph of C. Reeve's article, there is a whole political programme, the discussion of which would take up an entire volume, and which is thrown out as a triumphant and somewhat threatening conclusion to the 'parasites' (we don't know who exactly) who would refuse the 'road to communism' of the productive workers. Once more, that which interests us here is not the society of tomorrow; we can discuss it when we see it. What interests us is what is happening in today's society that reveals the breaking-points and the tendencies towards this communist society.

### *The class struggle*

This is, for us, precisely what is happening in capitalist society today, in its Western, Russian, Chinese or under-developed branches. The problem is not to approve or to disapprove, but to try to understand and to analyse, and not to apply *a priori* criteria.

C. Reeve takes up the attack on those who want to make of absenteeism the 'principle of the new revolutionary movement'. We are quite in agreement

with him, but not in the same way. And the criticism that we can make of those who set up the 'refusal to work' as the principle of a militant action, as a 'conscious exemplary act', we apply equally to this mythical 'revolutionary worker' and to the 'principles of revolutionary action' of which C. Reeve speaks on various occasions.

His whole criticism pretends to consider as a revolutionary 'slogan' or 'catch-word' that which he himself elsewhere recognises as a struggle. He can thus easily contrast his argumentation on the 'spirit and determination to fight against capitalism' and his 'principles of revolutionary action' with the new creeds of the 'little leftist tendencies' who 'set up the refusal to work into a principle of the new revolutionary movement'. This does not concern us, but for C. Reeve it is interesting as it permits him to slide completely past the debate. Couldn't he have done otherwise?

Nobody ever said that sabotage, violence, absenteeism, striking, etc. were new things. They are the very essence of the resistance to capitalism, they were born with it and will die with it. Only capitalism has transformed itself, and what the workers do today (not what they think or what they think they are doing) has quite another dimension and another meaning, both for capital and for the workers themselves. And that can have quite a different tomorrow. (24)

C. Reeve writes:

*... the 'revolt against work' ... a product of the defeat and division of workers in capitalism ... cannot be 'critical' forms of the modern revolutionary struggle. In fact, it's only from collective struggle that these new tendencies to reappropriate power over the productive apparatus can arise ...*

*... Rather than a new form of struggle, sabotage and the rest of the 'revolt against work' are in fact the result, the manifestation of weakness of the workers, a demonstration of their incapacity to take on capitalism in a conscious, independent and collective fashion.*

The consciousness of the struggle, its development from the individual level to a collective level and its generalization, the perspectives of this struggle which appear in the facts from the immediate necessities of the struggle and not as a programme studied in advance that one should know by heart, all this is confirmed by the practical events of struggles; and all this contradicts Reeve's way of thinking about the question of 'consciousness' and 'revolutionary perspectives'.

It is because he sees this as existing before the struggle, all arms at the ready, all thought out in the heads of 'revolutionary workers' that he makes a

(24) We must point out the similarity between the positions taken here by C. Reeve and those that he expresses in the pamphlet *The Portuguese Experience*, (Spartacus), underlining, p. 23 that it is 'important to say that the traditional leftist organisations, leninist in essence, are responsible for the impasse and the present result in Portugal'. This confirms that for C. Reeve, the organisation and its slogans play a capital role in every revolutionary process.

division in struggles, between what seems to him 'weakness', 'individual', 'non-revolutionary', and 'good' struggles, to catch the train with the 'good revolutionary's' manual in his hand, if by chance it should pass through the station where he has designated it should pass.

Because of this, he separates what is done by the same workers, which is, moreover, inextricably mixed up in the struggles of today. The transformation of the workers' ideas takes place at the same time as the transformation of the struggles. To speak of the new movement means for us (and, I think, for C. Reeve too) that the workers struggle in different ways, trying to act for themselves and by themselves. It would be really strange if the manifestations of autonomy in the struggles(25), however timid they might seem, were not accompanied by a radical transformation in the 'values' which capital has always tried to impose. A transformation not so much of ideas (we don't care at all about what 'theoreticians' or others think about 'non-work', and often workers express different ideas about the content of their acts), but of the individual and collective practice in respect of work (not of praxis thought of as a militant act, but what the workers do in their daily life without giving it a particular political meaning). We want to see that as a whole, not to split it up into little bits separated one from the other. We see that a whole series of new phenomena is appearing, we talk about them, and we try to connect them together.

Certainly, capitalist society will be destroyed by 'an open, conscious and collective' confrontation with capital. But it remains to be seen what this means. For us, it will definitely not be the 'big day' but a long and complex process that has already begun and whose manifestations can already be seen. If, in daily life, to defy the traditional 'values' of capital is not an open confrontation, what is? If such a confrontation, which regularly involves more than a quarter of the workers, is not a collective act, what is? As for consciousness, the examples that we cite further on show that the actions against the repression of these 'individual' collective ways of behaving are not conducted in the dark, but in a clear and 'conscious' way towards goals and with methods that 'conscious revolutionaries' could never have dreamed of.

We chose the examples that follow, among others very recent ones, to show how things are happening. Everyone can advance other analyses or contribute other examples from every country which confirm or negate, but which in any case push the debate further, the debate which will finish only with the end of capitalism. That's all that we want.

(25) Autonomy of struggles has nothing to do with the title 'autonomous' which is claimed by all those whose vanguardism has been led to an impasse precisely because the autonomous struggles of the workers made their organisational efforts useless and vain. We will speak another time of this 'current of autonomy'.

**11. How some isolated workers see the problem:  
Escape from poverty or the poverty of escape  
Repression against absenteeism in France**

The two pieces below come from French workers. The first one shows the distance travelled by individuals since May 1968 and the shock produced to behaviour, groups of a political or informal nature and ideas. Many young workers have probably travelled the same path. There is no end, everyone can add examples from their own knowledge.

*11.1 Escape from poverty and the poverty of escape*

'I was a good building worker who had been through May '68 without understanding what had happened. Even so I wasn't addicted to work; but there were other ways of escaping for me at the time; the Saturday night dance, "birds", etc. . . and "having 'sowed my wild oats' left and right, north and south, I went back home to 'settle down'. And yet there was something in me I couldn't stifle (I didn't know what to call it—Now I know 'disaffection' for the 'repugnant activity'. All workers are like me, passive resistance, a sort of nagging worry, a slight disgust; I was no longer a helpful worker; I fancied myself as a union man and quickly got through all the local firms in the region, either getting myself sacked or involved in rows. I had been radicalised in spite of myself, I mean without even realising.

