A Few Clarifications on Anti-Work

The text below is a translation of my post Quelques précisions sur l'anti-travail *initially published online by ediciones ineditos . This translation included several errors, some of them having me stating the opposite of what was meant. The translation below has been corrected accordingly, and is thus the only one being valid.*

For an episode of its program "Getting Out of Capitalism," Radio Libertaire asked me to do a presentation on anti-work, based on the pamphlet I published with *Echanges et Mouvement* in 2005. Upon re-reading it, I realized that there was a need to correct or clarify certain points of view expressed at the time. A few paragraphs in italics are reproduced without any change from the 2005 brochure.

Introduction:

There is some confusion about the notion of anti-work. My brochure, "On the Origins of Anti-Work" (*Echanges et Mouvement*, 2005), did not escape this fate. The confusion arises from a lack of precision in defining the notion of anti-work. On the one hand, it groups in the same category as anti-work certain behaviors such as a worker's laziness, when he or she tries normally to do the least amount of work, or a preference for (compensated) unemployment or living on the margin. Such practices of refusal of work, of resistance, are as old as the proletariat itself and do not define modern anti-work. On the other hand, the confusion lies in classifying as anti-work forms of resistance to exploitation that are in actual fact *pro*-work, e.g. Luddism. I believe that we should save the term anti-work for the struggles of our time (since '68) which demonstrate that the proletariat is no longer the class that will affirm itself in the revolution as the class of hegemonic labor, nor is it the class that will make work mandatory for everyone or replace the bourgeoisie in managing the economy.

To better understand the specificity of the term anti-work, it has to be placed in a historical perspective. It should be noted that what we are interested in here are struggles in the workplace, against the usual characteristics of the relationship between workers and their means of labor (absenteeism, sabotage, lack of discipline in general).

1 – Luddism

Luddism is often identified with 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 smashed machines brings to mind certain kinds of sabotage, especially in assembly-line work. This take, while not correct, explains why Luddism was later likened to anti-work.

Let us recall the principle traits of Luddism (found here). There were three episodes, all of them during the 1810s:

- The Nottingham stockingers: besides the usual problems of wages and rates, they were against the "cut-up" [cheaper method of making stockings] and "colting" [hiring too many young unskilled workers]. Their struggles to defend their craft work led them to destroy machines *that were not new*. They struggled against labor and exploitation practices.

- The West Riding croppers: they were against the gig mill (a machine that was not new) and the shearing frame (a more recent machine), two machines capable of replacing their labor (highly skilled).

- The Lancashire weavers: a more complex case combining bread riots, workers' demands and opposition to the first steam-powered loom.

Destruction of machines should not fool us—Luddism is pro-work. It defends skilled labor against mechanization, but also and maybe above all it is against poor quality (cut-up), which permits the use of unskilled workers (colting) and even women! Its content only looks like anti-work. Luddism defends old-style labor. It affirms the dignity of the worker against de-skilling and in some case mechanization. Politico-syndicalist activity comes into play, associated with violence against the bosses and the machines. Luddism played an active role in clandestine syndicalist movements and was not opposed to long, costly, pointless campaigns of parliamentary lobbying. The destructions of machines were not outbursts of spontaneous rage but carefully organized operations. Finally, that is why Luddites did not destroy the machines they worked on, but only those belonging to the bosses or to workers guilty of using banned machines, of making poor quality goods or of working below the going rate. The demand for good quality work performed according to the methods applied by skilled, decently paid workers *also* characterizes Luddism.

2 – Sabotage according to Pouget and Smith

Pouget introduced sabotage in union discourse at the CGT congress of 1897. His pamphlet *Sabotage* has since been republished innumerable times. Pouget is regularly mentioned as the precursor of today's « specialized workers » (hereafter, OS for "ouvriers specialisés", who are actually unskilled). His sabotage is often seen as the foundation of anti-work. We need to take a closer look at this. Sabotage according to Pouget (1911) was not anti-work, but rather anti-boss.

> Pay workers a proper wage and they will give you their best in terms of labor and dexterity.
>
> Pay workers an inadequate wage and you will have no more right to demand the highest quality and the largest quantity of labor than you had to demand a 5-Franc hat for 2.50 Francs.

Above all Pouget wants to demonstrate that sabotage is an efficient means to put pressure on the bosses over wages, etc. Furthermore, sabotage is proof of the workers' control over production through their unions. Pouget's sabotage is not angry and destructive. It is calculated and prepared. It relates to workers' control over their work, as both a technique and a form of collective organization.

