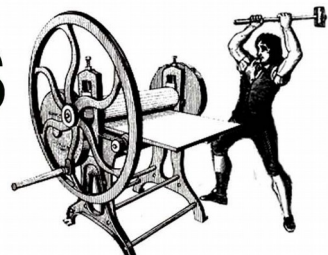


A Few Clarifications on Anti-Work



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Bruno Astarian • December 2016

skilling, labour will go so far as to oppose itself when it opposes Capital, included in daily struggles. Sabotage then becomes contemptuous of the means of production and destroys that which allowed for the saboteurs to work. Pouget did not reach this point. He was immersed in worker culture not anti-work; an anti-work which would broaden itself to be anti-proletariat and rejecting everything including work. We must consider former practices, which appeared to be very radical, from the point of view of the overcoming of the traditional worker's movement. Pouget and Lafargue are examples of writers frequently cited by commentators whom then go on to claim the self-negation of the proletariat and the overcoming of work. This is not coherent.

In the end has anti-work really made a come back the last few years? The observations made above reveal that, except for a few exceptions, the recent struggles that we could call anti-work take place outside of the workplace. In the case of traditional Fordism, relocated to developing or emerging countries, when the struggles attack the means of labour, it is from the outside as in the case of Bangladesh. In China, the destruction is mostly directed to the mess halls and the dormitories than the workshops. We are force

to acknowledge that these anti-work struggles are not developed within the workshops in a wave comparable to what we saw in the West in the '60s and '70s. In the industrialised countries, the workshops are calm. The tightened control of workers through digitisation and the threat of unemployment has foreclosed any calling into question of work. In these conditions, we could venture to say that any proletarian movement which would seriously call into question the current conditions of the reproduction of proletariat/Capital will be at the same time anti-work and anti-unemployment. To attack the work to which the proletariat is constrained, the proletariat must at the same time reject that unemployment is an impassable obstacle. And above all, this movement will encompass in its maelstrom the very heart of capitalist exploitation, namely the factories and offices of the core countries. The entry of productive workers into a generalised, even insurrectionary, struggle will probably show that the anti-work of specialised workers of the '68 years was but a rough draft...

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Substantively, post-Fordism is a Fordism which has ironed out the wrinkles so to better struggle against the last traces of laziness which had initially been provoked by Taylor's approach. I do not know of any struggles in the workplace which specifically oppose these types of subordination. There surely must exist some, but they undoubtedly remain very limited, due to the progress of digitisation which continually further closes in surveillance on workers. [A study by Angry Workers of the World](#) on Amazon worksites in Poland and Germany reports on struggles for the renewal of temporary work contracts. Workers had done two work-slowdowns despite the strict digital control of their activity. It did not go very far. The prerogative of companies like Amazon is to always grow faster. According to AAW, robots are still too expensive. This places us in a situation very similar to the one found in Fordism in the '68 years: the investment in fixed capital is always costly, so productivity gains are made by increasing speed rates – due to this important difference we now have massive unemployment and pushes the situation to an explosive point. For the moment the model holds thanks to a high turnover rate and thanks to a vast reserve army of labor. At the peak of activity, Amazon in Poland and Germany will then seek out workers in Spain or Portugal.

CONCLUSION:

I mentioned above that it would be necessary to nuance my remarks made in 2010. It seems to me that it would be necessary to underline three elements:

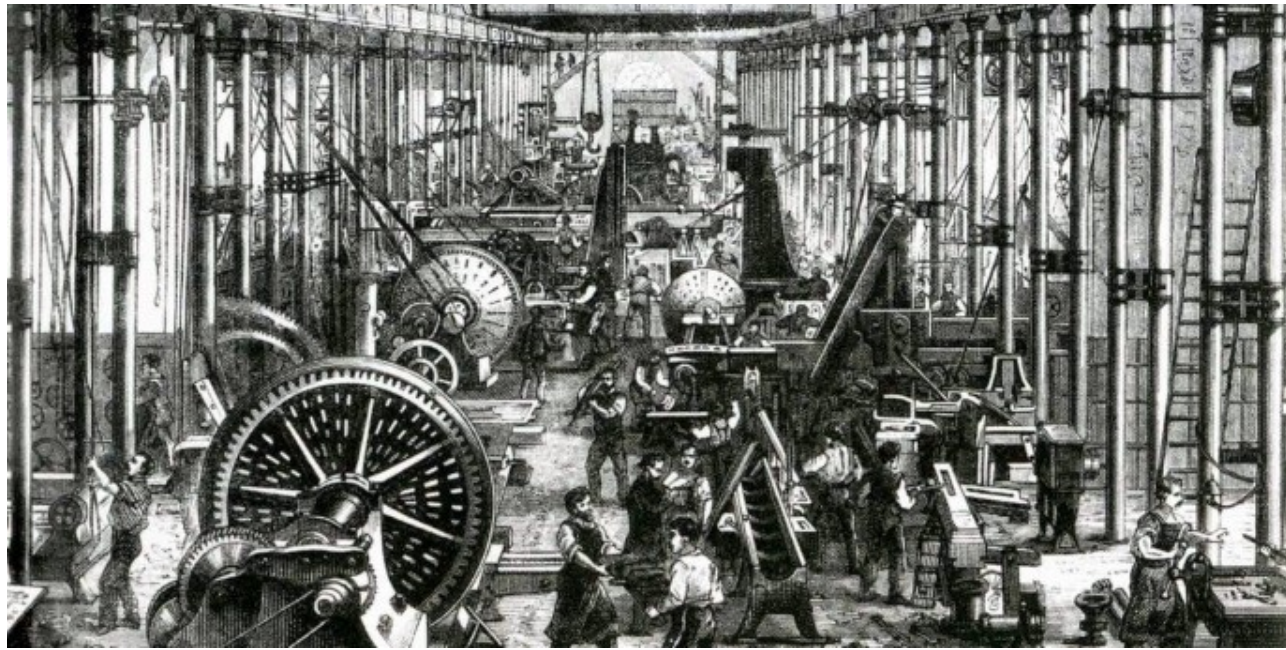
On one hand, anti-work distinguishes itself from ordinary refusal of work. The former finds itself inscribed in the daily resistance of workers in every era. It forms a part of the means it uses to survive faced with the boredom and fatigue of working for a boss. The proletarian prefers to work less, or rather not at all, whenever possible. This is the effect of the external nature of wage labour for the worker. Refusal of work exists to way in a massive way, in core countries, and *welfare* comes to its aid. Given the massive nature of unemployment and the very harsh conditions of post-Fordist work, the turnover of proletarians between unemployment (compensated, though badly so) and work (untenable in the long run) is a good thing for Capital. Moreover, even the most conservative capitalists began to think about the establishment of a universal basic income. No doubt economists are wondering at what level of misery this universal basic income should be set at, so that the pressure of unemployment continues to force proletarians to work at Amazon or other post-Fordist exploiters. Meanwhile, not wanting to work and to prefer to live on the margins when one can is a normal behaviour for the proletarian, but it is one which is not specifically critical of present society.