'In September 1973, more or less with a few exceptions a group of talkative weirdos and largely incoherent, we met 'Chez Gaston'. I more or less supported their ideas of that time, regionalism, ecology, anarcho something or other. Our activity a film club in the local youth club, little discussions, splitting hairs, etc. . . Even so, a more practical tendency was pushing its way up among some of us: we had a poster campaign to ask for part-time and alternative work. We received a lot of offers (in factories, gardening, child-minding, etc. . .). In our region, the Berry, we were the first to try out an experiment. We organised ourselves into 'teams' working on a one week on work, one week off basis; this 'marginal' activity limited our own exploitation, but cut us off from other workers (disloyal competition, etc. . .); this is why we planned as a result to use all forces available to 'legalise' our situation.

'In May 1974, the outside promoters of the experiment just disappeared without saying anything. Leaving us alone with our doubts. Had they just lost their last schoolboy and student illusions or had they just realised the ridiculousness of an organisation artificially built outside any context of real struggle? To their discredit we could see their attitude of disgust towards certain people who came as they said just to 'pretend'; too strong to stay with us, not strong enough to go elsewhere, they always stayed silent.

'In September 1974 we had a brief passing 'Liberation Committee' which came from contact with a 'Maoist-come-from-Paris-to-agitate-in-the-region'. This Mr Robinet took over this himself . . . and still has it.

'In November 1974, our 'occupation'. This must have been at the time I first knew 'Echanges'. I had also contacted various Trotskyists etc. . . They thought we wanted to 'organise' the unemployed. We all signed on together as wanting part time work. We carried out a symbolic occupation of the local job centre. The manager refused to speak to us and sent for the police. We decided to leave and to come back again another day only more of us, on our signing on day. We organised an exhibition at our local youth club on the theme 'alienated work'. The subject was badly dealt with. Anything went as long as it stirred things up.

'December 1974. The downward slide. Theoretical squabbles become personal attacks.

'March 1975. Clumsy attempts to clarify things in the form of auto criticism. Contact with some workers, young yobos and apprentices.

'September 1975. Short time working imminent in all local and national firms. Everyone is talking about it. 'Lutte Ouvriere' (Trotskyist group) in a public meeting become suddenly brave and put forward a 35-hour week, adding "Marx said that the end of collective (social) work is not for tomorrow; even the United States hasn't achieved a high degree of development for that". But they did not say when Marx had said that.

'November 1975. The non strikers at the local Fruehauf company demonstrate in front of the Prefecture demanding the 'right to work'. We publish 'Down with work'. Plans for a demo on 2nd December. If we don't get cold feet before then. Plan for a poster.

'Well that's all. Also, in the meantime, I've started to read quite a bit. Pannekoek, I liked that one. Bordiga as well. Now I work here and there. Often moonlighting for artisan friends still, 'just something for bread' but that doesn't change anything. Lots of others I know doing the same thing in different trades.

February 1975

### ***11.2 Repression against absenteeism in France***

We consider absenteeism as one form among others of refusal of wage-labour, an act of revolt that is individual but developing massively (in France, 25% increase in 10 years).



The authorities don't know what to come up with to suppress this very widespread means for the workers who try to regain a little of their energy, of their time, of their space; be it for resting, travel, love, odd-jobs, fishing or anything else.

In France, workers take 380 million days off every year for themselves, that is a hundred times more than the days spent on strike. These figures are taken from a governmental report (Heilbronner) (26) which also maintains that only ten per cent of absences from work have a strictly medical reason. We may add to that the days which we can take off without need for a medical certificate (two consecutive days in my factory) and the phenomenon of voluntary unemployment (registered or not).

This applies also to the workers in my factory, despite the blackmail of the monthly premium for regularity, which is 8% (of the basic wage); we lose it with two days of absence, that is to say that by missing two days, we lose four days' wages. This blackmail only pushes us to take a full two weeks off, since the result is the same. The average absenteeism in the factory (750 people) is 10%, but that ranges from 3% in the offices and in the machine shop to 17% in June-July in my department (piece-work).

So the Heilbronner report proposes some repressive measures which foresee an ever stronger authoritarianism in this field in the future: blacklisting of those workers who absent themselves the most (this measure has existed for a long time at a local level, but not organised; this blacklist will follow us)... Blacklisting of easy-going doctors (we can be sure there wouldn't be any more of them) and disciplinary measures against exaggerations. The three first days that at present are not compensated would be increased to seven. The daily compensation (at present 35F.) would be reduced.

The more capital becomes state controlled, the more this logic will be reinforced: 'Work for socialism'. Examples are not lacking. In France, allergy to wage labour is medically termed 'sinistrosis'.(27)

For a long time it has led to psychiatric hospitals, but will it soon lead here, as elsewhere (Chile, USSR, China etc. . .) to 'work-camps' or 're-education prisons'?

Absenteeism is a form of repossession that is developing a little everywhere (including China) and I think that it is useful to analyse it together with all the other forms of refusal and struggle.

What is happening in other countries?(28)

October 1977

(26) Report quoted, before publication, by *Le Matin*, 10.9.77.

(27) Pamphlet, *La Sinistrose* I, 34, rue des Balançiers 31000 Toulouse. See the note at the end of the article on the recent developments of the repression of absenteeism in France.

(28) The Heilbronner report only concerns Sickness Benefit in France, i.e. compensated absences. In the period before the elections, its conclusions and suggestions were more or less shelved. The control of the payment of complementary indemnities, notably by the insurance companies in agreement with the employers, has led to numerous polemics, and even to local actions by doctors, as in Reims (*Le Monde*, 16.2.77), *L'Union*, 29.2.77, *L'Ardennais* 19 and 22.2.77) or by the workers concerned.

## 12. It's always the same ones

On the third of November 1977, the *Financial Times* published the following statement, made by Tom Darby, Director of personnel and Industrial relations at the Chrysler factory in Linwood in Scotland:

*The company was bleeding to death through losses sustained at Linwood. . . the plant was afflicted with deliberate breaches of procedure, restrictive practices, widespread absenteeism, lateness, unofficial stoppages and a lack of flexibility. . .*

He added that in 1977 the factory had realised no more than half of its programmed production.