In his pamphlet, Pouget cites numerous examples, almost all of them involving skilled workers. And often these are not cases of actual sabotage, but rather ideas, proposals about what workers could do. His sabotage comes into play to support demands, in preparation for a strike (to prevent scabs). For Pouget, sabotage is primarily a way of slowing down production. He also mentions lowering the quality of output (for those on piecework), or in other words damage to the goods produced. The partial or total destruction, reversible or not, of the means of production is less often mentioned. But even then, no particular hostility towards work itself is involved. And Pouget approvingly cites a railroad union organizer:

> "What are needed are comrades among the highly skilled workers, who best know the workings of the service and would therefore be able to locate the sensitive spots, the weak points, so that they could strike home *without foolish destruction* and, through efficient, skillful, intelligent and energetic action, render a single blow to make indispensable equipment unusable for several days…" (emphasis by Pouget)

In the United States, much of Pouget's text was later taken up by Walker C. Smith, a member of the Industrial Workers of the World. But Smith is much more explicit than Pouget about the pro-work tendency of sabotage. Based on the control workers have over the production process, he talks about

"constructive sabotage": organized sabotage reinforces solidarity among workers and gives them additional control over production. He also describes as constructive sabotage the act of little by little improving the quality of products sold to workers, which the bosses adulterate to increase their profits. He concludes:

"should matters follow their present course, with the possibility of the workers gaining an ever increasing amount of industrial control, then labor's tactics will develop accordingly, with constructive sabotage as the result" (WC Smith, Sabotage: Its History, Philosophy & Function, 1913).

At the turn of the 20th c., sabotage contributed to the affirmation of the centrality of work in capitalist society. Workers (or at least those mentioned in the texts by Pouget and Smith) have relative autonomy in their work. They exercise some control over their rate of work and over its quality. Workers know technically how commodities are made. Sabotage consists of lowering the quantity and/or quality [of their labor], which of course does not please the boss. But this sabotage also demonstrates the possibility of workers' control over production and hence over society as a whole. Sabotage according to Pouget and Smith is part of the programmatic project of a working-class revolution.

"So far as actual productive processes are concerned we are in possession of industry, yet we have neither ownership nor control because of an absurd belief in property rights." (WC Smith)

The Luddites' fight was part of a broader movement of formation of the English working-class unions and parties. In the same way, "constructive sabotage" is part of the development of the workers' movement, which was to become a great disciplined army capable of seizing power. The rise of industrial unionism involves a similar trend. The struggles of unionized skilled labor marked a formative moment in industrial unionism. Insofar as the resistance of craft workers was broken down in small groups of relatively specialized workers, some conflicts could only develop by federating several trade unions under a single umbrella. *In a given workplace or city, workers were divided into various craft unions; for their demands to be successful, their work stoppages had to reach beyond their specific craft or workplace. The practice of spontaneous sympathy strikes, against the advice of the unions, was what led unions to evolve towards industrial unionism so as to prevent and control such movements.*

« Sympathetic action among machinists, molders, metal polishers, blacksmiths, pattern makers and boiler makers had long been commonplace, and a league of their national officers had existed since 1894. But the movement for a formal federation with local affiliated councils, which was initiated in 1901 and finalized by a convention in 1906, aimed to promote arbitration of disputes and joint negotiations, and to suppress sympathy strikes, as well as to move to amalgamate the unions » (David Montgomery: Workers Control in America, Cambridge, 1979, p. 54)

The workers' movement evolved, little by little, towards the affirmation of an ever more centralized and organized class. Constructive sabotage falls within that framework. The ultimate goal of work slowdowns and sabotage is not a rejection of work. "The main concern to revolutionists is whether the use of sabotage destroy the power of the masters in such a manner as to give the workers a greater measure of industrial control." (WC Smith). Far from being anti-work, sabotage helps prepare the working class for labor's hegemony in the future society.

Before shifting to another historical period, we should point out that Paul Lafargue's *The Right To Be Lazy* is not anti-work but rather a text advocating work in moderation (see my critique of Lafargue here).

3 – Resistance to work versus the Scientific Organization of Labor and Fordism

Another notable work is Herman Schuurman's *Work is A Crime*, published in 1920 by the Dutch Mokers group. This text was remarkable for its time. It expresses disgust towards work without laying claim to leisure time. It is against schooling, sports, long strikes, and the transition period [to communism] while advocating theft and sabotage. But the Mokers group developed its ideas in the absence of any real movement in that direction in Dutch society at the time. Its anti-work position was thus unable to free itself from councilist principles and was almost entirely restricted to an individualist attitude.

3.1 – From the origins to the late 60s

It should be noted that the resistance by craft workers to the Scientific Organization of Labor (SOL), whom the SOL sought to eliminate, did not give rise to massive struggles. But, once again, it did push American unionism to transition towards Industrial unionism by way of the *system federations*, a sort of craft-based inter-union, which emerged in the struggles against the introduction of timekeeping.

As for the unskilled workers, which the SOL sought to exploit, their resistance developed very quickly.

