

A text about the massive strikes of '95 - '96 in France

the strike and after...

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Foreword

The following text has no pretension of drawing the full picture of the 1995 winter crisis on the scale of the whole country, but of giving my point of view based on my own reflection and my own, very modest, participation in the movement of insubordination in Paris. Its aim is not to end discussion but, on the contrary, to encourage the opening up of debate amongst those who intend going further than just recording events. To understand today the advances as well as the failures seems essential - in order to avoid being tossed about by unseen situations tomorrow.

'To reflect is not to genuflect.'

Whatever the admirers of neo-liberal democracy might think, capitalism at the end of this century is the inverse of the image it presents. Behind the humanitarian mask appears the increasingly implacable inhumanity of exploitation and domination. The aggravated capitalization of life generates horrors without end to such an extent that, in the most civilized countries it is henceforth difficult to regard them as contingent and temporary.

From the point of view of the masters of this world, the World Bank being the appointed manager, many things remain to be done to crush their slaves and give free reign to their all-consuming ambitions: to devastate the planet and let loose the domesticating power of capital. For the factions in power in France it is necessary to get it over with - and quickly. They are impelled by the expiry dates for European integration, and in a more general way, by the requirements of the world market for which they are, in the final analysis, only acting as proxies. But it was enough for state employees to demonstrate their refusal to submit for the well-oiled machine, set in primed motion by the present managers, to begin to seize up.

For the leadership of the trade unions, who are always hostile to individual and collective initiatives which escape their control, the decision to call a strike was the result of exhausting negotiations conducted with all the pedantry and ceremony proper to democracy with the objective of gaining credibility from people concerned. But individuals not lacking in decision already know from experience that the formal unanimity thus achieved doesn't signify anything in itself. Without waiting for the approval of all their still hesitant comrades, they not only went on strike but also began to seize the signal control centres.

Such initiatives were denounced by the SNCF management as irresponsible acts "which put the security of the rail network and equipment at risk" whereas it is them who have been responsible for numerous railway catastrophes on the lines

which don't pay - by letting them fall into disrepair. In reality, such acts reveal the vulnerability of the transport network which is more and more centralized and computerized. The generalization of the latest technology is at once the source of the power and the general weakness of the system. It is a weapon of capital aiming to domesticate humans and to render their presence more and more obsolete. At the same time, all that was necessary was for a handful of individuals to occupy the control centres and signal boxes, carry out some basic acts of sabotage, like erasing the computer's memory, for the network to be paralysed in its entirety.

The leadership of the trade unions viewed with suspicion the first spontaneous outbursts which took place without their approval and which would have enormous unforeseen consequences. For those responsible for labour power, work is life itself and a strike is merely one of the unfortunate means the wardens of survival are sometimes obliged to use in order to attain their desired end. They do not understand that to stop work, even in a momentary fashion, forms part of the pleasures of life even though it absorbs a lot of energy and you sometimes lose money.

For a great deal of the strikers, the strike, on average, was set to become an end in itself. An activity breaking with daily life. It allowed heads to be lifted up and the cycle of resignation to be broken, to break somewhat, trade separation, to speak, to party, to demonstrate in the street and - and why not? - to have a feast with the people in the neighbourhood, which, by the way, happened much more on the fringes than in the centre of Paris, now being transformed into a museum and into a commercial centre for luxury goods.

The holders of state power, apologists for social Darwinism,^[1] have denounced such unwillingness as the "corporatism of the privileged worker", in short, as a survival reflex of antediluvian species unable to adapt. This view has nothing new about it. It dates from some fifteen years ago when the workers in traditional industries resisted, sometimes very violently, their disappearance...a primordial situation in order to bring the stubborn under control and permit the reconversion of capital.

The workers in state industries like the SNCF are, by tradition, marked by corporatism and underpinned by professional pride. But when the initiators of the first strikes affirmed that they were "striking for themselves but also for all proletarians waged and unwaged", they showed that they were overcoming their habitual shopkeepers' outlook which had been the cause so much that was wrong during the preceding strikes, in particular during the winter of 1986.

The content of the first intense discussions held, as often as not, in cafés as well as in assemblies, showed that there had been some subterranean maturation well before the outbreak of the strike. The majority were, to be sure, mainly preoccupied with the many questions relating to the status of the state workers. But a more conscious and determined minority went much further and attempted to tackle all the problems of daily survival. The responses were very confused, tainted with ideology and the language of pure democracy,^[2] but one felt a critical reflection, a search for real perspectives which would permit "the human

to be replaced at the centre against the dictatorship of the market", beyond capital's inhuman categories and the separations and roles which accompany them.