On the other hand, the historical perspective of certain practices of struggles in the workplace, such as sabotage, absenteeism and general lack of discipline, reveals a transformation in the content of pro and anti-work practices. We must periodise the history of sabotage, which has not always been anti-work. When the worker has arrived at a certain degree of de-

INTRODUCTION:

There persists a certain confusion around the notion of anti-work. “On the Origins of Anti-Work” (Echanges et Mouvement, 2005) did not escape this fate as well. The confusion consists in not sufficiently specifying the notion of anti-work. On one hand, it consists of placing in the same category as anti-work certain behaviours like worker laziness, which looks to do the least amount of work, or the preference for (compensated) unemployment or living life on the margin. These resistant acts of work refusal are as old as the proletariat itself and do not define modern anti-work. On the other hand, the confusion consists of placing in the same category as anti-work resistant practices against exploitation which are indeed *pro-work*, like Luddism for example. However, I believe that we should rather keep the term anti-work for the struggles of our time (since '68) that show that the proletariat is no longer a class which affirms itself in revolution as hegemonic labour and is neither a class which will make work obligatory for everyone, nor will it will replace the bourgeoisie in directing the economy.

To better understand the specificity of the term anti-work, a historical perspective is necessary. It should be noted that we are interested in the struggles that take place in the workplace, against the usual modalities of relation between workers and their means of labour (absenteeism, sabotage, general lack of discipline).



1 – LUDDISM

Luddism is often identified as a spontaneous and ferocious reaction by English workers, at the turn of the 19th c., against the introduction of new machines. The fact that they had smashed machines makes us think of certain kinds of sabotage, notably found within production-line work. This take, while not exact, explains how Luddism was later assimilated into anti-work.

Let us recall the principle traits of Luddism. There were three episodes which happened in the 1820s:

- The stockings of Nottingham: besides the usual problems found in wage-labor, they were against the use of the “squaring” [cheaper method of stocking making] and “colting” [hiring young unskilled labour]. Their struggles to defend the skilled-labor of their work led them to destroy machines *that were not new*. They struggled against labour and exploitation practices.
- The croppers of West Riding: they were against the gig mill (a machine that was not new) and the shearing frame (a more recent machine). These two machines allowed for the work to be done without them (which was highly skilled).

- The Weavers of Lancashire: their case is more complex, mixing bread riots, workers’ demands and opposition to steam power.

The destruction of machines should not fool us: Luddism is pro-work. It defends skilled-labour against mechanisation, but also and maybe above all it is against cheap labour that favours the employment of unskilled workers (colting), which at the time included women! Its content is only apparently anti-work.

Luddism defends old-style labour. It affirms the dignity of the worker against de-skilling, and eventually, mechanisation. It involves politico-syndicalist activity associated with violence against the bosses and the machines. Luddism has been active in modern-day clandestine unions, which are not opposed to long, costly and vain campaigns of parliamentary lobbying. The destruction of machines were not part of movements of spontaneous rage, but thoroughly organised operations. This explains why in the end the Luddites did not destroy the machines which they worked with, but instead those of the bosses or of unskilled workers doing cheaper quality work, or those working below tariff-price. The claim made for work of a better quality, executed with the methods of the skilled worker paid their due, is what *also* characterises Luddism.

later in the text, since these revolts took place outside of the workplace. But like within true anti-work, these revolts destroyed a necessary element in the reproduction of the proletariat. In their commuter train stations, proletarians demanded transportation that functioned well, but then destroy buildings and the trains. This is the same paradox found in the Bangladesh case, but here it concerns a moment outside-of-work in the reproduction of the proletariat. By challenging the shuttle between work and home, the proletariat attacks what it needs to live as a proletarian. Beyond comprehensible exasperation, we must see in these practices, which only aggravate the situation of the proletarians, the same clue as in proper anti-work, namely the index of possibility and of the necessity of proletarian self-negation in order to overcome the social contradiction of capitalism. Just as anti-work announces that the proletariat will not make the workers’ revolution as planned by the proletarian program, so the anti-proletarian practices announce that this revolution will not be made as an affirmation of the proletarian culture, but rather its destruction. By proletarian culture, I mean all the forms of life and thought that reproduce the proletariat in capitalist society. The revolts of 2005 in the French suburbs are an anti-proletarian practice, as well as the destruction by the proletarians of their own quarters, as in the banlieu riots.

