07 2014

Instructive cultural conflict in France

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It promises to be an exciting cultural summer in France. Not so much due to the planned artistic activities, but rather because of the combativeness with which the French campaign for fair labour conditions in the cultural sector, and for everyone with discontinuous employment. Many French summer festivals receive an ‘adjusted’ programme. A plethora of actions are drawing attention to the precarious situation of cultural workers due to the downsizing and marketing policy that the French authorities wish to implement.

The interim situation on 14 July: in recent days, a number of performances were cancelled in Avignon, Tours, Arles, Aix-en-Provence, Paris, Marseille, Lyon, Strasbourg, Montpellier, Rennes and other cities. As one may expect from a cultural conflict, there was creative experimentation with various means of action: flash mobs, free performances, demonstrations using giants, naked protests, open universities, and festive occupations of public space. Alternatively, there were targeted protests in which, prior to the performance, the actors cordially requested that ministers and other policy politicians leave the theatre. Call it a polite public shaming. A great many artists, including theatre icons Peter Brook and Thomas Ostermeier, proclaimed messages of solidarity. A

while back, director Franck Halimi went on a hunger strike for 52 days. The broadcaster Arte (Strasbourg) went on strike. Fnac in Avignon was occupied by a sit-in protest. The new actions were discussed at public meetings throughout France. The campaigners hope that it becomes a European conflict.

Particularly the Avignon Theatre Festival seems to have become an epicentre of the protest. At a general ballot among artists and technicians at the Cour d'Honneur, it was decided to strike on opening day, 4 July. Continual ballots would be organised in the coming days concerning the form of the protest. For instance, Thursday was designated as the weekly day of coordinated action, and also Saturday 12 July would be a second national strike day: the stages at eight of the thirteen performances of the official in-festival shows remained empty that evening. In the afternoon, 2,000 *intermittents* paraded from the station to the centre of town. The Off-festival 'only' cancelled hundred performances. They agreed that "The off must go on." For groups in the Festival Off, most of who can count on little or no subsidies, performing is tantamount to survival. "*Non merci!*" Prior to each performance at the festival, the same appeal resounds through the loudspeakers. "We will not participate in a divide-and-conquer policy between various cultural domains. We stand alongside all interim workers and seasonal labourers." Applause in the theatre invariably follows.

The Belgian troupe Zoo Théâtre (Françoise Bloch) joined the protest of their French colleagues. The Theâtre des Doms in Avignon received a visit from the (resigning) Belgian Minister of Culture from the French Community, Fadila Laanan. After the performance of *Blackbird* (Collectif Impakt), with the minister in attendance, the podium was occupied ("stormed") by Belgian cultural workers. They voiced their support for the *intermittents* movement and pointed out the similarities with the new Belgian

artist statute. That evening at a swank reception, just prior to the planned speech by the minister, the Belgian *intermittents* read a text aloud to her, which ended as follows: "We, the Belgian cultural workers, are here to say that we do not have the heart to raise a glass and toast with you this evening." This was followed by a silent exit by all the cultural workers and artists from twelve companies. The surprised minister and high-level attendees stayed behind alone, dismayed and dumbfounded. Also Belgian actor and director Josse De Pauw started his performance of *Huis* at the In Festival with a show of support. "Many countries are saving in the wrong way, putting precisely the fragile statutes at risk."

Cuts to culture

The reason? Francois Hollande and Prime Minister Manuel Valls recently decided to cut the French cultural budget by 2.3%. This fits into the framework of the great *"Pacte de Responsibilité et de Solidarité"* with which the Social-Democrat President intends to save 50 billion euro in order to provide more "oxygen" to French companies. Additionally, cultural workers were hit by cutbacks of 2 billion euro in unemployment insurance, 400 million of which would have to be coughed up by the so-called *intermittents du spectacle*.