In a few words, the situation which is thus described in a particular case, destroys the entire argumentation of C. Reeve's article.

*. . . sabotage and the rest of the 'revolt against work' are . . . the manifestation of weakness of the workers, a demonstration of their incapacity to take on capitalism. . .*

It is quite clear, in the example quoted, as elsewhere, that it is the same workers who, according to the circumstances, at the same or different times, use all methods of struggle. For them, there is no difference or separation between, for example, their absenteeism and their refusal to move a few yards down the production-line which would entail extra work because of a re-arrangement of jobs—a matter which in 1977 caused the closure of the Linwood factory for several weeks. The workers who arrive late or take time off when they feel like it know very well what they are doing. Why should their struggle be said to have a meaning when it concerns opposition to a point of work-rules (the definition of jobs) and when it concerns something else (hours of work)?

As for all the arguments on 'modernisation' or management, on the crisis: the example of Linwood, precisely, allows us to discard them. The Linwood factory was opened in Scotland in 1963 to reabsorb unemployment (with the hope of having a more docile work-force). It is the biggest and the most

modern of the Chrysler factories in Great Britain and designed to be practically self-sufficient (only the motors and gear boxes are built in Coventry). The model produced there sells very well (Chrysler has had to import cars from its other European factories to fill in gaps and to meet the demand of the English market). It proved impossible to reach half the planned production for 1977, despite the introduction of a second shift in May 1977, the employment of 2,500 extra workers, and the replacement of the director by Stan Deason, a big, strong shot from the Ford factory in Halewood, with a well-established reputation for being an energetic and direct man.

The American miners' strike (29) is another good example of how impossible it is to divide up workers' actions, calling some manifestations of 'weakness' (thus capitulationist), others manifestations of 'consciousness' (therefore revolutionary). After 73 days on strike, the Assembly of the representatives of the rank and file of the trade-union (UMW) did not dare to ratify and submit to the pit-head workers an agreement made by the 39 big union leaders and the representatives of the mine-owners. In exchange for a 37% wage-increase, over three years, and various financial advantages, the leaders wanted to impose on the miners draconian measures against absenteeism, wildcat strikes, and a complete restructuring of the system of compensation for sickness and pensions. Against absenteeism and wildcat strikes, dismissal was proposed for more than two days unjustified absence, or for having participated in a wildcat strike, or for having taken part in a picket in the course of such a strike.(30) This type of dismissal was not to be subject to any sort of redress. Further, all miners involved in wildcat strikes would have been liable to fines, and after ten days all sickness guarantees would have been suspended. The bosses regained control over the whole system of social security and pensions, which until then had been managed by the trade union (there were good reasons for that, notably the manipulation of funds by union gangs, but there were also other, equally good reasons, such as the possibility of penalising absenteeism and wildcat strikes). In this exemplary struggle, who could distinguish between what was defence of a de facto situation created by the miners themselves in the course of the last few years—and including absenteeism just as much as wildcat strikes—and what was some form of 'revolutionary consciousness'? The defence of the 'right to strike', that is to say the right to go on strike for day-to-day claims (grievances) is surely closely linked to the defence of the right to take time off for 'one's own self', another form of self-defence of one's own interest and by one's own means.

At the end of August 1977, more than 500 women from the FN (Fabrique Nationale d'Armes—National Arms Factory) in Liege in Belgium stopped work suddenly, demonstrating first in the factory and then in the streets, taking other workers with them: they marched in columns towards an inter-professional centre for sickness control. The police were notified, but only sent one officer to the spot, whose authority and demeanour were supposed to be sufficient to impress a few excited women. The officer was attacked.

(29) The strike is not yet finished at the time of writing. We will reconsider it another time.

(30) In 1977, 17% of the work was 'lost by wildcat strikes and absenteeism and productivity had fallen from 15.6 tons per man-day in 1969 to 9 in 1977.

The women invaded the centre and destroyed everything they could lay their hands on, from medical apparatus to dossiers and files: the doctors and other personnel just had time to escape through a concealed door. The next day, 12 factories, the most important in Liege, including the Cockerill-Ougree steel works, spontaneously stopped work. It was not resumed until the trade unions announced officially that they recognised the strike (which meant that strike benefits were paid). The centre in question had been built for the control of 'sick-leave' following the 'bi-lateral' agreements between the bosses and the trade unions (the 'socialist' FGTB and the Catholic CSC in order to check absenteeism, first at Cockerill-Ougree, then other factories, including the FN. The centre was especially hateful to the workers: the shared management denied them any possibility of redress through the trade union. The explosion which we have just mentioned followed immediately on a particularly tragic abuse: a young woman, after giving birth, had twice been sent back to work by the centre, despite the advice of the doctor treating her; the second time, she died suddenly in her work-shop. The centre has not been replaced, and the situation, as far as absenteeism is concerned, is the same as it was before this offensive by the unions and bosses. But it is equally sure that they will try something else.

This example of a 'refusal to work' leading to an open struggle is the exact inverse of what one could see at Swan Hunter, an English shipyard near Newcastle, at Wallsend: there it was an open struggle which led to a 'refusal to work', by a collective decision taken by everyone together in the most 'classical' of ways. For some months, because of the wages-policy, the men responsible for fitting out the ships' interiors had been refusing overtime to demand equal pay with the boiler-makers. In November 1977 the British Labour (social-democratic) government, having obtained an order for 24 ships from the Polish government, plotted, a blackmail scheme, together with the owners of the shipyards and Trade union leaders: either an allocation of 7 ships (and work guaranteed for two years) and the end to the ban on overtime (the proposed 'contract' speaks of 'improving the workers' conduct' and of 'good conduct from the Trade union); or, alternatively, the redundancy, within a few weeks, of 700 workers, to start with. The shop stewards were for 'work' and the Polish ships and the end of the strike. An assembly of the strikers, at the end of November, decided by 1700 against 20 to confront the coalition of shop stewards, trade union, bosses and government. There were cries of outrage against these workers who preferred their 'principles' to the life of 'their' form; some spoke even of 'suicide'. Against the hue and cry, one worker in the unit replied simply 'We've done very well to look after ourselves before anybody else'. It would be too long to follow all the ups and downs that have ensued. But in January 1978, the redundancies began, after the definitive withdrawal of the ships 'allocated' to the yard; this was because of a deliberate and mass choice by the workers in favour of unemployment

when faced by the blackmail of 'work' under certain conditions. One can also notice that for months they had chosen to work less to try and obtain higher wages, and then chose not to work.