Let us recall that the famous *Five Dollar Day* proposed by Henry Ford in 1914 was in no way a gift. *Ford's aim was to solve a problem of massive worker turnover related to assembly-line work: between Oct. 1912 and Oct. 1913, he had to hire 54,000 workers to fill 13,000 positions. On the day in Jan. 1914 on which Ford announced the 8-hour workday for $5, there were scuffles among workers to get into the factory. Ford took advantage of the candidates' enthusiasm to sort them based on their morals, sending more than 100 in-house sociologists to investigate their homes, detect alcoholics, detect any lack of cleanliness or unkempt children. He then set up compulsory English courses for recent immigrants and threw a huge fascistic celebration for the graduation of the first class, with a parade of 6,000 workers to commemorate this "Americanization Day."*

Despite the worker enthusiasm (including skilled workers) for Fordist wages, the constraints involved in the SOL and assembly-line work soon fostered specific forms of struggles. As we have seen, the massive turnover even before WWI was one form. In the 20s, a study on the SOL (and to some extent on Fordism) denounced the practices of cheating and restriction. The author explains these developments by the bosses' inability to crack down on such practices, satisfied as they were that at least with timekeeping they achieved major gains in productivity. The author also expresses surprise that "occasionally, restriction is the result of simple perversity—disinclination to strenuous work"! (Stanley Mathewson, *Restriction of Output Among Unorganized Workers*, New York 1931, p. 123)

The author suggests that the right way to fight against the restriction he observed in Taylorized factories is to introduce Fordism. In Fordism, the rate of work is set by the conveyor belt, making restriction impossible. He nevertheless cites the case of a Fordist factory in which workers had to perform an overly long series of motions and ended up falling behind. So periodically they would toss a part into the assembly-line wheels to make it stop. That was the starting point, the time at which a form of sabotage emerged which was anti-work.

With capitalism's formal domination, craftsmen were dispossessed of their means of production but left with their skills intact. Under the real domination of capital over labor, a second dispossession was introduced, depriving the wage earner of his skills. In assembly-line work, workers have no control over their own time or their methods of work (we will see later that this "secondary dispossession" did not occur all at once and that Capital continues to eat away at the remains of the Fordist and post-Fordist worker's autonomy). Work becomes an elementary motion whose nature and pace are controlled by machines. Labor's skills have been transferred to the machine, to fixed capital. The result is that, henceforth, the content of living labor is merely to bring into being those "skills" of fixed

capital. If living labor wants to adjust the quantity of its motions, then it is left with only one option: to stop working. And if it wants to adjust the quality of its motions, the sole option is sabotage. Conversely, if the worker—needing money—wants to work, his sole skill is to "stick it out." Under such conditions, being against Capital necessarily means being against work, the attributes of which are in the machinery. This does not mean wanting to work for oneself (self-management). The skilled workers of the 19th c. could oppose Capital with the project of a society founded on what they were. Such is not the case for the OS workers of the 20th and 21st centuries. These workers no longer have a cooperative or self-management oriented perspective.

What remains of living labor, the repetitive motions imposed on workers that exhaust them physically and mentally, arouse not their pride, but disgust and rejection. Sabotage, which was one of the proletariat's means of struggle against capital, continues to be employed, but has become anti-work. The Pouget/Smith-style sabotage proved that workers had technical control over production and that they were only prevented from achieving socialism by the ownership of the means of production. Today, sabotage only proves one thing, that all the former skills of living labor confront it antagonistically within fixed capital. The struggle against the boss by means of sabotage or absenteeism has become inseparable from the struggle against work. This is what explains the lack of respect for plant and equipment and the lack of discipline observed in the crisis of the Fordist model during the 60s and 70s. Unlike the Luddites, the OS workers attacked *the very machines they worked with.*

3.2 – '68 and beyond

The crisis of the late 60s was brought about by the fact that Capital sought primarily to raise productivity through speed-ups and overall degradation of working conditions rather than by crossing a major threshold in automation or by lowering wages, as it would later do. In the U.S., the term "niggermation" was coined to describe the methods of raising productivity: replacing white workers by a smaller number of black workers who had to do the same amount of work.

3.2.1 Sabotage

Sabotage and absenteeism are the salient forms of the general lack of discipline that reigned in the post-68 Fordist factories. This did not occur solely in Italy, but that was where workers went the furthest. For example, at Fiat [Italian automaker], workers would leave their workstations and join together in processions which would parade around the workshop, without prior notice and outside the unions. To force the others to join in, those in the procession would use a rope to encircle everyone who was still on the assembly line and drag them into the procession. Sometimes they would break open the doors separating departments and spread out through neighboring workshops. Foremen were totally powerless to restore discipline. Forklift races were sometimes held in the workshop alleyways. After 1973, the practice of "wild canteens" appeared, in which drinks and newspapers were proposed to workers on the shop floor. Whenever a fight broke out, precisely machined parts were used as weapons and ammunition. From the point of view of the bosses, the workshops had become ungovernable.

One well-known example is the GM plant in Lordstown (1972). Built in 1966 in an area far from Detroit, it was designed to do away with particularly hard tasks. The company paid good wages, but imposed a work cycle of just 40 seconds, as opposed to the usual one-minute work cycle. At the end of 1971, in attempt to catch up after a strike, management laid off 800 workers (out of 8000), but did not change the speed of the assembly line. Immediately, quality began to deteriorate. *However, the increased speed was only relative. Martin Glaberman (*False Promises: a Review, *Liberation, Feb. 1974) notes that doubling-up was practiced in Lordstown: two workers in consecutive positions on the*

*line take turns doing each other's work in addition to their own, so that they can both take extra breaks. As clearly explained by Ben Hamper (*Rivet Head, Tales from the Assembly Line*, Fourth Estate, London, 1992), who practiced it abundantly in the Flint factory where he worked for 8 years starting in 1978, doubling-up is only possible with the foreman's tacit agreement. And it assumes that the individual times are sufficiently long. This is not to say that the rate of work at Lordstown had not deteriorated substantially compared to the average at the time. It only means that there was still a reserve of productivity.* Sabotage of quality was apparent in the backlog of cars requiring revision that were stockpiled in a parking lot at the end of the line. The number sometimes reached 2000 cars, at which point production had to be halted to empty out the lot.