Thus, the strikers at SNCF, telecom, RATP (metro) and even the electricity industry accepted that people not belonging to the state industries were present in the general assemblies, organizing soup kitchens for down-and-outs and reconnecting, in part, electricity to shelters for the poor. These were the seeds of helping one another break with the ideology of belonging to a firm and the insane egotism peculiar to contemporary capitalism.

Ridicule failed to kill anymore: the wretched attempts by the state to set the population against the strikers failed. After the fiasco of the first demonstration of "angry passengers held hostage by the strikers", it decided to cancel the following demos. In spite of the generalization of disorder on urban transport, the population were not at all unsympathetic to the strikers, an attitude which stood out clearly from the latent hostility during the preceding SNCF strikes, in particular during the winter of 1986. In general, the sympathy was passive sometimes active: the setting up of a support fund for the strikers, putting up those occupying depots in the centre of Paris and who lived too far away on the outskirts to return every evening to their home, etc.

There were moments when it was possible to think that things were going to go much further. But the initial dynamism foundered, then came to a halt, without the demands which had caused the strike even being met, in spite of the general bitterness when the strikes were called off and the continuation of certain pockets of resistance.

The repression had been restrained, except in sectors which are ultra-sensitive to the functioning of capital, like in the electricity industry, where it was directed at isolated pockets of unyielding resistance. The absence of cash, the fear of being without it and of being laid-off, had been some of the factors which had contributed to the general inertia, in particular in the most structured sectors of capital where self-reliance, the war of one against all and of each against themselves, are, henceforth the rule. But the strikers themselves were less hamstrung by lack of money, at least immediately. Moreover, the determined among them replied to people who proposed to raise money on their behalf: "we are fed up with striking by proxy. Better to go out on strike yourselves".

The critique of 'striking by delegates' was to the point. It put in relief the somewhat amorphous behaviour of ordinary citizens, accustomed at work to delegate the resolution of their problems to official and officious individuals and therefore, scarcely inclined to show any spirit of initiative. Moreover, on the whole they continued to work, willingly or reluctantly, at best marching behind the trade union leadership, with the unemployed sometimes by their side. Even the mass of strikers were less and less mobilized. They stuck to the simple matter of renewing the strike through the general assemblies, participating in demonstrations and in the parties organized at their workplaces.

Against the prevailing passivity, the most combative strikers called for the

"generalization of the strike". The formula was ambiguous: it meant they considered their own activity, the strike they had embarked on, as the obligatory reference point for all potential revolts.

The unblocking of the situation could not come from a simple increase in the number of strikes. The extension was, in part, subordinate to radicalization, to bypassing the limited character of the initial initiatives which had stirred the mass of protesters. The contradiction between the breadth of the protest and the near general absence of a subversive perspective was clear to those who had not lost their clarity. In spite of their combativity, the protesters had stumbled over two essential questions, that of the function of work and concomitantly, the role of the state and in particular, the welfare state.

The strikers in the state sector were rejecting the devalorization of their situation. But they had accepted as unassailable their alleged mission, to be at the 'service of all citizens'. They had valorized what their survival was based on: their work. They endowed it with unique virtues whereas in this case, as elsewhere, work has become something very functional, with no particular meaning to workers except that it allows them to have money and be recognized as citizens. Their only uniqueness is in being an integral part of the state's communication system.

Furthermore, the state workers who had been able to profit from the weakness of the latest technology in their workplaces had not understood the modifications these had already led to in the rest of society. They were hoping their strike would paralyse the economy in its entirety and would therefore force the State to give in over the essentials. Nothing of the sort happened.

In the Paris region, the transport blockade had been total, much more so than in the winter of 1986, but the impact had been less. Industry has practically disappeared to the benefit of finance, the press, etc. There the computerization of work processes predominate. Firms have been capable, much more so than previously, of carrying out their essential activities thanks to flexi-time and the use of home-based computer terminals. Some managers had hesitated to put similar measures into operation because they were in doubt about the enthusiasm of their personnel and preferred to have them under their watchful eye in order to control them. Moreover, the nature of work did not always permit it, in particular in the retail trade. But the tone was set.

The concept of a communication network less and less overlaps that of the transport network. To increase the pressure, it would have been necessary for strikers to block other networks which was difficult to achieve without the connivance of employees in telecom, the electricity industry, etc. The strike in the electricity industry (EDF) could have had a much greater impact to the degree where the communication network couldn't function without electricity. But the trade union leadership, aware of the dangers, broke the few strikes which took place in the electricity industry and warned the over-excited against "acts which endangered the security of power stations and the grid".