4.2 – ANTI-WORK IN INDUSTRIALISED COUNTRIES

In industrialised countries, the proletarian setting is beset by unemployment and by the post-Fordist transformation of the immediate labour process. In regards to the former, the Toyota production model has been considered to be a perfect model linking a ruthless search for productivity and the association of workers with the continuous improvement of production methods (quality-control groups). It is in reality a way for the boss to last remaining personal traits which specialised workers have so as to recuperate a few more

seconds in a work cycle which is already very short (see: Tommaso Pardi: *Redefining the Toyota Production System – The European side of the system*, Gerpisa, 2007). We are present for a new degree of worker dispossession. Although they had very few skills, workers in classic Fordism did still had some tricks so that they could save some time or get some rest. The shift of workers into teams with a wider collective task than those of older specialised workers, the versatility that this entails among the workers (which is different from a so-called recomposition of labour), being beholden to the continuous improvement of work processes, the close self-supervision by workers and the team leader, team leaders by group leaders, etc. make it so that any tricks spotted quickly become integrated into what the workstation must do, and these few lost seconds are then recuperated by the boss. T. Pardi also describes how stress management involves giving contradictory orders and letting the worker work it out. For example, if there is a problem at the work station, the worker can ignore it and let a bad quality part go by. This goes against the desired quality being demanded and the mistake will be traced back to their station. They will then be penalised. The worker could also pull on a cord and bring the production-line to a halt so that the problem could be resolved for them. But this is frowned upon. The production-line rate is displayed continuously in the workshop and everyone can see it. As soon as it falls below 95 or 90%, everyone knows that there will be compulsory overtime. Stopping the chain is not a good way to make friends. So the conclusion made by workers: make it so you don’t have a problem...

wages of the Bangladeshi workers would be the lowest in the world (which is absolutely true). The comparison is shaky. Because in Bangladesh, jobs in the textile sector are sought after, which means that, relatively speaking, the wages are not as bad as that from other sources of income. On the other hand Red Marriot reproaches me for not taking into consideration societal differences (developed or under-developed industry) or context (massive underemployment, poverty...), etc. But this is not what concerns us here. When Capital transfers Taylorism and Fordism to Asia, it does so to exploit the differences in social conditions. It will go where it can find abundant and cheap labour. What concerns us here is solely the modalities of the exploitation of labour which it proposes and imposes on this new working-class. This class is in need of work and it accepts Capital's conditions. It is thus taken into the form of proletariat/Capital contradiction which necessarily leads it to rediscover the methods of struggle of those which preceded it in West. I did not take into considerations the societal differences between 1970s Italy and 2010 Bangladesh because I wish to follow the effects of Taylorism/Fordism in its geographical translation. But it is evident if one would want to consider the whole of societies where traditional Fordism has been implemented since 1980, and notably within the perspective of a revolutionary process, that there would be much to be said. I attempted to do this, in a simplified way, in my study of China.

4.1.8 – PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

We have seen in the last few years massive revolts against the terrible conditions imposed on workers in public transportation, which link residency with workplace. A few examples:

- Pretoria, May 2005: A driver strike prevents workers from getting home at the end of the workday. Six buses are burned down. An accord is signed around 11PM to partially begin service.
- Buenos Aires, May 2007: Repeated delays of commuter trains leads to a riot at Constitution station, which is looted and then partially burned down. The nearby businesses are also looted.
- Bogota, March 2012: the city offers a model network of articulated buses. A modest protest, made up of mostly students is joined by hooligans, against a rise in fair prices, packed buses, frequent delays, which then turns into a riot. Five stations are looted, ticket offices sacked, windows smashed and surveillance cameras are stolen.
- Mumbai, January 2015: repeated delays brings about protests from the passengers. Fights with the staff occur. Ticket offices are looted, ticket machines are pillaged (of both cash & tickets). Vehicles torched, ten trains damaged. Around 12,000 people are implicated in the destruction of at least to commuter train stations.
- Johannesburg, July 2015: repeated delays provokes a riot: two trains and a station are burned down.

In my 2010 text, I considered these revolts as part of anti-work. In reality, commute time is non-paid labour time. On the other hand, public transportation is the binding link between the suburbs and the factories & offices and it would be hard to understand why they would be spared from the rage of proletarians when the suburbs and workplaces clearly are not. Lastly, the overcrowding of proletarians in the train cars is a moment of twice daily humiliation. These were the arguments I used to support the claim that these revolts against public transportation were a form of anti-work. It would have been more logical to make a transition here towards *anti-proletariat* [activity] which I later evoked



2 – SABOTAGE ACCORDING TO POUGET AND SMITH

Pouget brought sabotage into the union discourse at the congress of the CGT in 1897. His pamphlet *Sabotage* has since undergone an innumerable amount of re-editions. Pouget is regularly invoked as the predecessor of the specialised workers (whom are non-skilled) of today. His acts of sabotage are often seen as the foundation of anti-work. We should look into this more deeply. The sabotage invoked by Pouget (1911) was not anti-work, but rather anti-boss.

Pay the worker a proper wage and the worker will give their best work on their behalf.

Pay the worker an insufficient wage and you will no longer have the right to demand the best quality from them, nor the biggest quantity of work from them just like you could not ask for a 5 Franc hat with 2 Franc 50.

Pouget wants above all to demonstrate how sabotage is an efficient means to put the pressure on bosses when it comes to question of wages, etc. Further, sabotage demonstrates the mastery which the workers have over production by way of their unions. The sabotage of Pouget is not raging and destructive. It is calculated and prepared. It participates in the mastery which the workers have over their work, as well as being a

technique of collective organisation.