The unions were powerless in the face of the mounting lack of discipline, sabotage and absenteeism in the workshops. They chased after the movement but without succeeding in heading it off. This opened up genuine vocations for Leftists in France, the U.S. and Italy. They would achieve no lasting success and failed to create "sabotage unions" or other stable organizations. *There was a key factor that condemned Leftists to failure: on the one hand, the workers were (relatively) well paid, and on the other, they had no desire to reform the factory. Faced with deteriorating working conditions and accelerating rates of work, 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 easily rejected or absorbed the "radicals" attempting to reform the union.*

3.2.2 Absenteeism

Absenteeism has always posed a problem for capitalists. Whenever a proletarian is able to avoid working, he misses work. Depending on the general situation (full employment or unemployment), he can do so more or less easily. According to current estimates, 1% absenteeism costs the company 1.87% of the total payroll in the private sector (1% in the public sector). In the early 70s, absenteeism had become a major problem in Italian factories. To such an extent that the President of the Republic had to address the problem in his televised New Year's speech on Jan. 1st 1973:

"Workers like to work and in their daily fatigue feel exhilaration in participating in the country's progress. And precisely to pay tribute to that desire to work, which is widespread among Italian people, we must reject the temptations of overindulgence which became apparent, for example, this past year in certain inadmissible peaks of absenteeism." (quoted by Y. Collonges and P.G. Randal, *Les Autoréductions*, Entremonde ed., p. 33).

At Fiat, the rate of absenteeism soared to 25%: every day, one quarter of the workforce would call in absent. What did the no-shows do? Did they work in the black market? In that case, could we call their absenteeism anti-work? Or were they resting up? Probably a little of both. Anyway, Fiat entered into an agreement with the unions by which the latter would combat absenteeism in exchange for a right to information on the group's investment plans. But the unions failed to discipline the workers.

Absenteeism in the late 60s differed from previous forms of absenteeism primarily by the very high rate, as well as what I have called *strike absenteeism.* We can first observe this type of absenteeism during the 1936-1937 strikes in the American automotive 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, self-defense, absence of alcohol, women or entertainment. One general meeting a day. Flint's kitchen could serve up to 2000 meals at a time. This figure does not give the number of occupiers, unless the many non-occupying strikers who also ate there are counted. In reality, there were 450 occupiers at Flint Fisher Body #2 on Jan. 5th and 17 on the 26th. "The problem facing the organizers was not that of convincing the occupiers to leave because it was difficult to feed them or because they were needed elsewhere, but rather to have*

enough men inside to hold the factories." (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 that the presence of their men in the factory was absolutely essential.*

The message was clear: the workers agreed to strike but preferred to not stay in the factories. Occupying the factory or maintaining the machines was not of much concern to them. They did not identify with their work. The same reaction was observed in France in May-June 1968. The occupied factories were practically empty. And when it was finally time to return, battles sometimes broke out that went on for days, like the ones at Renault Flins (1 dead) or Peugeot Sochaux (2 dead).

Did the occupation of the Fiat Mirafiori factory [Italy] in March 1973 contradict this view? Let us quickly review what happened. It occurred during the contract renegotiations. During previous months, the unions had organized rotating strikes and other minor movements, both to put pressure on management and to contain the pressure building up on the workers' side. Yet the unions missed the mark with regard to the latter because the decision to block commodities leaving through gate 11 at North Mirafiori was taken at a March 23rd, 1973 workers' meeting without a trade-union presence. On Monday the 26th, the plan went into effect for an hour. On the 27th, there was a second attempt. Little by little, the movement grew. On the 29th, the gates at North and South Mirafiori were completely blockaded. The neighboring roadways were also blockaded, and the workers set up a tollbooth to finance their struggle. After the weekend, the blockage kicked off again on Monday, April 2nd, but the unions and management negotiated an emergency agreement, which defused the conflict. The workers obtained a wage increase (+16,000 liras), but other worker issues were not mentioned in the accord (length of the workday, grade scale, re-hiring of laid-off workers). The unions won a juicy morsel of cheese: the workers had been granted a training leave of 150 hours per year, and the training in question was entrusted to the unions! (see Paul Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy, 1943-1980*)

In other words, the "occupation" of Mirafiori lasted three days. Tat is the term employed by most sources. But there was no claim of self-management on the part of the workers. Their activity consisted more of blocking the flow of commodities and workers (because they also had to block those who wanted to get in to work) than of thinking about resuming production, which was not brought up, any more than was machinery maintenance. This episode of the struggle at Fiat was particularly remarkable because the workers moved around from one workplace another shouting meaningless slogans. If this was the case, what better way of shouting out one's refusal to identify as a worker? That is why we must not allow ourselves be led in the wrong direction by speaking of occupation. More precisely, this should be described as a factory blockade. And in this case, the workers were well ahead of their time.