Another example can equally show how this transformation of a struggle towards the refusal to work, equally in a collective way, is produced. Again it took place in England, and is concerned not with wages but technological changes and dismissals. The English steel-works, (nationalised in a single State concern) are even more touched by the world steel crisis than those of other States, because of the resistance made in the past by the workers against modernisation that would entail redundancies. Very modern steel-works have been built, notably at Port Talbot (Wales) and Middlesborough (North). But they could'nt get started for months, or even years, because nobody wanted to go and work there. In France, can you imagine Fos in Marseilles or Usinor in Dunkirk staying empty because nobody from Valenciennes or Thionville or anywhere else wanted to go and work there? The unions supported, weakly, this line, and in words sustained their opposition to redundancies. Recently, at the end of 1977, 800 workers in Beswick (Scotland) at the Clyde Iron Works factory chose voluntary redundancies against compensation (up to £15,000 per worker) (31) and formed their own action committee to negotiate the closure directly with the management, because of the trade-unions' opposition. One can say that this 'serves capital's interests'; we will return to this point later, but, in our opinion, one form of struggle is simply giving way to another form of struggle. A 'refusal of modernisation' (which implies a break with many things in the field of relations in the factory) is quite simply followed by a 'refusal to work': one takes the money and goes away. In this situation, to tell the truth, the term 'other form of struggle' is particularly inadequate. In both cases, refusal of modernisation or acceptance of redundancy, there was the same choice, personal and collective at the same time, for a certain way of living, or working, that in every case excluded 'the good of the firm', only leaving self-interest in consideration. This was what was expressed by the reflection of the Swan Hunter worker that we mentioned.

A similar situation had already been produced in December '75 in the Chrysler factory in Linwood which we already spoke about at the beginning of this section a propos another struggle: there were too many volunteers to be made redundant in return for compensation, and all the union actions 'against redundancies', and those of their leftist emulators, fell in to the empty wind. We prefer to show by a French example that these are not isolated cases limited to Great Britain. The following article appeared in the French 'left' paper *Liberation* on 12 October, 1977:

In 1972, Gillette, already installed in Annecy since 1953, where it makes blades and razors, acquires first 80% and then 93 % of the Dupont firm, 20

kilometres from there in Faverges, which specialises in luxury lighters. Gillette is keen to develop the production of the disposable lighter, at that time known as 'tubagaz', of which Dupont is the promoter, and created the Cricket company, in 1972, in the village of Balme-de-Sillingy, about 15 kilometres from Annecy. There, in a huge workshop, 900 workers, a majority of them women, of whom many are immigrants, are responsible for production.

One fine day, this nice subsidiary begins to be a burden to Gillette—especially as at the same time its factory in Spain offers definitely more advantageous production—and it decides to shut it down. Gillette has already been concerned with this for two years, and the operation should be completed by the next October 31st. They make do then, with not getting rid of the French factory definitively, but putting it provisionally to one side, to freeze it, hoping for better days. Its production, meanwhile, will be strictly limited to France. But lessening production means suppressing employment. Now the figures for trade, and the profit from the exploitation are marvellously profitable; so a way must be found to get rid of this spare work force without becoming exposed to the trade unions, the factory inspectorate or the unemployment authorities.

*Everything will go very quickly*

Act one. In March 1977, M. Roux, director of the company in Balme, announces during a works committee meeting a first notification of excess personnel. No question, he says, of immediate redundancies, although the threat hangs over the factory; just one suggestion: to transfer 50 workers from Balme to the factory for luxury lighters at Faverges, where 19 temporary contracts are not renewed. 'We certainly tried to take action against this sort of activity' explained the secretary of the local CFDT in Annecy, 'but the fifty-five workers concerned finally accepted the transfers.'

Act two. Four months later, on July 6th, again during a works committee, M. Roux comes back to the question: this time, the excess is evaluated at 45 jobs immediately and about 150 for 1978. Still no question of redundancies, 'the undertaking by the management not to proceed with collective redundancy in 1977 was to be respected'. Once more, a whole series of actions are foreseen, some of which give a good idea of the procedure that will be used on a larger scale some months later: the director of Balme encourages the foreign workers especially to hand in their notice, offering 'exceptionally, compensation more substantial than that provided for by the paragraphs and laws currently in force'. The operation is not a success, no foreign worker accepts the proposal.

Meanwhile, a new figure, who will stay several months in the factory, enters on the scene. Guy Morales, CFDT delegate, tells 'we didn't know who this was. Until the day when we were informed by a CFDT section in Paris that this guy is a specialist in redundancies and has already shown what he

can do in several other factories. There, we made a big mistake: we weren't suspicious enough of him; we should at least have refused him access to the works committee. He stuck his nose in everywhere.'

A few months are enough to reveal to this technocrat-psychologist the state of mind and the atmosphere in the factory: an average wage of 2100 francs a month, a rather young personnel, made up essentially of women, of whom many are from the countryside or foreign, surrounded by a paternalist management; a high rate of absenteeism, an even more important number of resignations (about 8 every month); the largest union the FO, more or less has the blessing of the management and two very young CGT and CFDT trade unions for the last two or three years, have been trying more or less successfully to increase their audience. On top of this, for the last few months, the threat, serious and lavishly maintained by the director, or redundancies in the more or less near future.

### *A rush of madness*

So everything is ready for Act three. Last 18th of August, two days after the return to work after holidays, M. Roux comes back to business and convenes an extraordinary works committee meeting.

On that day, admirably counselled by his technocrat-specialist-in-redundancies, he presents the 'social plan' which he advocates, and which, besides, he had sent that same morning to the homes of all the workers of the factory. It is the first point of this 'social plan' that will provoke, in the next minute and for the next three days, a real tidal-wave in the daily life of the personnel. It provides for, in fact, 'a bonus to encourage voluntary redundancy: an exceptional payment of 30,000 francs gross (3 million old francs) (£3,350-£3,500) is proposed, within the limit of the operatives to be dispensed with as excessive (150) to everyone presenting his resignation before October 15th 1977 at the latest. Further, the beneficiaries will not have to work their notice, which will be payed in full. The resignations must be handed in to the personnel office, which will assure the immediate settlement of the payment'.