In his pamphlet, Pouget cites numerous examples, all coming from skilled workers. And often these are not proven cases of sabotage, but rather ideas, proposals which workers could employ. His sabotage comes as a support for demands, in preparation for a strike (a safeguard against those against striking). For Pouget, sabotage is principally a slowdown in production. He also mentions the lowering of the quality of work output (for those who work in piece work), which results in damages in the commodities produced. The partial or total destruction, reversible or not, of the means of production is less often cited. But at the same time there is no particular hostility towards work itself. And Pouget approvingly cites, a railroad union organiser:

“We will need comrades among the professional class, who know the most about the service wheels, who would know the most important places, the weak points, who could strike a blow *without doing idiotic destruction* and with their efficient, correct and intelligent action, filled with energy, could with a single blow render unusable for several days some indispensable material...”

In the United States, Pouget's text was largely reprised by Walker C. Smith, a member of the Industrial Workers of the World. But Smith is much more explicit than Pouget on the pro-work disposition of sabotage. It relies on the mastery which workers have of the production process so as to invoke a “constructive sabotage”: organised sabotage reinforces solidarity among workers and gives them a supplementary control over production. He also calls constructive sabotage the act of discretely bettering the quality of products that are sold to workers and which bosses could adulterate to increase their profits. He concludes:

“If the situation evolves according to the

current course, which includes the possibility of an ever-growing control by workers of their industry, thus the tactic apt for this struggle will develop in light of this, and it will be constructive sabotage which become a part of it.” (WC Smith: Sabotage, its history, philosophy and function, 1913)

At the turn of the 20th c., sabotage had participated in the affirmation of the centrality of work in capitalist society. The workers (in the cases which are mentioned in both texts by Pouget & Smith) have a relative autonomy in their activity. They exercise a certain control over the rhythm of their work and its quality. Workers know how the commodities are technically made. Sabotage consists of lowering quantity or quality [of their labour], which surely annoys the boss. But this sabotage also demonstrates the possibility of worker control over production, and by extension, control of the whole of society. The sabotage of Pouget and Smith forms a part of the programmatist project of worker’s revolution.

“As far as the production processes is concerned, we are the ones in possession of industry. But all the while we do not own it, nor control it, due to the absurd belief in property rights.” (WC Smith)

The fight of the Luddites inscribes itself within a broad movement of the English working-class forming unions and parties. In the same way, “constructive sabotage,” forms a part of the development of the worker’s movement in so far as it should become a grand disciplined army apt to take power. The evolution towards industrial unionism also takes this direction. The struggle of unionised skilled labour was a formative moment for industrial unionism. Indeed, since the resistance of tradespeople was split up by small groups of relatively specialised workers, certain conflicts could only be developed by

federating several trade unions under one umbrella.

In the same establishment or in the same city, the workers were divided into various professional unions, and the condition for the success of their demands was based on their work stoppages not being limited to their specific work or establishment. The practice of spontaneous solidarity strikes, against the advice of the unions, would lead unions to evolve towards industrial unionism so as to prevent these types of movements. ” The acts of solidarity between machinists, founders, polishers, blacksmiths, modelers and boilermakers have been frequent for a long time now. A league of their national trade union leaders have existed since 1894. But the movement for the formal regrouping of a federation with local councils, which started in 1901 and resulted in a convention in 1906, was aimed at provisional arbitration and negotiation, so as to repress solidarity strikes as well as regroup the unions.” (David Montgomery: Workers Control in America, Cambridge, 1979)

The worker’s movement evolved, little by little, towards the affirmation of an ever more centralised and organised class. Constructive sabotage inscribed itself into this logic. The end goal of work slowdowns and sabotage is not a rejection of work. “The principle preoccupation of revolutionaries is to have sabotage destroy the power of the masters in such a way that the workers can gain a greater control over industry” (WC Smith). For from being anti-work, sabotage participates in the preparation of the working class to the hegemony of labour in a future society.

Before changing historical periods, let us point out that [The Right To Be Lazy by Paul Lafargue](#), which far from being anti-work, is instead a text which calls for work in moderation.

worker struggles at Dhaka prevents us from talking of anti-work.

Let us firstly note that the methods of struggle in the Bangladesh textile sector have not changed. A few examples:

- May 2010, numerous roadblocks and demonstrations took place in support of a wage claim. At least 8 factories are vandalised.
- July 2010, a factory is vandalised by workers to make seven managers and even the boss leave, because of bad behaviour towards workers, and notably against female workers.
- October 2010: the government creates a specialised industrial police force to maintain order in worker neighbourhoods within the ZES of Dhaka, Chittatong, Gazipur, etc. It seems this explains the period of calm up until May, 2012.
- June 2012: strikes and protests happen one after another at Narayanganj and Ashulia, wanting a pay raise. Ten factories are attacked. Massive lockout ensues (300 factories). But on June 17th, thousands of workers at Ashulia demand the opening of the factories.
- November 2013: after weeks of strikes and protests for a pay raise, workers find themselves locked out. The police had to intervene to prevent the workers from looting the factories.
- June 2014: Dynamic Sweater Industries workers, at Savar, are roughly treated after they demand a pay raise. They sack two floors of a factory, stealing furniture and surveillance cameras.

In these struggles it is striking to see the reactivity of workers from factories that are implicated by the initial conflict. This almost instantaneous solidarity is also a sign of the great lack of discipline found in the whole of

this working-class. On the other hand, we see the importance of the wage (as well as the re-opening of factories). But this did not impede them from using methods in their struggles which would almost destroy the means of production, which speaks volumes about the idea they have of their work. There was no “respect for work tools,” nor respect for politico-revolutionary talk. The struggles remained close to their immediate preoccupations. Despite this, their methods, their concrete content, holds the discourse of anti-work.