That being said, the factory, whether occupied or blockaded, was on strike. Was there strike absenteeism? I could not find many statistics on this episode at Mirafiori. All the sources I used note that the Leftist groups had very little initiative in the movement and the unions even less. A procession of 10,000 workers apparently formed inside the factory and then split to blockade (or try to blockade) the gates at North Mirafiori. How many stayed for this first blockade, which only lasted an hour? It's impossible to know. In any case, the factory had a workforce of 60,000. Where were they during the blockade?

Provisional Conclusion

The lack of discipline that reigned in the Fordist factories in the late 60s is hard to imagine today. Neither the unions nor supervisory staff were able to keep it under control. Capital only succeeded

through investments and relocations, from which it had previously backed away due to the cost. But the factories had become ungovernable, and the very expensive concessions granted to workers had failed to get them to fall back into line.

In short, by the mid-70s, the bosses at Fiat had granted:

- large wage increases
- discussion of every job change between management and the worker
- a shorter workday
- paid time for union and training meetings
- 4 delegates per 1000 workers
- the location of any further investments to increase capacity in southern Italy
- wages of South Mirafiori workers = wages of North Mirafiori workers

As for Renault, the concessions during the same period were as follows:

- large wage increases
- elimination of equal pay for similar work
- creation of a new category, “Manufacturing professional”
- monthly paychecks
- attempts at reorganizing work in semi-autonomous groups (not pursued).

All of this ended with the relocations which, combined with fast-rising unemployment from the second half of the 1970s on, forced workers into submission everywhere.

The longstanding proletarian methods of resisting the boss’ pressure in the workplace shifted from being pro-work (Pouget), in the case of skilled workers, to being anti-work, in the case of the unskilled OS workers. Luddism had been one of the formative bases of craft unionism. The struggle of skilled workers against the introduction of the Scientific Organization of Labor contributed to the transformation of craft unionism into industrial unionism. The struggles of the OS workers in the late 60s did not produce any new form of organization, but they modified the content of sabotage by removing any element of worker’s pride, with a systematic I-don’t-give-a-fuck attitude, total lack of

respect for plant and equipment, for union delegates or for their superiors. Sabotage in particular has changed as work has been de-skilled and labor has lost control over the rate of work and motion. It has evolved from a reasoned practice, used primarily to back wage demands and carried out mainly by skilled workers within a union framework, to an enraged, destructive protest by unskilled workers against their working conditions—and against work itself. Sabotage by unskilled workers is part of a more general lack of discipline, evidence of how little workers identify with their work. The unions were unable to control this anti-discipline movement, as is clearly demonstrated by strike absenteeism. These practices have been called anti-work for two reasons: first, to describe the disgust felt towards brutalizing work stripped of any *savoir faire* and, second, to indicate that no workers' organization developed out of these movements of rage and rejection of discipline. The impossibility for the traditional organizations in the workers' movement to take control over anti-work practices did not foster the building of new mass organizations, despite the Leftists' efforts to that end. The term anti-work also translates the idea that communism can no longer be conceived of as a society of associated laborers in a "free economy."

4 – Anti-work under post-Fordism?

It is worth wondering whether the anti-work and anti-discipline of the 60s and 70s survived the great wave of [Capital] restructuring that ensued. In a text written in 2010, I unambiguously answered that following a period of decline, anti-work was making a vigorous comeback. Perhaps this should be nuanced somewhat. After a period of retreat, the bosses had responded to the lack of proletarian discipline in several different ways: restructuring the Fordist work process, partial automation, relocation of traditional Fordism to countries where labor is cheap. The turning point occurred in the mid-1970s.

4.1 – Anti-work against relocated Fordism

Relocation was one way for Capital to rein in unruly labor in the 60s and 70s. These relocations were often to Asia. There Capital found a workforce on which it could impose working methods rejected by Western workers. But after a few years, these new OS workers reacted like Western workers. Unless noted otherwise, the following examples concern China:

4.1.1 *Violence, destruction, rage:* a few examples

- Foxconn Chengdu, Jan. 2011: Riot in the factory/dormitory complex, workforce 22,000. Causes: inadequate wages, especially since relocation from Shenzhen, where the minimum wage was 1200 yuan, to Chengdu, where it was 950 yuan; poor living conditions in the dormitories. The dormitory where the riot broke out was 18 stories tall, with 24 rooms per floor and 8 workers per room. There were neither elevators nor running hot water, electric power was lacking, etc.

- Foxconn Taiyuan, Sept. 2012: dormitories ransacked, on-campus shops looted, cars torched in protest against the security personnel's brutality. The base wage had recently been raised from 1550 to 1800 yuan a month.

- Fugang Electronics (Dongguan), Jan. 2013: the kitchens and the canteen were ransacked by the 1,000 workers on night shift because the food was rotten.