A whirlwind, a rush of madness, far exceeding the anticipations of the technocrat-specialist, seizes the works committee. The session is suspended. The workers present, union delegates at the head, rush to the personnel office to hand in their resignations. The 'social plan' is posted on the factory walls; the news spreads like wildfire. It's like a carnival procession: they just leave their production lines and machines like that and hurry to the office, where the FO union rep, full of zeal, records the resignations with several carbon copies on the typewriter.

During this time, some of the women who prefer to seek the advice of their husbands before taking a decision like this join the long queue which forms in front of the telephone. At the factory door, a continuous wave of men and women, in the know about the matter because of the letters they had received that morning, jump quickly out of the buses, run straight towards the personnel service, and, cheque in hand, make again for the bus which will take them far from this factory to which they hope never to return.

'The first day it was terrible' remembers Dina, the last to be included on the list of voluntary redundancies. 'We'd done nothing the whole day; we were feeling on edge. We saw everyone leaving. People were getting organised, writing their names on anything that came to hand, on bits of cardboard picked up in the factory. They all wanted to go straight away. Me, I weighed up the pros and cons for two days, then I decided. It was just in time, I was the last to go on the list.'

On August 18th, 150 workers leave the factory the instant after they hand in their letters of resignation. This will continue for two more days, with 38 additional resignations. It is not until the 21st that the management, itself overpowered by such an overwhelming success, closes the lists. Balance sheet — 188 resignations in 3 days. The services that correspond to the worst jobs (coincidence?) are completely abandoned and disorganised, leaving a group of foremen and middle managers much too important in relation to the few hundred workers who didn't want, or didn't have time, to leave. As for production, it is completely disorganised.

#### *Trade unions dismantled in one hour*

From the trade-union side, the situation is dramatic. The resignation operation has dealt a tragic blow to the union structure, understandably: most of the CGT and CFDT delegates were the first to sign their resignations, abandoning immediately the mission which had been entrusted to them. The losses are heavy, very heavy, and the consequences will be severe. And the ghost of dismemberment becomes apparent, dragging behind it numerous sackings. . . Nobody comes to the area branch CFDT and CGT meetings in Annecy any more. Consternation.

'Everything that we had got going slowly and painfully in the last three years, everything is destroyed. There are only two CFDT delegates left. It's a catastrophe'. And to try to understand: It's true there was a real psychosis about redundancies at Cricket. It's true, the delegates were very young and didn't have much union experience. But still, one doesn't leave one's post like that'. 'Ah, now the boss, Roux, can get himself a job anywhere' adds, a little sourly, the CGT secretary. 'He has managed to dismantle two trade unions in less than an hour. He got rid of 188 people like that, without a murmur, nothing.' As for the CGT delegate, better not to speak about him: 'The 18th of August, when we got wind of the business, we were keen to ring to him in



the factory. And there, they told us that he was no longer on the staff. We thought at first that it was a joke. Well, it was true, he left that day without leaving any trace of himself. We haven't seen him since.'

*Over a thousand pounds in our pockets to do something else*

Guy gave in his notice, like the 149 others, the very day of the voluntary departures operation. About 23 years old, he had been a CFDT delegate at Balme for one year. 'The section was very young' he explains 'there was nobody. It was a little by chance that I became a delegate, but I wasn't at all equipped to maintain the position'. Why did he give in his notice? 'When we saw, on the way out from the committee meeting that the social plan had been posted up, some delegates really tried to say that we shouldn't leave straightaway, but the people replied. 'Bugger that, we're leaving'. So I did just the same. I didn't think at all about the consequences for the trade union. I only thought about my personal case'. In fact, Guy had a big project: to follow an Industrial re-training course, then to start up as a carpenter. Because of lack of funds, he hadn't been able to put this into practice. With his three million francs he'll be able to begin in October.

Martine was also in the CFDT union. About 20 years old, she also nursed a big project: Canada. She gave in her notice. She is leaving for Canada at the end of the month.

With Dina it's different. She had enough, that's all. Like plenty of others who left with her on the 18th August. About forty, widow and mother of two children, she had been working for three years at Cricket. 'It was impossible. 900 people in an enormous workshop, without any partition, the temperature rose in the summer to 40°C, the noise, the machines. . . It's impossible to work inside there. Me, for example, I never had anything you could see that looked serious, it was more nervous tension, general tiredness; I spent my time at the doctor's. For one year, I hand adjusted lighter flames . . . It seems simple to fix a lighter. But do it several times a day, 1200 times a month! You can't imagine what it's like. Sometimes I was forced to sleep on my stomach, arms hanging down, it hurt so much.' For Dina, the three million is above all a chance to escape from this nightmare. Certainly, she's been taken in because, contrary to what the management led her to believe, she will certainly not benefit from unemployment benefit. Of course, three million adds up to not much more than a year's unemployment pay at 90%; and a year goes quickly. 'It's true, but I don't feel sorry for anything. In any case, sooner or later we were going to be made redundant. And I prefer to receive three million all at once rather than a little money every month You can't do very much with three million, perhaps, but you can, in any case, take your time, a little comfort, time to look for something better.'

One day or another, doubtless, the question of finding work will have to come up again. Dina and the others are aware of this. Perhaps it won't be easy, there are 5,000 looking for work already in Haute-Savoie. 'We'll find something alright, we've got time now.'

### 13. Refusal of work and the crisis

*...we will see the collapse of the myth of absenteeism as a radical form of struggle in the same way as today already the slogan of the 'revolt against work' is collapsing in the face of rising unemployment. C. Reeve.*

Let's come back to Chrysler UK in Linwood. These workers that are so 'improductive' for capital, are they in the midst of a prosperous society? No, Scotland is one of the regions of Great Britain where the unemployment rate is highest, and growing: 6.9% in October '76, 8% in February '78.

Swan Hunter—the rebel shipyard—is in the North-East where the unemployment rate increased from 7.2% in October '76 to 8.4% in February '78.