Behind the fixation on retaining acquired privileges, there appeared ambiguities at the same time towards the welfare state. For example, calls for guaranteed

employment, even payment for not being employed.

The system of labour protection, put in place after the Liberation, was indispensable for the reconstruction of the basis of the state, and a prelude to the subsequent frenzied accumulation of capital over the next 30 glorious years. Labour power was then considered as the most precious capital. The recent changes within capital, in particular technological changes, have brought into question its centrality and as a consequence, the state treats it as a depreciating commodity whose upkeep is expensive and worthy of being thrown in the waste paper basket.

Moreover, the domination of the welfare state was part of the mentality of being taken care of. It had accustomed citizens to seeing their survival problems taken in hand and decided by a supreme authority in a practically quasi-automatic fashion without there being any need to intervene themselves. This renunciation had been the reverse of protection. In particular, it wasn't for nothing that in the atomization and partial asthenia^[2b] that stubborn individuals, because of their hatred of work, fled firms in order to try and live a little. Despite the partial questioning of the welfare state, the need for social security wastes and encourages the partial neutralization of energies which otherwise would become dangerous to society.

To be sure, neo-liberalism is inhuman. But it does no more than reveal the internal essence of capital: for it, the human is only of interest to the degree it is capitalizable. From now on, more than ever, it will be too much. When state power becomes the apologist for labour, it is not because it thinks that the employment of all potential workers remains the primordial condition for the value creating process of capital but in order to try to make good, at the least cost, a life of inactivity, the origin of revolts. The state has a horror of emptiness. So to keep order, any kind of activity is better than none at all - such is the credo of neo-liberalism which has taken over from the apologists of the welfare state. Work remains the best cop even though the mode of contemporary capital's functioning makes the employment of all available human beings practically impossible, even on the cheap.

It might appear paradoxical that some protesters who were indifferent to politics should have granted so much importance to the idea of democracy: faced with the authoritarianism of state power, the defence of citizenship appeared to them indispensable.

In France, the myth of the sovereignty of the people has always been of great importance in the minds of the average citizen. They see there the means of disposing of despotisms, although it resurfaces without cease from the representation they have themselves chosen. But the myth would never have a similar hold on them if the state had not also appeared as their protector with the setting up of the welfare state. Not only did it assimilate, in the last analysis, citizens with workers, but also as workers it protected them somewhat, they and their families, against the upset and risks inherent to wage workers in the service of capital. In France, the welfare state had thus realized up to the end the democratization of the state.

From now on, the transformation of capital shall make citizenship appear as a pure political form without a socially effective content. That is why the reduction of the protective role of the state is linked to the partial, and even total questioning by the excluded, of the statute of citizenship. Here also, neo-liberalism plays a revelatory role. Democracy appears, even under a benign appearance, as what it always had been: the domination of capital.

The winter crises also revealed the paradoxes of contestation for official unionism. The protesters have, *en masse*, expressed willy-nilly, their refusal of neo-liberalism following behind union officials to the degree that, with the exception of those in the CFDT, they could make a show of mobilizing them.

It is, however, notorious that in France disaffection with trade unionism has considerably increased over the years. At the risk of abstraction, the period of radicalisation after May '68 had not gone beyond the trade union strait jacket. Rather, it had sanctioned atomization, the dissolution of former combative communities and submission to the imperatives of capitalist restructuring.

But the principal characteristics of the welfare state in France is to have integrated the trade unions, who at times have preserved the facade of contestation, into organs for the protection of labour. '*Paritarisme*' (the equal representation of both sides when management and trade union leaders meet) gave the impression to the trade union rank and file, and continues to give it despite de-unionization, of having a direct hold over state management through the intermediary of their leaders.

From their angle, the majority of trade union bosses were apprehensive; the reduction in the contractual function of the state would mean to them the loss of sinecures and positions even if the tendency to participate in the neo-liberal mode of management was pronounced among them and not only in the CFDT. What's more, they knew that their acknowledgement as partners by state power depended on their being representatives and their capacity to enclose and derail trouble in the enterprises, especially in attracting and controlling the most combative individuals who appeared.