Red Marriot stops here and brings up the fact that the workers made pay raise demands so as to, most likely, judge their struggles as non-revolutionary. He is not totally wrong, but this is not the matter at hand. Anti-work is not the revolution, nor its beginning, or its model. It is a form of struggle which indicates that revolution will lack the content which would allow the working-class to ascend into a hegemonic situation thus replacing the bourgeoisie. It also indicates revolution within the framework of the present forms of struggles of unskilled workers. Anti-work practices inscribe themselves into the everyday course of class struggle. On their own they bear no revolutionary potential. They are but an indication of the content of the contradiction between the proletariat and Capital. In an intense and relatively widespread insurrectionary moment would the sabotage of production, work absenteeism, the absenteeist strike, lack of discipline in relation to employers and trade unions still be on the agenda? It’s doubtful.

One of the reasons for this, according to my contrarian [Red Marriot], we cannot place the struggles of specialised workers in the ’60s-’70s and the struggles in Bangladesh in the same category and that specialised workers would have had the highest wages of the time, above all in the automobile industry, while the

4.1.4 SLEEP-IN: JALON ELECTRONICS 6/10

A rise in wages on June 1st is followed by a work rate hike on June 3rd, despite the fact that the former work rate was impossible to maintain. The reaction of these overworked workers was to collectively sleep at their work posts.

4.1.5 – LACK OF DISCIPLINE

- Strikes waves at ZES at Dalian in 2005. Commentary from a business newspaper: “Although the workers have no evident leaders, they are developing a leader-less organisational strategy. Since the workers have largely shared interests and the feeling of shared suffering, they react to subtle signs. Some workers explained, that when they are unhappy, it is enough for someone to cry out “Strike!” so that all the workers on the production-line stand up as if to make a standing ovation but then stop all work.”
- Siemens, 2012: four workers are laid-off due to absenteeism. The factory goes on strike. Management threatens to count the elapsed time of the strike as time-out. Workers blockade the factory entrance.

All this reminds us of Italy in the '70s. The transference of work conditions to China which were once prevalent in the West in the '70s raises similar reactions as those of Western specialised workers. But we are far from an Italian-style ambiance. The cited struggles mostly remain isolated and do not directly attack the system of production, and do not normally take place in the workshop. In more recent years the struggles have largely multiplied, but remain at the level of demand-making and negotiations. This is linked to the recession, which caused many factories to close and bring about unemployment. It is also

necessary to invoke the demands of the trade-union representation, with or without the ACFTU (state-controlled trade union centre), which do not point in the direction of anti-work. An indicator of the degree of resignation and despair among Chinese proletarians is the proliferation of suicides or threats of suicides in order to get what they want, in particular to gain payment of backpay. In the case of Chinese factories, we can say that the anti-work of the specialised worker in the Fordist system exists, but in a limited and fragmented way.

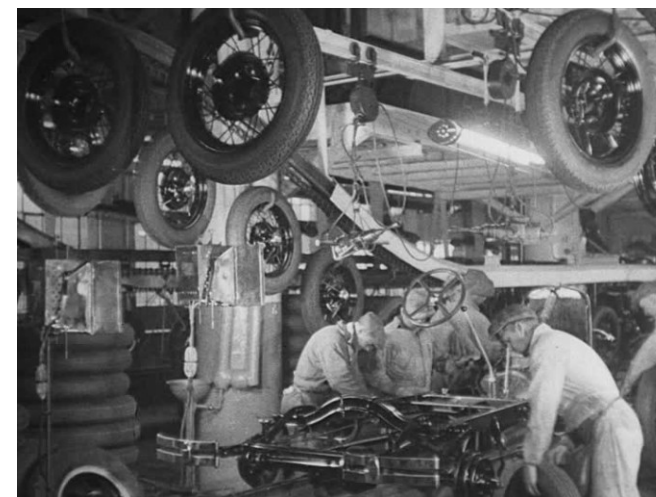
4.1.6 – LACK OF SELF-MANAGEMENT...

...found within the factories abandoned by the bosses, which are usually of a weak organic composition (textile, toys...)



4.1.7 – THE BANGLADESH CASE

In 2010, I cited the case of worker revolts in Bangladesh as an example of anti-work. In effect, in this country where unemployment is significant, we see workers protest against their workers (most often around wages) and burn down or destroy their factories. I concluded in highlighting “the strongly paradoxical character of these movements which *defend* the wage condition in *destroying* the means of production.” This point of view was critiqued by Red Marriot in a comment on [Libcom](#). For him, the term anti-work should be reserved for the revolts of the 60s & 70s, and further the demand-based content of the



3 – RESISTANCE TO WORK, FACING THE SCIENTIFIC ORGANISATION OF LABOR AND FORDISM

Let us point a text by Herman Schurrman, *Work is A Crime*. Published in 1920 by the Dutch group, Mokers Groep. This text is remarkable for its time. It expresses disgust towards work without laying claim to leisure time. It is against schooling, sports, long strikes, against the transition period [for communism] and advocates stealing and sabotage. But the Mokers Groep developed its ideas absent of any real movement going in the direction they described within the Dutch society of their time. Their anti-work position thus is not able to disengage with councilist principles and reduces itself to an almost individualist attitude.

3.1 – '68 ORIGINS

We noted above that the resistance towards the Scientific Organisation of Labour (SOL) by tradespeople, whom SOL sought to eliminate, did not give way to massive struggles. But it, once again, did push American unionism to transition towards Industrial unionism by way of *system federations*, a sort of inter-union of tradespeople which notably formed within struggles against the introduction of timekeeping.

On its side, the resistance of unskilled workers, which SOL sought to exploit, very quickly arose.