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

- Denso (Guangdong), Jul. 2010: This factory with a workforce of 1,000 (mostly women) produces parts for the automotive industry. For three days, the workers came to work but, after punching in, did not go to their workstations. Instead, they walked around in the workshops, calmly and without causing any damage, and then left, punching out at the end of their workday. Rebukes by management did nothing to stop this. On the third day, management granted a significant pay rise.

4.1.2 Rising turnover **(**10 to 25%)

4.1.3 Murdering of bosses (Tonghua Steel, 2009)

During a protest against the acquisition by a private group of a stake in the steel mill, a group of workers attacked the big boss and beat him to death. The privatization of Tonghua was canceled.

4.1.4 *Sleep-in* (Jalon Electronics, June 2010)

A wage increase on June 1st was followed by a heightening of the work rate on June 3rd, despite the fact that the former work rate was already impossible to maintain. The reaction of these overworked workers was to collectively sleep at their workstations.

4.1.5 Lack of discipline

- Strike waves in the Dalian Special Economic Zones in 2005. Commentary by a business newspaper: “Although the workers have no clear leaders, they are developing a leader-less organizational strategy. Since the workers have largely shared interests and a feeling of shared suffering, they react to subtle signs. Some workers explained that, when they are unhappy, all it takes is for someone to get up and cry “Strike!” and all the workers on the line stand up as if for a standing ovation and then stop working.”

- Siemens, 2012: four workers were laid off for absenteeism. The factory went out on strike. Management threatened to count the strike time as absent time. Workers blockaded the factory entrance.

All this reminds us of Italy in the 70s. The transfer to China of the West’s prevailing working conditions in the 70s reveals reactions similar to those of Western OS workers. But this is a far cry from an Italian-style atmosphere. The struggles mentioned remained by and large isolated, did not directly attack the system of production, and did not normally take place in the workshop. In more recent years, there have been far more struggles, but they most often remain at the level of demands and negotiation. This is linked to the recession, which caused many factories to close and worsened unemployment. Demands for trade-union representation are also probably worth mentioning, whether or not they involve the ACFTU (state-controlled trade union affiliation). This is not aligned with anti-work. An indicator of the degree of resignation and despair among Chinese proletarians is the proliferation of actual or threatened suicides to obtain satisfaction, in particular payment of back pay. Hence, in the case of Chinese factories, we see that the anti-work specific to the Fordist system’s OS worker does exist, but in a limited and fragmented way.

4.1.6 *No self-management* in factories abandoned by the bosses, even though they usually have a low organic composition (textile, toys…)

4.1.7 Case of *Bangladesh*

In 2010, I cited the case of worker revolts in Bangladesh as an example of anti-work. Indeed, in this country where unemployment is high, we see workers protest against their bosses (most often over wages) and burn down or destroy factories. I concluded by highlighting "the strongly paradoxical character of these movements which *defend* the wage-earning condition while *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 and 70s. Moreover, the demand-based content of the worker struggles in Dhaka precludes the use of the phrase anti-work.

We should first note that the methods of struggle in the Bangladesh textile industry have not changed. A few examples:

- May 2010: numerous roadblocks and demonstrations took place in support of a wage demand. At least 8 factories were vandalized.
- July 2010: workers vandalized a factory to get seven managers, including the boss, fired for bad behavior towards the workers, especially the women workers.
- October 2010: the government created an industrial police force specialized in maintaining order in working-class neighborhoods and in the ZESs of Dhaka, Chittagong, Gazipur, etc. This apparently explains the period of calm that lasted until May 2012.
- June 2012: a series of strikes and protests in Narayanganj and Ashulia for pay increases. Ten factories were attacked. Massive lockout (300 factories). But on June 17th, thousands of Ashulia workers demanded that the factories be reopened.
- November 2013: after weeks of strikes and protests for a pay rise, workers found themselves locked out. The police had to intervene to prevent the workers from looting the factories.
- June 2014: Dynamic Sweater Industries workers in Savar were manhandled after they demanded a pay raise. They ransacked two floors of the factory, stealing furniture and surveillance cameras.

In all these struggles, it is striking to see the reactiveness of workers from factories not affected by the initial conflict. This almost instantaneous solidarity is also a sign of the very pronounced lack of discipline among the entire working class. In addition, the wage issue is clearly important. Workers constantly demand wage rises (and even that factories be reopened). Nevertheless, their methods of struggle can go so far as to destroy the means of production, a fact that speaks volumes about the idea they have of their work. There is no "respect for plant and equipment" or politico-revolutionary talk. The struggles stick very close to their immediate concerns. But their methods, their concrete content, speak the discourse of anti-work.

Red Marriot may well focus on the fact that workers demand pay rises so that he can consider their struggles non-revolutionary. He may be correct here, but that is not the issue. Anti-work is not the revolution, neither its beginning nor its model. It is a form of struggle signaling that the revolution's content will not include raising the working class to a hegemonic position to replace the bourgeoisie. And it signals this within the framework of the present forms of struggle by unskilled workers. Anti-work practices are an everyday component of class struggle. As such, they have no revolutionary potential. They are merely an indication of the content of the contradiction between the proletariat and Capital. In an intense and relatively widespread insurrectionary moment, will sabotage of production, factory or strike absenteeism, opposition to discipline by the bosses and the trade unions still be on the agenda? That seems dubious.