We may supplement this with some other indications that appeared in *The Economist* in January 1977 under the title 'The British at work'—for Europe, the absenteeism rates are estimated for 1976 at 8% in the UK, 9% in West Germany, 12% in France and 13% in Italy (at Fiat, it increased from 9% in 1970 to 13% in '76, despite the crisis. . .) Great Britain does not seem to be among the most affected. But the 'refusal to work' is expressed there in a different way, just as effectively'.

*Ihe think tank study of the motor industry found that:*

- 1. It took 56-130% more man-hours to assemble identical cars in Britain than on the continent. In some operations 40-70% more men were employed.*
- 2. Even when manning levels for given capital equipment are competitive, output is not. Two body-framing lines had similar planned levels of manning and output. . . The British one produced half the planned output. . . . Only once, on comparable projects, did the British perform better than the foreigners. Usually British productivity was half to three quarters that abroad.*

*. . . In a study from Cambridge, international companies were asked for productivity comparisons between their operations in Britain and elsewhere. In 85 instances, productivity was higher abroad . . . On average, American and Canadian productivity was 50% higher, West German 27%, French 15%. . .*

We underline again that this is a situation in a period of crisis. We have already mentioned the fall in productivity in American mines between 1969 and 1977: an identical phenomenon was produced in the English mines between 1974 and 1977: (32)

*...Despite the six years of normal investment in new machinery, productivity in 1976 was below the level for 1970. The coal board has stepped up its recruiting... Many new recruits to mining soon leave when they discover what the job is like...'* (33)

We recall in passing that these are the same miners who caused the fall of the government in Great Britain by their strike in '73-'74.

We find again the same signs in other industries and in other countries: for example the USA. . .

*Auto absenteeism remains high despite depressed sales, massive lay-offs. Chrysler actually had a higher assembly line absence rate in April than two years ago when overtime was booming. Ford's rate (5.2%) through May was down only slightly from 5.6% a year ago. . .* (34)

A final example: at the end of 1976, many English workers 'granted' themselves, without any slogans of course, ten days extra holiday by staying away from work between Christmas and the New Year. To prevent this, at the end of 1977, many firms preferred simply to close; those which didn't dare do so found themselves in the same situation as the year before; with even greater problems, as evidenced by this strike of 4,500 dockers of the Mersey Dock and Harbour Company of Liverpool, who went on strike for almost a fortnight in solidarity with 60 of them who had not been payed for 'absenteeism' around Christmas, and who practically made the bosses give way. Liverpool is also one of the high-points of English unemployment, and the 'collective' character of absenteeism is, here as in the example previously given from Liege, illustrated by the immediate passage to an open struggle of solidarity, that is to say that everyone is quite conscious of the same problem. (We have only a little first-hand material about Italy—and we ask indeed our friends for more—but we put forward the idea that the present situation of 'crisis'—the development of violence, notably in the factory, the persistence of strikes, the impossibility of the social plan 'to put things back in order' and the CP's approach to a position of power, are all elements of a global situation, which expresses itself in different simultaneous or successive forms. Can one separate the legs that refuse to get out of bed on a workday morning, the skin and the eyes that feel a sunny day, arms that refuse the speed of the line, the head that, alone or with others, looks for a way to sort out the foreman etc. . . The fact that for almost ten years Italy has been boiling in this way is not due to the 'crisis' but to the fight all over the place of Italian workers. Still, we can cite one recent example: Alfa Romeo at the moment loses 4,000 francs on each car; the nationalised firm's deficit for 1977 rose to 840 million francs. According to the management, up to two thirds of the deficit comes from the factory in Naples, brought on by an average rate of absenteeism of 18%, with high-spots of 40%, and permanent small industrial conflicts. (35)

(32) From 457T per man per year in 1970 to 440 in 1977. (34) *Wall Street Journal*, 8.7.1975.

(33) *The Economist*, 9.7.1977; *Financial Times* 31.10.77 (35) *Les Echos*, 13.2.1978.

## 14. The refusal of work, a tendency towards another society

*... Does the absence of the work ethic ideology among young workers imply a radical attack on the system? ... Ultimately what counts is the desire and determination to fight capitalism and, in this regard, the attitude towards work is not, to start with, decisive. C. Reeve.*

It was not a sociologist but an American journalist who stated:

*'At General Motors I was told by a major official that productivity and the quality of cars coming off the line are affected adversely by absenteeism. . . These absences are occurring in every geographical area—and all races and types of people are involved'. Though only 15% of the work force at GM generates most of the late arrivals and absences, he went on, most of these men are concentrated among the newer workers under 35. They often take one or even two days off every week. . . The sudden tough talk comes from Stanley, the smaller of the two foremen: 'Some of you young guys take too many days off. . . These kids have a different outlook on life. They've never been broke the way we were. You want to know something—they don't even know how to take the crap we took.'*(36)

Why does one find similar things in Europe? In France, in Lyons for example: 'The young people today can't manage to orient themselves. . . For them everything is mixed up. To work, not to work. To steal, not to steal. . .' About fights between 'organised' gangs, one of the workers declares: 'We're more discreet, we've got a different way to meet. . . We leave the factory when we're fed up. . . Life isn't just work and nothing else.'(37) The article that we are quoting gives some figures also: in the whole of Lyons, 8,000 young people get by in this way, by one means or another. The local unemployment office sees nearly 10,000, 40% of all registered unemployed, of those who want 'to find their own world, to form a separate society with their own ideas' . . .

It's not only the Sex Pistols who note that 'the dole is not so bad, no, it's great to be payed for doing nothing'. Liverpool has the highest rate of unemployment since the 1930s. We have already spoken of the struggles of these 'unemployed with power'. (The more recent strikes which took place at two

(36) Bennett KREMEN, *New York Times*, 7.1.1973.

