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Mass Strikes Against Austerity in Western Europe – A Strategic Assessment

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Abstract

The politics of austerity and the changes to labour law in many Western European countries have led to a wave of mass strikes that is unprecedented in that part of the world, at least since the end of World War II. The strikes are predominantly one-day political and general strikes. Their characteristics are (a) a huge participation in historical comparison, (b) the crucial role of unions and workers from the public sector, and (c) a general lack of success. We give a brief account of the strike wave since 2008 and address four questions: 1. What type of strike do we encounter? 2. What are the socio-economic and political conditions that have led to the emergence of this type? 3. What are its limits as a means of struggle? 4. Which steps would have to be taken in order to change the relations of forces in favour of the European working classes?

Keywords: Eurozone Crisis, Austerity, Mass Strikes, General Strikes, Political Strikes, Trade Union Strategies, Repression

1. Introduction

‘Will the interregnum, the crisis whose historically normal solution is blocked in this manner, necessarily be resolved in favor of a restoration of the old? Given the character of ideologies, such an outcome can be ruled out

– but not in an absolute sense. (...) One can also infer from this that very favourable conditions are being created for an unprecedented expansion of historical materialism. (...) But this reduction to economics and to politics signifies precisely the reduction of the highest superstructures to what is closest to the structure; in other words, a possibility [and necessity] of creating new culture’ (Antonio Gramsci, Third Notebook, § 34, 1930)

Since the financial crisis turned into the Eurozone crisis, there is an unprecedented wave of mass strikes in Western Europe. The strikes are directed against the austerity agendas imposed by governments, which involve pension cuts, welfare state retrenchment, layoffs in the public sector and restrictions of social and collective bargaining rights. Usually, they are symbolic insofar as they are limited to just one or two days. On 14 November 2012, the first transnational European strike of this type took place – but it was effective in Spain and Portugal. The aim of the mass strikes is to scandalize the undemocratic character of political crisis-management in Europe and the fact that working people are being made to pay for a crisis they did not cause .

Various authors call for the revitalization of the European social model (Hermann and Mahnkopf, 2010; Dullien et al., 2011; Marterbauer and Oberndorfer, 2013) with a shift in economic policy towards a Keynesian approach, a strong welfare state, a big public sector and democratic political institutions. This call gives rise to a set of key strategic questions: how can workers shift the relations of forces in their favour and interrupt the politics of austerity, and who are the political allies needed to do so? Building on the call for ‘a political left both willing and able to develop and present political options (...) which could result in reliable alternatives’ (Hermann and Mahnkopf, 2010: 326), we examine the present state of the struggles against austerity in Western Europe by addressing four questions:

1. What type of mass strike do we presently encounter in Europe?
2. What are the socio-economic and political conditions that have led to the emergence of this type of mass strike?

3. Where are its limits as a means of struggle?
4. Are there steps that unions could take in order to change the relations of forces in their favour?

In our view, the political significance of the strike wave lies in the fact that it is part and parcel of a movement for democratic and social rights at the European level, which is based on a loose alliance of unions, activist networks such as the 'Indignados' and 'Occupy' and political parties of the left. As such, it represents an important first step in the constitution of a European public and a European working class movement. At the same time, it is an inadequate means of struggle for achieving the demands made. The unions are caught in a dilemma: The type of strike chosen is an adequate reflection of the capacities that unions have under the given socio-economic and political conditions. But in order to prevent a collapse of trade unionism in the crisis countries and to stop the demolition of welfare states and the curtailment of democratic and social rights across Europe, unions would have to be far more confrontational. In other words, it appears that they desperately need to raise the stakes in order to stay in the game, but they have been dealt a bad hand. In this situation, it is rational for gamblers to resort to bluffing. And unions are not so different: They choose a means of struggle combining radical symbolism (in particular, the myth of the 'general strike') and a moderate form of disruption (the one-day 'warning' strike). In so doing, they secure mass involvement: going on strike for a day does not demand huge sacrifices from workers and thus comes with a relatively low participation threshold, but does not pose a real threat to social cohesion or capital accumulation. In so doing, they get high numbers of workers to participate and create a show of strength, which covers up the weakness of organized labour in the crisis.

2. The strike wave in Western Europe

The strike wave after 2008 started with general strikes in Italy and France and gained momentum in 2010. While the number of five general strikes in 2009 was already an exception for Western Europe, the year 2010 saw 14 general strikes in five countries, followed by 11 strikes in 2011 in three countries and 10 in 2012, again in five different countries. The mass strike in the UK in November 2011 is not included in this count, because it was focused on the public sector, but it has to be seen in the same context and shares many features with the general strikes. In 2013, there have been only five general strikes in Western Europe so far. Nevertheless, there are still significant protests against austerity in Europe. In fact, the popular struggles against the crisis intensified in Spain and in Portugal, and new union protests erupted in France. In light of this, it is not far-fetched to assume that there will be quite a few general strikes in 2014.