According to my contradictor [Red Marriot], one reason why we cannot place the struggles of OS workers in the 60s-70s and the struggles in Bangladesh on the same plane is that OS workers were supposedly well paid at the time, especially in the automotive industry, whereas the wages of the Bangladeshi workers are said to be the lowest in the world (which could well be true). The comparison is shaky insofar as in Bangladesh, jobs in the textile industry are sought after, which means that, relatively speaking, wages are not as bad as all that compared to other possible sources of income. Secondly, RM criticizes me for not taking into consideration differences in the nature of the society (industrialized, developed or under-developed) or the context (massive underemployment, poverty, etc.), for example. 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 goes wherever it can find an abundance of cheap labor. What we are concerned with here is solely the methods of labor exploitation that it proposes and imposes on this new working class. Because the latter needs to work, it accepts Capital's terms. This wedges it into a form of the proletariat/Capital contradiction, which necessarily leads it to rediscover the methods of struggle by those in the West who preceded it. I did not take into considerations the societal differences between Italy of 1970 and Bangladesh of 2010 because I wanted to track the effects of Taylorism/Fordism in its geographical translatory movement. But obviously, if one wanted to examine in depth the societies where traditional Fordism has taken root since 1980, in particular from the perspective of a revolutionary process, there would be much to say. I attempted to do so, in a simplified manner, in my study of China.

4.1.8 *Public transportation*

A woman takes cover behind riot police as protesters throw stones during a demonstration in Bogota.

In recent years, we have seen massive revolts by workers against the poor conditions of public transportation, by which their home and workplace are interconnected. A few examples:

- Pretoria, May 2005: A bus drivers' strike prevented workers from getting home at the end of the workday. Six buses were torched. An agreement was signed at around 9 pm to restart part of the service.

- Buenos Aires, May 2007: Repeated delays by commuter trains led to a riot at Constitution station, which was ransacked and then partially burned down. Nearby businesses were also looted.

- Bogota, March 2012: the city built a model network of articulated buses in dedicated lanes. A modest protest against a fare hike, overcrowded buses and frequent delays, mostly by students

but later joined by hooligans, turned into a riot. Five stations were ransacked, ticket offices looted, windows smashed and surveillance cameras stolen.

- Mumbai, January 2015: repeated delays led to passenger protests. Fights with the staff. Ticket offices were ransacked and the ticket machines looted (for both cash and tickets). Vehicles torched, ten trains damaged. Some 12,000 people were implicated in the destruction of at least two commuter train stations.

- Johannesburg, July 2015: repeated delays provoked a riot, with two trains and a station burned downed.

In my 2010 text, I considered these revolts part of anti-work. The reason is that the time spent commuting is unpaid labor time. Furthermore, public transportation is the link between the suburbs and factories and offices, and it is hard to see why they would be spared the proletarians' rage whereas the suburbs and workplaces clearly are not. Lastly, the overcrowding of proletarians in trains is a twice-daily source of humiliation. These were my arguments to support the claim that these revolts against public transportation were a form of anti-work. It would have been more logical to see them as a transition towards the *anti-proletariat* activity I discussed later in the text, since these revolts took place outside the workplace. But as with anti-work itself, these revolts destroy a component indispensable to the proletariat's reproduction. In their suburban train stations, proletarians demand a smooth-running transportation system, but destroy the buildings and trains. The same paradox was found in the case of Bangladesh, but here it concerned an outside-of-work instance in the proletariat's reproduction. By challenging the commute between work and home, the proletariat attacks what is needed to live as a proletarian. Beyond a very understandable exasperation, we need to see in these practices, which only aggravate the proletarians' situation, the same sign as in anti-work itself, namely the sign of proletarian self-negation as a possibility and a necessity in order to overcome the social contradiction of capitalism. Just as anti-work announces that the proletariat will not carry out the workers' revolution as planned by the proletarian program, so the anti-proletarian practices announce that the revolution will be made, not as an affirmation of proletarian culture, but rather as its destruction. By proletarian culture, I mean all the forms of life and thought which reproduce the proletariat in capitalist society. The 2005 revolts in the French suburbs are an anti-proletarian practice, like the destruction by the proletarians of their own neighborhoods, as in the ghetto riots.