Already for a number of years, the day belonged not to exclusion (except in the CFDT) but to recuperation, in order to try to broaden the base of the pyramid whose mummified summit was in danger of falling to pieces. The development of shop floor delegates was henceforth very different from that of preceding generations. The oldest had often participated in radical groupings which had sprung up after May '68, particularly in workshop committees outside of the main trade unions. The bankruptcy of their revolutionary political pretensions had led them to devote the majority of their energy to rank and file trade unionism even when they were sometimes members of Trotskyist/anarchist groups, etc. The youngest have come from the co-ordinations of winter '86. They are pretty indifferent to trade union labels; not uncommonly they belong at one and the same time to several organizations including the libertarian wing of the CNT. Their combativity is at times real. But, as long as they manoeuvre within a framework of a trade unionism approved by the state, they are tolerated by their

leaderships as elements necessary to their survival and to the maintenance of their influence over the incredulous who, for want of anything better, accorded them some credit for trying to limit the damage.

The trade union leadership played the game well. The basis of their subtle sabotage was double language. They had, in part, consigned to the basement their stall-holder slanging matches and sought to consolidate, for the moment at least, the branch on which they were sitting and which they had contributed to sawing through. Hence the demagogic appeals to a "unitary inter-trade action through the generalization throughout the country of strikes and demonstrations for the scrapping of the Juppé Plan". In reality they refused to extend the strikes, in particular in the electricity industry (EDF), monopolizing speech and communication in the strikers' assemblies, controlling demonstrations and causing them to degenerate into inoffensive, repetitive marches in which the aim was exhausting their energies and preventing the most radical of them taking over the local branches after their own fashion.^[3]

The winter crises confirmed the breakthrough of a renewed rank and file trades unionism recomposing itself outside of traditional confederations, very much upsetting the different leaderships, in particular the leadership of the CFDT. From now on the model is the SUD.

The frequent references by the founders of the SUD to the origins of revolutionary syndicalism, indeed of anarcho-syndicalism for those who are also members of the CNT, to the original trade unions and to the first associations which had as their objective the emancipation of the workers, can develop illusions. Likewise their hostility to the most narrow-minded corporatism.

But their steps were more the result of the exclusion imposed by the leadership of the CFDT than of any critical reflection. In reality, they are participating in the renewal of trade unionism, a renewal based both on taking up the theme of self-management and the taking into account of the phenomenon of exclusion, up to then neglected by the main unions. They combine the traditional defence of the right of state employees with the defence of the workless, the homeless and illegal immigrants, participating in the creation of charitable organizations and multiplying contacts with those religious and lay people who are taking over from the state in matters of social assistance.

The SUD is already an integral part of a combination movement such as the purest democrats of our epoch dream of, champions of "the defence of civil society against the attacks of state power". But the renovated combination movement is rotten even before flowering: it is born out of the decomposition of the former professional trade unionism, based on the identification of individuals with their type of work, and from the emergence of new reformist associations based on the aim of integrating into the world of work all those who have been excluded, so that they become citizens in their entirety. In spite of the good will of a number of SUD members, this atypical trade unionism, as they like to call it, has nothing revolutionary about it.

The irony is that the bureaucratism of the main unions does not stop them from

participating in the institutional mechanisms in the state industries, in particular, in elections which allow them to be recognized by the state as the official representatives of the staff. The notion of not abandoning the terrain of power-sharing institutions (from workers' committees to administrative councils) to the managers is completely worn through. The terrain is full of pitfalls, delegates are admitted as co-managers of labour-power.

Faced with the institutionalization of the SUD, some protesters propose to limit the duration of delegates' participation in the co-management organizations and even to elect and revoke them on the basis of only the decisions taken in general assemblies and strike committees. But no formal procedure has ever impeded the appearance of a hierarchy within the institutions even when the base is regarded as sovereign. As long as individuals express the need to be represented, they are always confronted by the fact that the representation that they have chosen escapes their control.

It is customary in France for demonstrators to try to get round obstacles encountered in concrete struggle through a recourse to abstract recipes. Faced with the inability to understand what was shackling the development of the content of the movements unfolding, there was a return to apologetics regarding well-known forms. But, detached from the context that gave them life and meaning, they were nothing more than dead, hollow formulas, phantoms which no longer arouse fear in the holders of state power and their acolytes in the trade union hierarchy. Because the trade unions, for fear of throwing petrol on the fire, have avoided using the term general strike, some protesters thought they saw in it a miraculous solution. But whatever their good intentions, they have only tried to outbid their rivals.