The frequency of general strikes during the crisis years surpasses anything seen post-1980: the number of general strikes in the EU-15 plus Norway was 18 between 1980 and 1989, 26 from 1990 to 1999 and 27 between 2000 and 2009 (Hamann et al., 2013). In contrast, there were 37 general strikes in the period between 2010 and June 2013 (own count). The focus of this strike wave is in the five countries with the highest incidence of general strikes since 1980, which are all severely affected by the Eurozone crisis: 18 of these 37 strikes were in Greece, six in Italy, five in Portugal, four in Spain and three in France. In Belgium, there was one general strike in January 2012, the first one since 1984 (ibid.).

But this increase in the incidence of general strikes is no reason for optimism on the side of labour: The context of the wave of general strikes is a long-term decline of the relevance of economic strikes in the same countries. While the average number of strike days per year had been 16.6 per 10.000 employees in 1980-2 for the EU-15 plus Norway, it fell continuously to

1.1 in 2004-6 (Hamann et al., 2013). The strike activity also fell if we consider the share of workers (out of 1,000) on strike: In Western Europe, it plunged from 97 in the 1970s to 67 in the 1980s and 29 in the 1990s (Scheuer, 2006: 148f). In the 2000s, the number went down again, this time to 21 (European Commission, 2011: 46; Vandaele, 2011: 29). In other words, unions were increasingly unable to organise sectoral strikes, which can be explained with the restructuring of work and labour relations in the neoliberal era and its results: the overall decline of industries with a strong union presence; a secular decline of union density; and the fact that many trade unions focussed their strategies on (industrial) core workers, whose numbers also decreased (Vandaele, 2011: 32f.).

The upsurge of general strikes is a consequence of the fact national governments increasingly adopted neoliberal and austerity agendas: welfare state retrenchment moved the terrain of struggle to the political level. Governments curtailed social rights and workers rights, as well as cutting public expenditure. This development gained traction in the course of the global financial and economic crisis started when governments started to impose draconian austerity agendas in an authoritarian fashion. This suggests that the increasing popularity of political strikes and general strikes is due to the fact that governments on the whole refused to negotiate with unions when they adopted the politics of austerity.

While the participation in general and political strikes since 2008 was spectacular, they were on the whole unsuccessful. There is not a single case of a government offering substantial concessions after one of the general strikes since 2008. Similarly, there were minor concessions only in one case, the general strike in Belgium in January 2012. This in stark contrast to the period before 2008: Between 1980 and 2011, there were government concessions in 27 of 68 cases (40 per cent; substantial: 8, minor: 19) and no concessions in 41 of 68 cases (60 per cent) (Hamann et al., 2013). Post-2008, one and two day general strikes (and even the fighting strike in France in 2010) were ineffective regarding material

concessions. In other words, the class relations of forces in the crisis were unfavourable to labour.

3. The limits of quantitative analyses

Interpretations of the strike wave since 2008 diverge considerably. Stefan Schmalz and Nico Weinmann argue that there is a trend towards more irregular conflicts and more incoherence between countries compared with the wave of mass strikes from 1968 to 1973 (Schmalz and Weinmann, 2013). Kurt Vandaele contends that there is an increasing convergence between European countries, both in terms of the long term decline of economic strikes (Vandaele, 2011) and the growing significance of political mass strikes (Vandaele, 2013). Gregor Gall also sees a trend towards convergence, which consists in the growing significance of political mass strikes and the emergence of the public sector as the centre of trade union activities (Gall, 2012).

Both Vandaele and Gall highlight that there are limits to quantitative analyses as they have been conducted in the past 30 years, thus questioning to some extent their own approaches. Vandaele implies that if strike action takes place in the public sector, it is not primarily at decreasing profits, but at disrupting everyday life through the suspension of public services. In this context, the number of days not worked or of workers participating are not the best indicators for the strength of a stoppage because it is possible to block a service with a small number of workers (2011: 33). It follows that analyses of labour activism should take on board qualitative factors in order to grasp the full picture. Gall highlights other aspects when

he discusses the limits of quantitative approaches: Many political strikes in the public sector and many general strikes are not counted in the official statistics – despite the fact that they have been a dominant form of industrial action in Europe at least since the 2000s (2012: 14f). For Gall the decrease of strike activity is exaggerated if one operates on the grounds of these numbers.