(37) D. ROUARD, *Le Monde*, 30.8.1977.

of Liverpool's biggest car factories—Ford at Halewood and Leyland at Speke—would be other examples.) 'A strange and happy atmosphere is making itself felt at the moment—Liverpool lives again'. (38)

One could take up the same problem again a propos those strikes 'without demands', where no one meets beforehand, which in France, let's say after May 1968, emphasise from time to time worries of capitalists among others, a TV factory in Angers (39), the FM subsidiary Renault Peugeot near Lens (40) etc. For the USA one is referred to by Zerzan (41) or further back there was Lordstown.(42)

From this type of struggle one can draw some conclusions valid for all countries concerning the refusal of jobs that are too tiring or badly paid (5-600,000 in France, according to the bosses)(43), refusal of mobility, i.e. choice of unemployment. The story of LIP in France is exemplary from this point of view because it shows excellently that no one can separate the different forms of 'refusal' and 'action'. It was certainly the same 1000 workers who, by some actions that astonished the world, and by others which have hardly been spoken about, refused to go and work 'elsewhere' and in fact succeeded in 'holding on' for four years without working, doing practically whatever they liked, collectively, for most of the time payed at full wages, by various means (sale of stolen watches, prolonged unemployment benefit, fake collectives, re-training and back to school schemes, manufacturing various gadgets etc. . .) Who can trace here the borderline between collective action (it was exemplary in many respects) (44) and individual 'selfish survival'? The reaction of Besancon's bourgeoisie, and of those caught up in its ideological wake, is resumed in this graffiti from the walls of Besancon, in the most active period of the LIP affair: 'The LIP: all lazy'. The workers of Swan Hunter, whom we have spoken of, who opt for unemployment and their 'dignity' as skilled workers, are in the same line. As one of them said: 'At least on the dole there's no differential, we'll all be equal'. (45)

We are aware that these different manifestations of a new mentality are charged with ambiguities—and this is normal, for nothing in this domain arises in a pure state, but is inserted in a process and becomes more precise in a dialectical change of action and repression. We know that some make outrageous credos out of it, as others did or do of ouvrierism, terrorism, populism. . . The class-struggle will continue with the forms that workers will give it. We don't maintain that this is the only way. . . but simply that it is the manifestation of a new phenomenon, the transformation of mentalities. It's not only 'sociologists' who talk around the problem, it is more directly the capitalists and their 'economists', those who 'take every day the pulse of profit'. We suppose that C. Reeve accords them more confidence.

(38) D. ROUARD, *Le Monde*, 7.9.1977.

(39) *Le Point* 30.4.1978.

(40) *Liberation*, 16.2.1976.

(41) and (42) See bibliographical note.

(43) *Liberation*, 5.10.1977.

(44) For the first period of LIP see bibliographical note.

(45) Statement during an interview with the BBC.

## 15. The 'refusal of work', the movement of capital and the movement of the class struggle

*The 'refusal of work' has been the slogan of the bourgeois class and its flunkies since the beginning. . . C. Reeve.*

Discussions on the refusal to work present some similarities to discussions in the past of the 'refusal to vote'. In bourgeois democracy, universal suffrage was considered for a long time as a 'working class conquest'. Not to vote was 'to betray one's class' and to be contemptuous of past sacrifices made for the 'right to vote'. A handful of isolated people fought against this mystification, but the 'refusal to vote' developed as practice, not as theory (notably in the USA and GB) when it became clear that the 'workers' parties' were only good managers of capital, and that capital's interests always in one way or another, 'forced open' the doors of 'democracy'. In the same way, the debates about 'work' have nothing to do with the 'refusal to work' which develops when it becomes clear that 'work' is only a 'use-value' for capital, value stripped of all ideological covering. The 'right to work' and 'respect for work' just like the 'protection of the instrument of labour' were, like the 'right to vote' and 'democracy' the same ambiguous expressions of a workers' struggle for the affirmation and development of capital. It is not by chance that 'abstention' from work goes together with all the other forms of 'abstention' in capitalist society: the recomposition of the new society can only part from elements that have profaned all the ideological values passed on to the reality of capitalism; all capital's manipulations to try and resolve 'its crisis' only serve to tear further down the ideological veil and to contribute to the appearance, in all fields of society, of those tendencies which we have defined as the manifestation of the new movement.

It is not the 0.05% of 'revolutionaries' who create radical struggles (even if they claim them for their own), no more than do 0.05% of capitalists determine the movement and dynamic of capital—even if they take profit from it and apparently take the decisions. The general movement of capital dictates the choices, choices which are made in forms of action, the actions 'possible' at that moment. What is 'possible' is the result of a dialectical

struggle between capital's movement in search of profit (and the maintenance of its domination for this purpose) and the refusal of the workers (their resistance) to 'make surplus value'. In a world which it covers completely with its various forms of adaptation to concrete situations, capital can realise enormous profits by taking advantage of these different situations. But at the same time, it must squander enormous sums without compensation just in order to maintain itself (armaments, aid in arms and supplies, loans and gifts to States and enterprises without corresponding profit, maintaining a minimum standard of living without corresponding work etc. . .).

'The morality of the bourgeois class, of which Reeve speaks is the road of profit, but it is just as much the means simply to maintain itself. C. Reeve speaks of the 'crisis of productivity' to say that the 'refusal to work' has nothing to do with it. He begins by saying that

*The falling profitability of capital, the low level of investment in new productive capital, the low rate of utilisation of existing productive capacity are so many sources of the productivity crisis.*

The example of the Chrysler factory in Linwood shows that, in a particular case, this statement is false: there is important investment in new productive capital; the bosses want to use production capacity to a maximum to sell a product that is in demand; it is the multiform resistance of the workers, the class-struggle, which is at the origin of the productivity crisis, thus of the fall in profitability of the capital involved.

Or we may take another sector, where the world situation seems to confirm C. Reeve's statements: the steel industry today. One is forced to note that the effect of the crisis is 10 times increased because the workers opposed—and still oppose despite the crisis—precisely in GB once again—the introduction of installations or measures destined to increase productivity.