The general strike of May '68 constituted their blue-chip stock *par excellence*. In so doing, they no longer demonstrated any critical spirit. For the mass radical movement which broke out then had already passed the very limited confines of the general strike. It began to question work and many other aspects of daily survival: the family, school, urbanism, etc. Under the control of the unions, the occupations quickly shut themselves away and sometimes turned hostile to anything which wasn't to do with the corporate struggle. So leave the dead in peace. The wheel has turned. The structure of society has undergone an in-depth transformation with the commodity invading the totality of relations plus the near total demolition of working class communities which had, in spite of their corporatism, put up a resistance to capital. It has become impossible in France to identify the modern islets of contemporary capitalism, workers and non-workers, with the former workers of industrial capitalism which then constituted the heart of the economy, with the exception of, partly, state industries and what remains of the classical industrial firms.

To go on strike is not reduced in importance because work, as a feature of the domestication of individuals, remains the basis of society's functioning. But the general disruption of the work process throughout the country is, less than ever, the model for combat for every particular revolt. The ensemble of roles and the strait-jackets which suffocate us overwhelm the confines of work. Henceforth,

work disruptions are only one of the moments of the movements of insubordination against state power and contemporary society. Witness the urban riots endemic to the megalopolis of the most advanced countries which already, in spite of the limited character of their objectives, are certainly no less characteristic of the manifestation of revolt in our epoch.

It is impossible to say today what will happen tomorrow. The outcome of the winter movement has not been settled in advance. In relation to those of the recent past it has achieved some advances but, at the same time, it has revealed the existence of enormous obstacles. Of course these are not, *a priori*, insurmountable and must not become the pretext for kow-towing. Nothing is inevitable, and as the celebrated saying recalls: 'the power of the masters also rests on the weakness of the slaves'.

However, it none-the-less remains true that historical conditions have been modified. The Juppé Plan is not the only fruit of the neo-liberal fads of the technocrats in delirium who are today in power in France. In this case the mass strikes of winter would have been enough to cause its withdrawal. But behind them looms the menacing shadow of the real enemy whose managers they only are. The enemy is global capitalism which has decided, on a planetary scale, to deliver the *coup de grace* to those it has not yet got under control. It's also the reason why the shrewd Juppé Plan has the capacity to take a lot of punishment.

Moreover, the victims of neo-liberalism are in a corner. On the one hand, the oldest are scarcely enthused by the programmes coming from bygone periods which in general were reformist. On the other hand, young people have grown up in the shadow of the crises, in an atmosphere of generalized nihilism, which characterizes contemporary capitalism.

Even when the determination to unravel it is real, the absence of a global perspective for overcoming the survival which envelopes them condemns them to explosions of anger which are considerable but without any follow up at the moment, when even a simple resistance to the encroachment of capital is a very arduous thing to achieve. Capital has always taken back what it granted the night before and one cannot appraise the winter movement in terms of a balance sheet. But the non-satisfaction of basic demands had a part to play in the feeling of powerlessness. We don't only live for the pleasures of the flesh but when they aren't to be had those of the spirit offer no consolation.

The absence of great aims does not prompt the use of great means except in very particular situations. Power understood this. In spite of the fear the massive work stoppages in state industries aroused in them, they relied more on the likelihood of decay than on savage repression and gave way to sectional demands only to accelerate the decomposition.

A handful of "irreducibles"[\[4\]](#) in Paris and the regions, in order to struggle against defeatism and the return to atomization following the return to work, have taken it upon themselves to think and act in a co-ordinated fashion in expectation of a hypothetical resumption. The initiative is not without interest. But it is essential to comprehend that it cannot be a matter of reconstituting the action committees,

such as existed in the period of radicalization inaugurated by May '68. And still less the co-ordinations, in the image of those which arose during the preceding strikes and which sought to be the representatives of different trades and professions in struggle. Without neglecting the exchange of information and the rest, it is, more than ever, necessary to draw up a critique of the movement of insubordination which we participated in. The possibility that individuals refusing to accept resignation will get together depends on it. What is particularly necessary is the critique of trade unionism, even atypical trade unionism. It is difficult because it could be the cause of estrangement, not only towards trade union leaderships, but also towards friends who are still full of illusions on the question of rank and file trade unionism, and not understanding the critique, the latter could liken it to a rupture in relations forged during the strike. But it is today one of the conditions enabling us to act by ourselves and for ourselves.

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√1] Doctrine which justifies predatory relations between individuals.

√2] A very widespread ideology which opposes a literal to a real meaning of democracy.

√2b] Although this is a relatively well-known word in French ('asthenie'), it doesn't feature in most normal sized English dictionaries. It means debility, or growing loss of vital strength.

√3] Sporadic demonstrations happened in neighbourhoods outside of official ones.

√4] A term roughly meaning "implacable enemies of the system".

ANDRÉ