The limits of quantitative approaches are visible in Schmalz and Weinmann's analysis, which draws its political conclusions almost entirely from an evaluation of quantitative data about 'non-normative conflicts'. They state that trade unions exercise less control over mobilizations than they did between 1968 and 1973 (Schmalz and Weinmann, 2013). It disappears from the picture that many of the big trade union-led stoppages in the 1970s drew their momentum from wildcat strikes (Birke, 2007: 218f, 274f.; Gallas and Nowak, 2013), which is not the case for the current European strike wave, where union federations predominantly instigate the action. [1] Hamann et al. (2013) also work with a quantitative approach, trying to detect patterns that explain under which circumstances general strikes yield successful results. Since the current strike wave is marked by the general absence of concessions, this methodology is difficult to apply. In contrast, Gall's analysis considers the political context of the European strike wave, explaining its novelty by highlighting that unions are either excluded 'from the process of political exchange' (2012: 2) or that political negotiations increasingly yield poor results for workers. Following him, there has been an erosion of corporatism, which means that the political strike became the primary means of struggle in France, Greece, Italy, Spain and Portugal. According to Gall, this form of strikes has strength to it because it entails big political mobilizations as 'expression of collective discontent against and contestation of neoliberal policies' (20).

4. A Luxemburgian Typology

In this section, we propose a qualitative account of mass strikes inspired by Rosa Luxemburg. With regard to the recent wave of mass strikes, we can show what type of industrial action we are examining, and where its strategic limits lie. For this purpose, we develop a typology of strikes based on a qualitative description with four axes.

LUXEMBURG'S UNDERSTANDING OF MASS STRIKES

While scholars tend to reflect on the political context of political mass strikes and its strategic implications, they tend to neglect two aspects: The strikes are defensive strikes, and they are, to a large extent, without success, -- despite the unprecedented size of the mobilizations. Before we elaborate on these aspects, we will discuss the concept of the 'mass strike', which is used by Gall and Vandaele without providing a proper definition. We believe that Rosa Luxemburg's work provides some insightful observations on mass strikes, which can be used to determine the concept. These can be found in her text *The Mass Strike, the Political Parties and the Trade Unions*, written in 1906, after the strike wave that led up to the (failed) Russian revolution in 1905. Obviously, there is no revolutionary situation in contemporary Europe (quite the contrary), but we believe that we can gain some general insights from Luxemburg by isolating her observations from their historical context.

She does not confine the concept of 'mass strike' to political strikes and highlights that purely economic strikes sometimes very quickly get a political dimension. One of her examples is a stoppage in the railway repair workshops in Kiev in July 1903. The strike movement grew after the police arrested two delegates of the railway workers. The subsequent blockade of the local railway station led to a police massacre with more than 30 dead workers. On the next

day, a general strike started in all parts of Kiev . Inspired by these events, , there was a general strike in Jekaterinoslaw in early August 1903 (Luxemburg, 1906/2008: 125). The famous strike in Petersburg in January 1905 exhibits a similar dynamic: Two workers were dismissed because of their membership in a legal official workers' association. About one week later, 200,000 workers attended a march to the castle of the Tsar in order to submit a petition. A bloodbath followed, leaving between 200 and 1,000 workers dead. This in turn paved the way for a wave of mass strikes that lasted until the summer of that year, which led to the introduction of the 8-hour day in many sectors of the Russian economy (12 to 14 hours were the standard before the events) and to wage increases of around 15 per cent all over the country (127f).

But Luxemburg underlines differences as well: While the strikes in 1903 started as sectoral, economic strikes and became political conflicts in their final phase, the mass strikes in 1905 reversed the pattern: they started with a unified political programme and led to many partial and independently organized economic strikes all over Russia. This distinction is not just of historical importance, but pertains to a central feature of Luxemburg's understanding of mass strikes: The mass strike does not exhibit a unified pattern and cannot be identified ahead of its unfolding in a concrete struggle: 'Its adaptability, its efficiency, the factors of its origin are constantly changing' (140). It is only possible ex post to chart mass strikes in a given conjuncture. But there are some defining features, which we can extract from Luxemburg's account of the events in Russia: First of all, they disrupt political life, affect public discourse and provoke massive responses from governments or other state bodies (140f). A second central aspect is the mobilizing character of mass strikes for the working class: Workers experience the power that goes along with collective action, gain experience in political struggles and see the need for organization. Importantly, these are qualitative features: the mass strike is not defined on the grounds of simple numbers (be they absolute numbers of

participants or working days lost or relative number compared to the size of the population), but in terms of its effects, both on the political scene and the working class. In this sense, the 1984-5 Miners' Strike in Britain can be seen as a mass strike (even though it was confined to one industry); in contrast, the public sector strikes in Germany in 1992 and 2006 involving hundreds of thousands of workers are not necessarily mass strikes, because they did not have persistent effects on the political scene and their mobilizing character for the German working class was limited.