Let us recall that the famous *Five Dollar Day* proposed by Henry Ford in 1914 was in no way a gift. *Ford sought then to fix the massive problem of worker turnover, linked to production-line work: between Oct. 1912 and Oct. 1913, he had to hire 54,000 workers to cover 13,000 positions. And the day that Ford announced, in Jan. 1914, an 8-hour workday for \$5, there were scuffles among workers to get into the factory. Ford takes advantage of the enthusiasm of the candidates by sorting them out according to their morals, sending more than 100 sociologists to do home investigations to weed out alcoholics, find the homes which are more or less clean and children more or less well-kept. He then creates compulsory English courses for recent immigrants, and makes a fascinating celebration for the graduation of the first class with a parade of 6,000 workers to celebrate this “Americanisation Day.”*

Despite the enthusiasm of the workers, even those who are qualified, for these wage-workers of Fordism, the constraints of SOL and production-line work will see quickly appear specific forms of struggles. In the '20s, a study of SOL (and a bit on Fordism) would denounce the practices of cheating and braking on the line. The author explains the development of the weakening of bosses, claiming that it is because they have become already so satisfied with the productive gains obtained by timekeeping. It is also true that the author is astonished that “sometimes, the braking [on the line] is the result of a simple perversion: a disinclination against ardently working”! (Stanley Matthewson: *Restriction of output among unorganised workers*, New York 1931, p. 123)

The same author thinks that the best way to

struggle against braking found in Taylorised factories is to transition to Fordism. It is with Fordism where the conveyor belt determines the rhythm of work, thus eliminating any braking. However he does cite the case of a Fordist factory where workers who had a much too long series of motions to perform would end up falling behind. So periodically they toss some piece into the production-line wheels so that it stops. It was from here, from that time on, that a form of sabotage appeared which was anti-work.

The capitalism of formal domination has dispossessed the artisan of their means of production, but left the worker with their skill-set. In production-line work, the worker neither has control over their own time nor over the methods of their work (we will later see that this “secondary dispossession” was not done all at once and that Capital continues to try to scrape away what remains of the worker’s autonomy within Fordism and post-Fordism). Work becomes an elementary act whose nature and rhythm are controlled by machinery. The skills necessary for the work have been integrated into the machine, within fixed capital. The result is a situation where living labour only exists to bring into being the “skills” of fixed capital. If living labour wants to adjust the quantity of their work gestures then it is left with only one option: to stop. And if living labour wants to adjust the quality of its work acts, the sole option is to sabotage. Inversely, if the worker wants to work – since they are in need of money – their sole skill is to “stick it out.” In the conditions the worker finds themselves, to be against Capital effectively means to be against work, whose attributes are found in the machinery. This is not a matter of working for one’s own sake. The skilled workers of the 19th c. were able to oppose to Capital the project of a society founded on what they were. Such is not the case for the specialised workers of the 20th

and 21st centuries. These workers no longer have a cooperative or self-managerial project.

What remains for living labour, the repetitive work gestures which are imposed on workers and which physically and psychologically exhaust them, are gestures which are the object of disgust not pride, gestures to be rejected. Sabotage, which was one of the means which the proletariat could make use of to struggle against capital, continued to be of use but it became anti-work. The sabotage of Pouget/Smith proved that workers had technical control over production, and that the sole thing that stopped them from realising socialism was the ownership of the means of production. Now, sabotage only proves one thing, that all the former skills of living labour antagonistically confront it within fixed capital. The struggle against the boss by means of sabotage or absenteeism have become inseparable from the struggle against work. What explains the lack of respect for work tools and the lack of discipline that we witnessed in the Fordist-model crisis of the 60s & 70s. Unlike the Luddites, specialised workers attacked *the very machines they worked with*.

3.2 – THE ’68 YEARS

The crisis of the ’68 years was brought about by a Capital which principally sought to increase productivity by increasing speed and the general degradation of work conditions, rather than by crossing the significant threshold of automation, or by lowering wages, as it would later do. In the U.S., the term “n*ggermation” had been used to describe the modalities of increasing productivity: replacing the number of white workers, for a smaller number of black workers who will do the same amount of work.

4 – ANTI-WORK WITHIN POST-FORDISM?

We can ask ourselves whether the anti-work and anti-discipline which existed in the ’60 and ’70s have survived the great wave of [Capital’s] restructuring. In a text from 2010, I unambiguously responded, that after a period of flux, anti-work was on its way back in force. Maybe this requires a little nuancing. After a period of retreat, the bosses had responded to a lack of proletarian discipline in a few ways: restructuring the Fordist work process, partial automation, relocation of traditional Fordism to countries with low labour costs. The turning point was in the mid-1970s.

4.1 – ANTI-WORK AGAINST RELOCATED FORDISM

Relocation was one way for Capital to bring into order unruly labour in the ’60s and ’70s. These relocations particularly ended up in Asia. Capital found there a labour force whom it could impose methods which Western workers had refused. But at the end of a few years, these new specialised workers reacted like Western workers. Except where noted, the following examples concern China:

4.1.1 – VIOLENCE, DESTRUCTION, RAGE: A FEW EXAMPLES

- Foxconn Chengdu 1/11: Riot in the factory/dormitory complex, counting 22,000 workers. Causes: insufficient wages; notably after the relocation from Shenzhen where the minimum wage was 1200 yuan, to Chengdu where it is 950 yuan; and bad living conditions within the dormitories. The dormitory where the riot took place was over 18 stories tall, had 24 bedrooms per floor, and 8 workers per room. However there were no

elevators, running hot water and electricity was deficient, etc.