4.2 – Anti-work in industrialized countries

In industrialized countries, the proletariat has been made to toe the line through unemployment and the post-Fordist transformation of the immediate labor process. With regard to the latter, the Toyota production model was considered a perfect model linking the ruthless quest for productivity and association of workers in the continuous improvement of production methods (quality groups). It is in reality a way for the boss to grab the last remaining personal tricks the OS workers had to glean a few more seconds from an already very short work cycle (see Tommaso Pardi, "*Redefining the Toyota Production System: The European Side of the Story,* Gerpisa, 2007). Here we see a new level of worker dispossession. Although they were fairly unskilled, workers in classic Fordism still had some tricks to save time and get some rest. By organizing the workers in shifts in charge of a larger collective task than that of the former OS workers, the versatility among workers that this entails (which differs from a so-called recomposition of labor), the constraint of continuous improvement of work processes, the close supervision of workers among themselves and by the shift head, of the shift heads by the group leaders, and so on and so forth—as a result of all this, any tricks are spotted and

integrated into the workstation job description, thereby enabling the boss to recapture those few lost seconds. Pardi also describes how management by stress involves giving contradictory orders and leaving the worker to make do. For example, if a worker has a problem at his workstation, he can ignore it and let a poor quality part go by. This conflicts with the constant quality requirement, and the defect will be traced back to his station. He will then be penalized. Alternatively, the worker could pull on a cord to halt the assembly line and demand that the problem be solved. But this is frowned upon. The assembly line rate is displayed continuously in the workshop for everyone to see. As soon as it falls below 95 or 90%, everyone knows that there will be compulsory overtime. Stopping the line is not a good way to make friends. Conclusion: do what it takes to avoid problems…

Substantively, post-Fordism is a kind of Fordism which corrects its imperfections to blot out the last traces of laziness which had initially brought about Taylor's approach. I do not know of any struggles in the workplace which specifically oppose these types of subordination. Some probably exist, but they no doubt remain very low-level, especially since computing progress continually tightens worker surveillance. 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 apparently called slowdowns twice, despite strict digital control over their work. It did not go very far. The problem of companies like Amazon is to always go faster. According to AAW, robots are still too expensive. This puts us in a situation similar to the Fordist period of the late 60s: investment in fixed capital is too costly, so productivity gains are made by increasing the line speed—with the major difference that unemployment is now massive, pushing further away the point at which the situation will explode. For the time being, the model works thanks to very high turnover and to the availability of a vast reserve army of labor. At peaks in activity, Amazon Poland and Germany can go get workers as far away as Spain or Portugal.

Conclusion:

I mentioned earlier that the remarks I made in 2010 should be nuanced somewhat. I see three main elements worth stressing:

First, anti-work must be distinguished from ordinary refusal of work. The latter is part of the daily resistance of workers in every era. They use it as a means to survive in the face of the boredom and fatigue generated by working for a boss. The proletarian prefers to work less, or even not at all, whenever possible. This results from the fact that wage labor is external to the worker. Refusal of work exists massively today and, in the core countries, *welfare* comes to its aid. Given the massive character of unemployment and the very harsh conditions of post-Fordist work, proletarian turnover between periods of unemployment (compensated, even poorly) and work (unsustainable in the long run) is a good thing for Capital. Besides, even the most conservative capitalists are beginning to envisage establishing a universal basic income. No doubt economists are wondering what level of poverty this universal basic income should target to ensure that the pressure of unemployment continues to force proletarians to work at Amazon or other post-Fordist exploiters. Meanwhile, it is normal proletarian behavior not to want to work and to prefer living on the margin whenever possible, but it is not particularly critical of present-day society.

Second, by putting certain practices of workplace struggles into historical perspective, such as sabotage, absenteeism and lack of discipline in general, we can see their content transformed from pro- to anti-work. We must delineate periods in the history of sabotage, which was not always anti-work. When it reaches a certain level of de-skilling, labor will go so far as to oppose itself when it opposes Capital, in its daily struggles as well. Sabotage becomes disrespectful for the means of production and destroys what makes it possible for the saboteurs to work. Pouget did not reach that point. He was immersed in a worker culture which is rejected, just like work, by anti-work,

broadened to become anti-proletariat. Longstanding practices, in appearance highly radical, must be reconsidered from the point of view of the overcoming of the traditional workers' movement. Pouget and Lafargue are examples of writers frequently cited by commentators who then go on to advocate the self-negation of the proletariat and the overcoming of work. This is inconsistent.

Finally, has anti-work really made a big comeback in the last few years? The above observations show that, except in a few cases, recent struggles that we could describe as anti-work take place outside the workplace itself. In the case of traditional Fordism relocated in developing or emerging countries, when the struggles attack the means of labor, they do so from the outside, as in Bangladesh. In China, the destruction is more often directed against canteens and dormitories than against workshops. In other words, we have to acknowledge that these anti-work struggles did not develop inside the workshops in a wave comparable to what occurred in the West in the 60s and 70s. In the industrialized countries, the workshops are calm. The tighter control over workers thanks to digitization and the threat of unemployment has thus far prevented any challenge to work. Under such conditions, we could venture to say that any proletarian movement which seriously call into question the current conditions of reproduction of the proletariat/Capital relation will be simultaneously anti-work and anti-unemployment. To attack the work to which it is constrained, the proletariat must at the same time reject the notion that unemployment is an insuperable obstacle. Above all, this movement will encompass in its maelstrom the very heart of capitalist exploitation, namely the factories and offices of the core countries. As productive workers enter into a generalized, even insurrectionary, struggle, the realization will probably occur that the anti-work of the OS workers of the late 60s was nothing but a rough draft…

Bruno Astarian

December 2016

Translated into English by **ediciones ineditos**, Feb. 2017, with corrections by B.A.