Importantly and contrary to some readings of her work, Luxemburg does not glorify the mass strike. She underlines that there are limits to its effectiveness in the Russian context: While the first general strike in January 1905 led to a national wave of economic strikes, and a second national strike in October ended with political concessions of the Tsar, the third general strike in December resulted in defeat: An armed uprising of workers in response to state repression against the strike in Moscow was crushed by the military, and efforts by the social democrats to organize a fourth national strike in 1906 were not successful (139f.). Luxemburg concludes the chapter with the following words: 'The role of the political mass strike alone is exhausted, but, at the same time, the transition of the mass strike into a general popular rising is not yet accomplished. (...) The stage remains empty for the time being.' (140) This suggests that calls for mass strikes are only useful in specific conjunctures, and that other forms of political and social action prevail in other periods.

FOUR ANALYTICAL DISTINCTIONS

Against this backdrop, we propose a typology of the mass strike inspired by Luxemburg's analysis (cf. Gallas and Nowak, 2012: 25f.). We use four distinctions to describe the different types of the mass strike. These distinctions are inspired by Luxemburg, who operated in a similar way without providing a systematic conceptual elaboration. They are analytical in character. Of course, the reality of a particular strike is always messy and sometimes produces grey zones that complicate or even defy categorization. But it is impossible to understand the causes, dynamics and effects of strikes without the use of analytical distinctions.

1. The first distinction concerns the *aims* of strikes. It runs between economic strikes that relate predominantly to the workplace, and political strikes that address extra-economic issues. Economic strikes address issues such as wages, layoffs and working conditions. One example for a political strike is the fight for universal suffrage: the labour movements in Belgium, Britain and Germany in the 19th and early 20th century demanded the vote not just through demonstrations, but also by going on strike. Luxemburg emphasizes that political and economic strikes constantly blend into each other (1906/2008: 144).

2. The second distinction relates to the *extension* of strikes: there are 'partial' strikes that affect just one sector of the economy (sectoral strikes) or one particular region or city (local or regional strikes), and general strikes that cut across sectors and are held at the national level (for Luxemburg's use of the term 'partial', see 1906/2008: 142).

3. The third distinction is about the *direction* of a strike movement: Offensive strikes aim to reach a goal set by the strikers themselves (that is, wage increases or the recognition of independent unions by the state and employers), while defensive strikes try to block measures proposed by the government or employers (that is, layoffs or cutbacks of pensions) or are intended to defend rights such as universal suffrage or freedom of the press (119).

4. The fourth distinction reflects the *form* of strike: Demonstrative strikes voice the opinion of workers and are limited to one or two days, while fighting strikes are about striking until the goal of the stoppage or a compromise has been reached, or until the workers decide to give in (143).

The vast majority of the mass strikes in Western Europe since 2008, on the grounds of our typology, are political strikes because they are directed against plans of the government to restrict rights and cut social expenditure. Furthermore, they are defensive and general strikes. Finally, they are usually demonstrative strikes limited to one or two days. [2] In a nutshell, the type of strike dominating the Western European wave of mass strikes is the political, general, defensive and demonstrative strike.

COUNTRY-SPECIFIC PATTERNS

Vandaele stresses that there are regional patterns of strike activity, and he is grouping European countries into five categories according to their different industrial relations regimes (2011). For a group of 'Southern' European countries – France, Italy, Greece, Spain and Portugal – he describes a common pattern characterized by 'long-lasting employer hostility towards union recognition' (16) and a weak institutionalization of collective bargaining. Similarly, Gall argues that the political mass strike became the main strike method in the same countries since the late 1990s, reflecting the fact that the ties between social democratic parties and the union movement have not been very close in these countries, given the huge weight of communist trade unions (Gall, 2012: 20ff).

What is noteworthy is that the countries in question are also those where the vast majority of political strikes against austerity happened after 2008. So one could see this as a case of path

dependency rather than a new political dynamic. But there is still a much higher frequency of these strike since 2009. This suggests that two factors come together: First, the countries already had an established tradition of the political strike, which emerged in the late 1990s; and, second, the countries are worst hit by the Eurozone crisis (with the exception of France). Besides, there is a genuinely new development in that the strike wave reaches countries that do not belong to this first group: there were political strikes against austerity in the UK (which, according to Vandaele, belong to a Western European group) and in Belgium (which belongs to a Western-central European group). In the UK, the strikes have so far been confined to the public sector, but there are debates among the unions about the possibility of a genuine general strike (Gallas and Nowak, 2012: 70ff) – something that has not taken place in the country since 1926.