- Foxconn Taiyuan 9/12: dormitories are looted, internal businesses are also looted, cars are torched in protest against brutality by security personnel. The base wages were raised from 1550 to 1800 yuan per month.
- Fugang Electronics (Dongguan) 1/13: the kitchens and the mess hall were looted by 1,000 workers from the night crew because the food was spoiled.

We note that these movements happen outside the workplace. Here is a counter-example, but one without rage or destruction. Is this concerted slowdown sabotage?

- Denso (Guangdong) 7/10 This factory with 1,000 workers (mostly women) produces parts for the automobile industry. For three days, the workers came to work and after having punched in they did not go to their work post. Instead, they walked about the workshop, calmly without damaging anything and then left, punching out at the end of their workday. The admonitions from management did little to stop this. On the third day management conceded a significant pay raise.

4.1.2 RISE IN TURNOVER, FROM 10% TO 25%

4.1.3 ASSASSINATION OF BOSSES (TONGHUA STEEL, 2009)

During a protest against the entrance of a private group into the capital of the steel mill, a group of workers attacked the head boss and beat him to death. The privatisation of Tonghua is cancelled.

PROVISIONAL CONCLUSION

The lack of discipline which reigned in the Fordist factories of the '68 years is hard to imagine today. Neither unions, nor the bosses were able to control it. Capital had only succeeded by making investments and relocations which it had up to that point hid behind because of their costs. But the factories had become ungovernable, the very onerous concessions granted to the workers were not enough to bring them back into the ranks.

Thus, at Fiat in the mid '70s, the bosses conceded:

- high wage increases
- every job change had to be discussed between management and the worker
- shortening of the workday
- paid time for union and training meetings
- 4 delegates per 1000 workers
- localisation in the South [of Italy] any increase in [production] capacity
- the wage for a South Mirafiori worker = the wage for a North Mirafiori worker

In the case of Renault, at the same time, the concessions were the following:

- high wage increases
- creation of a new category: “Manufacturing professional”
- Monthly paychecks
- some attempts to reorganise work into semi-autonomous groups

All this resulted in relocations everywhere. Combined with a rapidly developing unemployment starting at the end of the 1970s, submission would be imposed on the workers.

The old worker methods used to resist pressure from the boss in the workplace had passed from being pro-work (Peugot), in the case of skilled workers, to being anti-work, as

in the case of specialised workers. Luddism had been the formative base of trade-unionism. The struggle of skilled workers against the introduction of the Scientific Organisation of Labour had participated in the transformation of trade-unionism into industrial-unionism. The struggles of specialised workers in the '68 years did not produce any new form of organisation. But these struggles modified the content of sabotage, by removing any form of worker pride, in practicing a systematised I-don't-give-a-fuck-ism, by not respecting neither work tools, nor the union delegates and their hierarchy. Sabotage had been particularly transformed by the way that work had become de-skilled and lost its need for mastery of its rhythms and gestures. The sabotage of specialised workers inscribed themselves in a more generalised lack of discipline, evidenced by how workers did not identify with their work. Unions were not able to control this anti-discipline movement and the absenteeist strike demonstrates this. We call these practices anti-work for two reasons: one to describe the disgust felt towards brutalising work stripped of any *savoir faire*, secondly to indicate that no worker organisation held sway at the base of these movements of rage against discipline. The impossibility for organisations of the classical worker's movement to take control of anti-work practices did not give way to the construction of new mass organisations, despite the efforts of Leftists in this regard. The term anti-work also expresses that communism could no longer be envisioned as a society of associated labourers in a “free economy.”

3.2.1 – SABOTAGE



Sabotage and absenteeism are the salient forms of general lack of discipline which reigned within the Fordist factories of the '68 years. And this not only happened in Italy, but it was there where workers took it the furthest. For example with Fiat [Italian automaker], workers left their posts and regrouped into a procession which would parade through the workshop, without warning or unions. To force others to join in, those in the procession would use a cord which they would use to encircle those who stayed on the production-line and thus dragged them into the procession. Sometimes they would force down doors between departments and spill out into neighbouring workshops. Foremen were totally powerless in restoring discipline. There were sometimes forklift races in the alleyways between the workshops. After 1973, we would see appear “wild canteens” in the workshops offering drinks and newspapers to the workers. As soon as there was a fight, carefully machined parts were used as weapons and ammunition. From the point of view of the bosses, the workshops had become ungovernable.

There's the well-known example of the GM American plant at Lordstown (1972). Built in

1966 just outside of Detroit, it was conceived of as a way to eliminate onerous tasks. The company offered good wages, but imposed a workcycle of 40 seconds, against the one minute workcycle. At the end of 1971, after a strike and in attempt to catch up, management laid off 800 workers (of 8000 workers), but they do not change the speed of the production-line. It is from this moment that quality began to deteriorate. The rate increase remains relative however. Martin Glaberman (False Promises, a review, Libération, Feb. 1974) reports that doubling-up is practiced in Lordstown: two consecutive workers on the line successively do the work of each other in addition to their own, so that everyone can take breaks. As clearly explained by Ben Hamper (Rivet Head, Tales from the Assembly Line, Fourth Estate, London, 1992) who practiced this abundantly in Flint's factory where he had worked at for 8 years since 1978. Though this doubling-up is only possible with the tacit agreement of the foreman. And the foreman assumes that individual times are sufficiently wide. This is not to say that the work rates at Lordstown had not significantly degraded compared to the average time. It only means that there is still a productivity reserve. The sabotage of quality is seen in the accumulation of cars to be revised which piled up in a parking lot at the end of the line. There sometimes were 2000 cars, at which point it was necessary to stop production so that the lot could be emptied out.