The example of Lordstown (46) which C. Reeve himself cites, also contradicts what he just said for, at Lordstown, there was also new investment, and sales potential, thus potential for realisation of profit: it is the class-struggle also that provokes the 'crisis of productivity' in the factory. It is true that C. Reeve uses this example to say that

*It is this capitalist need to surpass a formerly sufficient level of productivity that preceded and provoked the revolt of the workers. . .*

There are too many implications in this little sentence for us to pass over it. One would be tempted to say: one couldn't care less; it's not very important if the struggle precedes or follows a 'capitalist need'. What counts, is that this revolt exists, and what its effects are. Effects for the workers first in what it reveals of their self-organisational capacity and in the accompanying transformation of mentalities. Next effects for capital, forced to try and integrate the class-struggle at this level, and to redeploy geographically (to go and invest elsewhere, where the class-struggle is less intense, provisionally because industrialisation will develop this class-struggle) or structurally (by further

(46) See bibliographical note on Lordstown.

increasing fixed capital or its material and physical means of domination). Here are expressed the positions of C. Reeve already underlined: C. Reeve must have 'offensive' 'revolutionary' workers, animated every morning by the will to destroy capital. From his point of view, one would be tempted to say they don't exist. But from another point of view, precisely the one which C. Reeve does not accept, one can reply: all workers are like that. As soon as they step out of bed to go to work they begin to 'destroy capital' because they are not, not at all what capital would like them to be.

But, even if one hangs on to the idea that 'it's always capitalism that begins', and that the workers 'only' defend themselves, one can ask C. Reeve: what is this 'capitalist need' to increase productivity which obliges it (capitalism) to take measures which are dangerous for itself because they break the 'social peace' which would guarantee for it the maintenance of the same conditions of exploitation.

This 'need' is the very essence of capital, which, from its birth has sought to invest where profit is highest, that is to say, where productivity is strongest. One can discuss the component parts of this productivity, but, in the aspect which interests us, it is evident in the actual world that capital has the possibility, with comparable investments, of finding in many states a productivity superior to that of the industrialised states, because the class-struggle is less intense there, more primitive, with a recent proletariat still dominated by physical and material methods more or less out of date here. Voluntarily leaving aside all the other problems (of which one of the most important is the distribution of this production) we only wish to underline that if the capitalists go elsewhere, it is because class-struggle has forced capital, in the industrialised states, to accord a certain standard of living and certain working conditions; and because the resistance of the workers makes impossible a 'step backwards' to the level of exploitation which can be found in the under-developed countries. It is the return shock waves of these displacements of capital towards better profits—because of workers' resistance here—which finally obliges the companies here, in order to survive, to seek to increase productivity as well (even if they have also succeeded in getting into underdeveloped countries). With all the consequences that we have seen, and others, which also follow on from the needs of modern capital, the class-struggle everywhere, and the transformation of mentalities and forms of struggle which arises precisely from this combination.

Who can separate one struggle from another in all this who can distinguish what is 'offensive' and what is 'defensive'?

Everything that we have sketched out is only the start of a long discussion. We will not go further in this text which is only an attempt to lead the debate back to the most concrete terrain possible, and to bring it out of ideological blinkers. We would only like, to conclude, to underline some points which in part resume what has been said above.



**15.1** There are not, in our opinion, 'little' or 'big' struggles 'offensive' or 'defensive' ones, 'union' or 'anti-union' ones. In all these cases, it is workers who are struggling. The starting-point of the struggle is one thing, its development and arrival-point are other things. The outward forms of the struggle sometimes say little about what the workers really put into the struggle. In a few lines one cannot contain a movement so profound under modern capitalism as the 'retreat from work' under all its forms and on the other hand glorify a struggle that is so limited—if one considers it on a world scale—as the struggle at LIP, for example. We have already underlined the fact that: the class-struggle is a whole, and each of its manifestations can reveal its profound tendencies, whatever might be its form and whatever might be its dimension.

**15.2** Capital, while it survives, survives precisely through its possibilities of adaptation to the global movement of struggle which permanently tends to destroy it. In our opinion, this global movement is so much the more difficult to repress in that it is inserted in the very foundations of capital's domination, and not in a struggle tending to modify certain forms of this domination. In the measure that every movement of struggle reveals a crisis for capital, it tends at the same time to express the 'solutions' of this crisis. As we have seen, capital still has the possibility of exploiting the diversity of conditions and of workers' struggles on a world scale, and of taking from it profits that are sometimes enormous (47) of which a part indeed is used to maintain the standard of living elsewhere, and to contain social explosions. But this solution itself creates a new situation: a new proletariat is developed where there had only been peasants with demands and struggles that borrow at the same time from ancient forms (because of day-to-day conditions) and the most modern ones (because of the techniques in question and the products offered for consumption). The 'old' proletariat develops—because of the new situation that has been made for it—other forms of resistance—including the refusal to work—which amplify out of all measure a movement which capital had itself permitted—for its own survival—on the condition that it stayed within 'acceptable' limits (for it, (capitalism), which varies with time and generates other tensions). And this same current of 'refusal of work' which takes root in the fact that modern workers cannot have the slightest interest in 'their' work or in 'their' company, is also exported with all the capitals for all the proletariat placed in the same conditions.

**15.3** This situation still further underlines the interdependence of all these factors and all these struggles. One cannot use one series of arguments to destroy others that in the end refer to the same things. The 'refusal to work', in Britain or elsewhere, has as big an effect on world capital as the revolts of (47) A French firm of electrical components from Grenoble has built a factory in Morocco. The cost per unit in this country is seven times less than in France. But such an example cannot be reproduced everywhere and for everthing because of local economic necessities or the need for skilled manpower.

the Polish workers, the strike of the Rumanian miners, the skiving and graft of the Russian workers, the workers' riots in Cairo or Tunisia etc. Each of these struggles, with its specific characteristics, destroys or reduces the survival chances of fractions of capital, which must look for profit' elsewhere, or die as capital; furthermore, to stop the movement, capital, at a global level, although it takes the form of national interventions in the framework of international capitalist solidarity, must maintain both repression and concessions, which means the swallowing up of enormous amounts of capital—their destruction—with no compensation other than the maintenance—very risky—of a certain level of exploitation. From this point of view, the resistances that are called 'passive' play a part that is equally as active as that of open revolts: everyone can find recent examples in all branches of capitalism.

The problem of the revolution is not posed in terms of voluntarism but in the fact that the expansion of capital on a global scale and its constant displacement mean that any struggle whatsoever immediately has repercussions at the other end of the world; not through the effect of solidarity, but because capital must find a solution—in terms of profit and exploitation—which in turn gives impulse to another struggle—under another form in another dimension. From this flows the solidarity of struggles and their internationalisation, and from this flows the revolutionary process of an inseparable transformation of actions, behaviour and ideas, of a process of which we can trace neither the pathway, nor the forms; of a transformation of which we can foresee neither the scope nor the character.

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