4. Political Strikes against Austerity as a Reflection of the Conjuncture

The type of strike that is prevailing in the Eurozone Crisis, the defensive political strike, is both a reflection of a specific political conjuncture and of class relations of forces unfavourable to labour. Two aspects of this situation are important for debates on strategies: the fact that the strikes have been unsuccessful to a large extent and the fact that they are facing ‘physical limits’ in the form of violent state repression.

Against this backdrop, it appears that many of the big trade unions in the countries that are affected heavily by the crisis are halfway stuck between organizing protests against austerity and attempts to keep channels of negotiations open. This is changing slowly in some of the countries, for example in Britain, Spain and in Portugal, where unions are beginning to take a more confrontational stance vis-à-vis governments. To illustrate the two aspects, we will take a closer look at the strike against the pension cuts in France in October 2010, given that they

were most advanced form of protest against austerity: it went against the dominant pattern insofar as the strike was not a demonstrative strike limited to one or two days; in fact, it lasted for about three weeks.

THE FRENCH STRIKE AGAINST PENSION CUTS

In spring 2010, the French government announced pension cuts. As a reaction, a three-week general strike against pension cuts erupted in October 2010, the main issue being the increase of the retirement age from 60 to 62. Similar mobilizations in 1995 and 2006 had brought substantial concessions (Lindvall, 2011). The strongholds of the 2010 strike were the refineries.

The strike was unsuccessful despite the fact that there was a broad consensus among the main trade unions behind the strike and public opinion was in favour: According to opinion polls, 60 to 70 percent of the population supported it. Furthermore, participation in demonstrations was high – much higher than in 1968 and comparable to 1995 (1968: 500,000; in 2010, 2.5-3 millions on various occasions). However, in 2010, the number of workers on strike was comparably low: estimates run between 500,000 and 1,000,000. In 1968, 9 million workers were on strike, and in 1995, it was considerably more than one million workers. (During the 2006 protest movement, there were no mass strikes) (Gallas and Nowak 2012: 56ff; USS, 2010).

In 2010, participation rates among important groups like railway workers and students were low because these groups had just been defeated in drawn-out conflicts that had taken place only a few months before the strike. The main bases of the strike were the oil refineries, the ports, and the public sector in the region of Marseille. Outside these main bases, the strikers were very much dispersed across sectors and workplaces, so that demonstrations became the focal points of the mobilization. Obviously, these demonstrations did not have much of an

impact on the economy or the public infrastructure. The strikes in the refineries, which led to a shortage of fuel, had not been organized properly by the unions. As soon as the police and military arrived at the scene, the strikers gave up blockading (Gallas and Nowak 2012: 59ff).

Arguments between the main unions (CFDT and CGT) resulted in a moderate strategy: When the fuel shortages led to problems in the productive sector, the main unions distanced themselves from blockading refineries and fuel stores. The main unions were not prepared to start a proper confrontation with the Sarkozy government, because they believed that the Socialist Party (PS) was not ready for a change of government: The PS was divided on the issue of pensions and quarrelled about the party leadership. Sarkozy's strategy to refrain from offering negotiations or concessions surprised the unions. It was a new pattern of class politics in France.

The conditions of struggle throughout Europe had changed considerably with the onset of the financial crisis, but the main unions in France used the same old political strategies (Gallas and Nowak 2012: 59ff): they wanted to change public opinion. Furthermore, they banked on the PS gaining the presidency in 2012 and repealing the restructuring of the pensions system. Hollande was carried to office by the strike movement but did not deliver on the demands of the strikers that he had included in his agenda. His attempt to restore the status quo ante in the area of pensions was half-hearted: the return to a lower pension age (60) will only affect 110,000 people. The focus of the unions on a change of government turned out to be a strategic mistake.

DEADLOCK

The French example reveals the deadlock that trade unions in many European countries face in the crisis. The old strategies of working with threats and blockades as well as hoping for negotiations and changes of government do not appear to work any longer. The political

strikes against austerity conform mostly to what Beverly Silver (2003: 20) calls ‘Polanyi-type of labor unrest’: they are struggles predominantly based in sectors where layoffs, privatisations and restrictions of workers’ rights pose a threat to the existing labour force. This constellation of struggle produces specific challenges and dilemmas for labour, which mean that winning is difficult: If public sector workers, who were crucial for most of the mobilisations in Europe, go on strike, the state saves money. The strikers can make up for this by interrupting the economic and social infrastructure, for example by blockading public transport and roads, but this is difficult to sustain and creates tensions with the infrastructure users. Furthermore, if workers are indeed blockading key sites of the infrastructure or of production, there is a real danger that the repressive state apparatuses break strikes with force: this happened when air traffic controllers struck in Spain in 2010, and also in France in 2010 at the refineries.