Unions were powerless in the face of mounting lack of discipline, sabotage and absenteeism found in the workshops. They chased after this movement without being able to head it off. This provoked some calls from Leftists in France, the U.S. and Italy. They would achieve no lasting success though in creating “sabotage unions” or any other stable organisation. *There is an essential element*

which condemns Leftists to failure: on the one had the workers were (relatively) well paid; and on the other hand workers had no desire to reform the factory. Faced with deteriorating work conditions and rising work rates, their exasperation was real. But this was expressed more by sabotage and absenteeism than by participation in health and safety committees. Thus the union machine would reject or swallow-up without difficulty the “radical” candidates attempting to reform the union.

3.2.2 – ABSENTEEISM

Absenteeism has always been a problem for capitalists. As soon as the proletariat is able to offer up their work, they miss out from work. Depending on the situation (fully-employed or unemployed), they can do so more or less easily. In Italy, absenteeism had become a major problem in the factories starting around the early 1970s. To such a point that President of the Republic had to speak about it in a televised speech, Jan. 1st 1973:

“Workers like to work and in their daily fatigue there is a drunkenness in participating in the progress of the country. And it is precisely in paying homage to this desire to work, which is generally found in the Italian people, that we must reject the lax temptations which have been manifested, for example, this past year with a certain inadmissible points of absenteeism.” (Cited by Y. Collonges and P.-G. Randal, *Les autoréductions*, Entremonde ed., p. 33).

At Fiat, the rate of absenteeism went up to 25%: a quarter of the personnel would be missing every day. What did the no-shows do? Did they work in the black market? Whatever the case, could we call their absenteeism anti-work? Or were they just resting up? It is likely they were doing a bit of each. No matter, Fiat entered into an agreement with the unions in which the unions would combat absenteeism, in exchange for a right to information of the

group’s investments. But the unions were unable to install discipline in the workers. The absenteeism in the ’68 years differentiated with previous absenteeism above all with its high rate, as well as by the development of what I call an *absenteeist strike*.

We began to see this type of absenteeism in the American strikes between 1936 and 1937 in the automobile industry.

In the case of the GM Factories in Flint, MI, workplace occupations were carried out on a military model. Discipline, maintenance of equipment and premises, alcohol-free, no women or distractions. One general assembly per day. Flint’s kitchen was able to serve up to 2000 meals at a time. An idea of the number of occupants comes into view once you take into account that many non-occupying strikers who also ate there. In reality, the number of occupiers at Flint Fisher Body n. 2 was 450 on Jan.5th, and the same between Jan. 17th through the 26th. “The problem faced by the organisers was not to convince the occupiers to leave because it was difficult to feed them or because they were needed elsewhere, but rather to have enough men to hold the factories down.” (Sidney Fine: *Sit Down, Ann Arbor*, 1969. p. 168). Permissions were limited and a number of occupiers were held against their will. Members of the UAW [United Auto Workers] from other companies came to participate in the occupation. The local newspapers published articles explaining to the women of the town that the presence of their men in the factory was absolutely indispensable.

The message was clear: the workers agreed to strike but preferred to not stay in the factories. The occupation of the factory did not matter much to them, nor did the maintenance of the machines. This is a reaction that we would see in France, May-June 1968. The occupied factories were practically deserted. And when

it was finally time to return, there were at times battles that went on for days, like the ones at Renault Flins (1 dead) or Peugeot Sochaux (2 dead). (See: [The Strikes in France, May-June 1968](#)).

Does the occupation of the Fiat Factory at Mirafiori [Italy] in March 1973 contradict this view? Let us quickly pass over what happened. This was a period of time locked in negotiations for the renewal of collective contracts. For several months unions had organised rolling strikes and other minor movements, to apply pressure on management as well as to contain movement from the workers. Though they missed the mark when a worker’s assembly, without the union organisers, on March 23rd 1973, decided to block the flow of commodities at Port 11 at North Mirafiori. On the 26th, a Monday, the plan was applied for an hour. On the 27th there was a second attempt. Little by little the movement grew. On the 29th, there was a complete blockade of the ports of North & South Mirafiori. The neighbouring routes were also blocked, and the workers put in place a tool booth to finance their struggle. After the weekend, the blockage kicked off again on Monday, April 1st, but the unions and management negotiated an emergency accord which defused the conflict. The workers obtained a wage increase (+16 liras), but other worker concerns were not mentioned in the accord (workday length, categorisation, the re-hiring of laid-off workers). The unions were able to win a bit of cheese because the workers had been granted a training leave of 150 hours per year and the training in question was entrusted to the unions.(According to Paul Ginsborg: *A History of Contemporary Italy 1943-1980*).

For 3 days Mirafiori was “occupied.” This is the term that most sources use. But there was no pretension of self-management on behalf of the workers. Their activity mostly consisted of

blocking the flow of commodities and of workers (because they also had to block those who wanted to get in to work), than to envisage a resumption of production, which was not the matter at hand, nor was the maintenance of machinery brought up. This episode of struggle at Fiat was particularly remarkable because the workers moved about the workplace shouting slogans that did not make sense. If this is true, can one shout out their refusal to identify as a worker? This is why we must not let ourselves be led into a false direction when speaking of occupation. What is more exact to describe this case is a factory blockade. And in this case, the workers were well ahead of their times.

This said, occupied or blockaded, the factory was on strike. Was there an absenteeist strike? I did not find many figures concerning this episode at Mirafiori. All the sources that I used note that the Leftist groups were very few at the beginning of the movement and even less so the unions. It seems an internal procession of 10,000 workers formed and then broke off to blockade (or try to blockade) entries at North Mirafiori. How many stayed for this first blockade which only lasted an hour? It’s impossible to know. In any case, the factories was comprised of 60,000 wage workers. Where were they during the blockade?