Surely, the political strikes against austerity had a mobilizing character. But the fact that unions in the crisis countries on the whole did not gain any concessions – neither through negotiations nor through attempts to exert ‘influence from without’ (Gall, 2012) – reveals that the working classes in these countries generally lacked any sort of political leverage, which goes further than just saying that we are witnessing the ‘end of social democracy as a credible political force’ (ibid.). And in those cases where workers were able to mount effective resistance and put pressure on governments, repressive state apparatuses intervened on their behalf. How is it possible to overcome this impasse? There are three possible ways: (1) blockades are so widespread and massive that there are not enough repressive forces available to effectively break them; (2) political pressure is strong enough that the government withdraws from violent intervention; or (3) labour activists develop new tactics that deal with violence in one way or another. The first option of an all-out blockade seems utopian, and it is difficult to build effective political pressure. But the labour movements across Europe cannot

evade the question of how to build up effective pressure when faced with governments unprepared to make concessions, but ready to break strikes with violent means. If organized labour is not able to address this question, 'the stage will remain empty' for the time being.

5. Strategic lessons

Unions are faced with a dilemma in the European crisis. They find themselves in a situation of weakness where it would be better to lay low and gain strength first, but they are not controlling the conditions under which they operate. They are under attack and cannot afford to lose because this would have devastating consequences: unemployment and impoverishment for the working people in the crisis countries and a seriously constrained room for manoeuvre for labour. In this situation, they tend to resort staging symbolic political strikes, which thus become the terrain for the reconstitution for working class movements across Europe. The strikes are supposed to represent shows of strength, but their results in terms of concessions are meagre. In other words, governments across the Eurozone have called the bluff of the trade unions by choosing not to move in response to the strikes.

In this situation, unions have to rethink their strategies. But it is not enough to simply call for a radicalization of trade unionism. There are reasons why unions resort to the rather moderate means of the symbolic political strike. Thanks to the crisis, their members are faced with the serious economic hardship caused by wage cuts. Furthermore, they are under the threat of being laid off, and finding a new job is very difficult under conditions of a deep economic crisis. The 'silent compulsion of economic relations' (Marx, 1867: 899) is further amplified through cuts in the welfare system, which make it even harder to cope with unemployment. Finally, it is difficult to call for a radicalization when people have already been defeated at various occasions, which has a demoralizing effect. In this situation, simplistic calls for militant action have a ring of radical posturing. As a result, the starting point of any debate on

union strategy should be on the existing pattern of struggle, and how its elements can be recomposed to lead to a more forceful results.

What is clear from recent struggles is that they happen under two pre-conditions that need to be addressed: unions are dealing with a European crisis, and they are acting in alliances with social movements.

EUROPEANIZATION

The politics of austerity are the dominant pattern of attack on the working classes throughout Europe. They are orchestrated at the European level through the Troika and justified with reference to the future of the European project. This means that organised labour has no choice but to give a European response to this attack. Obviously, this is very difficult considering the diverging socio-economic and political conditions in different European countries. If the northern European trade unions continue to block efforts for coordinated action across Europe, then the southern European trade unions have little choice but to press ahead with creating a ‘core Europe of resistance’ – to modify a term coined by one of the architects of austerity in Europe, the German finance minister Wolfgang Schäuble – and leading the way, just the way they did during the one-day general strike in November 2012. It seems pretty obvious that since trade union movements in several European countries have been staging general strikes in the past years, it would make sense to focus efforts on coordinating these strikes. This could take various forms: a single day of action creating maximum media attention for a short time, or a protest rota with coordinated strikes on different days in different countries, prolonging the action for some time. Neither approach would not require extra sacrifices from workers, but could possibly be a more forceful and visible form of protest and the first step towards creating a European public from below.

Furthermore, there is a lack of a 'grand narrative' flanking the protests at the European level. It would have to counter the claim by the Troika and its supporters at government level that they are defending the idea of a united Europe, and that the protests are a reflection of the widespread Euro-scepticism. Many new social movements and trade unions at the local and national level are linking, in their demands, democracy and redistribution, but this rarely happens on the European level. A grand narrative could lie in stressing, first, that democracy and the welfare state were European inventions; second, that the only way to create a European project with mass support from the European working classes is a democratic and social Europe, which can only be achieved through a clear-cut political rupture with the existing institutions and mechanisms prevalent in the EU; third, that the European Commission, the Troika and many European governments are currently creating an anti-democratic and anti-social Europe, enshrined in particular in the European Stability Mechanism (ESM), which imposes a permanent regime of austerity on the participating countries (Marterbauer and Oberndorfer, 2013: 79); and fourth, that the unions standing up against and fighting together across national boundaries are the true Europeans. Again, working more forcefully at the discursive level for a democratic and social Europe, for example through coordinated campaigns and media interventions led by the organic intellectuals of organised labour, does not put an extra burden on working people across Europe, but may contribute to strengthening their position by introducing 'cohesive' ideas into the protests that cut across national boundaries and countering smears by their opponents effectively. Obviously, there have been various calls for a social and democratic Europe from trade unionists and academics, but these have mostly been confined to national discursive spaces. A first step in this direction could be to work on a truly European call of this type that emphasises need for a rupture with the neoliberal thrust of EU politics inscribed in its treaties and institutions.

ALLIANCES

The politics of austerity do not just affect the conditions of employment; they also affect the conditions under which people raise children; under which they live if they are unemployed; under which they have access to healthcare and eldercare, and so forth. This suggests that people will protest against austerity from different positions in the social fabric, and that they will choose different ways to do so: by going on strike, occupying squares and houses; voting or joining parties opposed to the status quo; or creating alternative social infrastructures. As a result, trade unions are already working in close cooperation with new social movements and parties of the left-of-centre, and this is not a reflection of their weakness, but of their capacity to understand the dynamics of the current conjuncture of capitalism in Europe. Obviously, this creates various challenges, most importantly, integrating the different perspectives into a fairly coherent agenda; but due to the fact that people are affected by the crisis in multiple ways, there is no alternative to cooperation. Against this backdrop, it would make sense to facilitate learning processes on all sides, that is, to exchange experiences and explain to one another one's particular perspective. This is the only way in which factionalism, sectarianism and infighting in the movements against cuts can be avoided. Moreover, it pays to show concrete solidarity in difficult situations: when protesters from UK Uncut, a social movement against austerity, occupied a department store in London in March 2011 during a demonstration against austerity, several trade union leaders came out in support of this action and criticized police repression – an intervention surely conducive to fostering close relations between the new social movements and trade unions.

CREATIVE AND UNCONVENTIONAL TACTICS

Given the recent experiences, one can assume that effective strike action would be faced with state violence and state repression. It appears that the European labour movements have to face up to this fact and consider new protest tactics. In the following passage, we present some creative and unconventional tactics from past labour struggles that might enable trade unions and labour activists to use their resources wisely and to tackle repression. None of them are universally applicable; obviously, different socio-economic and political environments require different kind of tactics and strategies.

1) Flexible blockades: One possibility to circumvent confrontation are flexible blockades of workplaces based on shifting labour activists from one place to another, so that the police is not able to respond quickly to a blockade. Such a tactic requires a high level of coordination and a huge number of activists. It is not very much effective when the number of workplaces is small, as is the case with airports or refineries (there are only ten oil refineries in France, and there were twelve at the time of the strike in 2010). One way the police responded to the ‘flying pickets’ in the British Miners’ Strike of 1984-5 was simply to prevent people from moving around the country freely by creating roadblocks. This suggests that flexible blockading is a tactic adequate in sectors such as retail rather than in heavy industries with just a few, centralized workplaces.

2) Work slowdown: A second protest tactic often used in the history of the labour movement that is possibly less risky for individuals than going on strike is to work slow. Instead of declaring an open strike, ‘working to rule’ can create a lot of pressure on employers. But it is hard to coordinate such an action across various sectors, and it is difficult to apply in some of the service industries and in certain parts of the public sector (Matthöffer, 1971: 178-186; Nowak, 2014).

3) Occupations: In refineries and airports, it seems possible to engage in a slowdown of work . But even there, it can be a risky tactic for workers: the air traffic controllers in Spain were forced to work by threatening them with heavy prison charges if they refused to do so. In this situation, an occupation of workplaces with very expensive machinery, like aeroplanes or control rooms, can be a form of adding pressure. An occupation always goes along with the danger of expensive machinery being damaged in the case of a violent eviction, which makes it very difficult to handle for the police. But obviously, an occupation is a high-risk strategy that requires a huge degree of commitment from workers and the ability to negotiate results that prevent participants from facing persecution afterwards.

ALTERNATIVE SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURES

The crisis led to the emergence of big and small social movements attempting to address immediate needs of the population, be they movements against eviction in Spain (The Journal, 2013) and in Italy, alternative networks of food provision through urban gardening in Lisbon, or alternative health centres in Greece. The crisis affects everyday life in manifold ways in the crisis countries, where basic needs often are no longer met through the market and the public sector. Even if involvement in such efforts requires a lot of personal commitment and a change in culture for trade unions, it is crucial to re-establish a more organic and less bureaucratic relationship between union officials and their members. The Spanish trade unions operate in these areas when they campaign for public healthcare and education. They organize actions in the health and education sector once a week which ensure a day-to-day presence of trade unions in everyday struggles and thus bolster the capacity of unions to mobilize workers for bigger events. [3]

A serious challenge facing people organizing alternative social infrastructures are that at first sight, their activities appear fully compatible with the neoliberal notion of creating a social

sector run by charities and volunteers. In other words, they have to take great care not to offer a cheap replacement for a state-funded public sector run by professionals. In particular, trade unions representing public sector workers could play an important role in ensuring that this does not happen by putting across the message that alternative social infrastructures are responses to unaddressed needs in a situation of deep crisis, but not a permanent form of ensuring people's well-being.

6. Conclusion

The obvious starting point for future campaigns is building on the existing protests against austerity, which enjoy widespread popular support. These are defensive protests focusing on the existing structures of the public sector; and they have to be fought as defensive struggles building on a wide alliance of social forces. In the opening statement to this text, Gramsci remarks that in times of heavy economic constraints, the conditions for new political formations and 'new cultures' of social interaction emerge. In other words, crises require changes of political-strategic orientations. For the case of Western Europe, this suggests that the constraints imposed on workers through austerity agendas cannot be dealt with, from the standpoint of labour, by simply resorting to the old strategies of negotiation and social partnership: in many Western European countries, governments are pursuing political strategies directed against the interests of working people, and are simply not prepared to make any concessions. Unions have to change their strategies in order to have an impact on the class relationship of forces. The struggles against austerity – despite their defensive nature – can only be successful if they lead to a radical change in political-strategic orientation, not

least since the recently restructured ensemble of European political institutions does not allow for a return to the status quo ante.

First of all, this concerns the articulation of the different scales of struggle, from the European down to the local level. The campaigns of the Spanish trade unions in the health and education sectors show that working across scales is possible. They are usually orchestrated from above, but take place at the local level: Struggles against the closure of local health centres bring together healthcare workers and residents using local medical services. This type of alliance calls for a radical re-thinking of the nature of public services, which would be based on considering both the needs of users and workers, and on aligning national political agendas with local demands.

Second, it is important to keep in mind that the political strikes against austerity do not just concern workers. They, build on both unions and new social movements constituted outside labour relations. Besides, left parties also play a role. Again, this calls for a radical overhaul of politics, both of mechanisms of representation and of political aims: a re-vitalization of democracy requires the combination of traditional forms of representative democracy as practiced by political parties and many of the unions with the procedures of grassroots democracy used by the new social movements and movement-oriented unions (cf. Poulantzas 1978: 251-67); the political aims of a movement against austerity results from negotiating the demands of a variety of social groups, some of whom are located outside labour relations.

In sum, unions in Western Europe have to embark on a new politics if they want to fight against austerity successfully. In so doing, they have to reconcile two seemingly contradictory tendencies: the emergence of centralized resistance at the European level and of local, micro-political networks based on self-organization. If trade unions manage to deal with this tension

in a creative and productive way, it may be possible for them to get out of the current impasse.

[1] The recent general strikes in Spain and Portugal were characterized by the massive participation of people belonging to the indignado movements and the organizations of precarious workers. Their marches sometimes outnumbered the official trade union marches. But in terms of effective strike action, that is, the ability to disrupt the economy and the public infrastructure, members of the main trade unions dominated.

[2] There are a few exceptions: (1) In early 2009, the general strikes in the French Caribbean (which belongs to the EU) were fighting strikes that were able to reach their most important demands, among them a price-cut for basic foods and an increase of the minimum wage. (2) Some of the general strikes in Greece took place on days when the Greek parliament was due to decide whether to go ahead with austerity measures. Activists tried to transform demonstrative strikes into fighting strikes with blockades of the parliament (for example in October 2011), but they did not manage to do so. (3) The French strike against the pension cuts in October 2010 was a fighting strike that included blockades of oil refineries. But it did not succeed because the main unions CGT and CFDT withdrew their support for the blockades when the fuel shortage began to affect the productive sector. In the end, the French government managed to implement the pensions cuts without making any concessions to the strikers (see below and see Gallas and Nowak, 2012: 29f).

[3] Interview with Nuria Lozano Montoya, in Gallas, Nowak and Wilde, 2012: 158

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