These *'intermittents'* are part-time/casual workers in the entertainment industry – TV, performing arts, music, audiovisual media, circus, shows, and festivals – with a special statute. This statute applies to work that follows an 'interrupted' or discontinuous course – thus from day to day – from one project to the next. It is unique because artists as well as supporting technicians are therefore not forced to operate as independent

contractors or under the table, and consequently may enjoy labour rights and, to a certain extent, unemployment benefits.

In a recent interview, Belgian artist Kobe Matthys, who enthusiastically supports the resistance of the *intermittents*, pointed out that our so-called Belgian 'artist statute', which came about in 2003 under the guidance of the NICC (New International Cultural Centre), is inspired in part by the statute of the *intermittents*. Existing Belgian legislation from 1969, to which principally performing artists could appeal, was at that time extended to all artists. Today, Kobe Matthys and the *State of the arts* collective are working hard by way of petitions to open up this 'artist statute' to all employees with a discontinuous job. After the reform in early 2014, however, the statute became a stricter and more exclusive affair for artists, safely delineated with an 'artist visa' in order to guarantee that it continued to be a matter of an 'exception for the arts'. This is clearly a savings measure.

At the same time, do not make too much of the exception that the French *intermittents* creates. For instance, this special labour contract, which dates from 1936 and has been adjusted several times, provides the right to a number of paid 'unemployed days', but then calculated according to limited 'working hours' in which the time for rehearsals and other preparations do not officially count. Still, in these neoliberal times in which permanent jobs are quickly becoming scarcer, it provides some kind of firm base to an increasing number of cultural workers: their numbers rose from 100,000 in 2000 to 254,394 in 2011. At least, it would be a firm base for all of these people were it not for the fact that the number of those entitled to benefits has been capped 108,000 for more than ten years. Increasingly strict criteria have also been introduced for budgetary reasons.

For instance, there are currently around 350,000 people working in the French *secteur du spectacle* (entertainment industry). 100,000 of them have a regular contract of unspecified or specified duration. The remaining 250,000 are *intermittent*. Owing to that special statute, now they are also entitled to social rights and to have unions defend their interests.

Class conflict

As the French employer organization, Medef is the counterpart of the VBO (Federation of Enterprises in Belgium) or VOKA (Flanders Chambers of Commerce) in Belgium, and in France as well the employer organisations use comparably aggressive offensive strategies in their struggle against the unions and civil society, in the media as well as at the negotiating table. Due to the 'success' of the *intermittents* statute, French employers wish to reduce to a minimum the number of people entitled with ever-new savings measures. In this way, they erode the only system that protects employees with a discontinuous job against precarization. The fact that only 108,000 of the 250,000 *intermittents* currently receive benefits for their 'unemployed' periods is because the 'ruling class' considers the expansion of this 'derogation' and the accompanying social protection too dangerous for a labour market in which flexible work and mini-jobs are becoming the norm.

In fact, Medef has heavily resisted this social protection since 1990, but now receives support from the administration, which on 26 June adopted the protocol of 22 March 2014 that, together with numerous other curtailments of the right to unemployment benefits, increases the social security contributions of the *intermittents* by 2% and will increase the waiting period for unemployment benefits for half of the *intermittents* from seven days

to nearly a month. In practice, for many this means the loss of two months' income annually.

A striking detail is the way in which the authorities and business elite played into each other's hands this past spring: at the beginning of consultations about these measures, Medef launched the provocative proposal to simply eliminate the regulations for *intermittents*. This shock therapy led to demonstrations and strikes in February and March. The Paris Opera was occupied. Not Medef, but the entertainment sector received a great deal of criticism from the media and public. On 22 March, it then came to an agreement between a few social partners, in particular the stakeholders from the employers and minority unions led by CFDT, the right-wing conservative social-democratic trade union in France. But the CGT, the largest French union, which is also the most active in the cultural sector, and also the committees of the CIP, the self-organization of the *intermittents*, resolutely rejected the new protocol.

Despite the many actions from the cultural sector, on 22 March, and with a high level of mediagenic theatricality, the French Minister of Culture, Aurélie Filippetti, greeted this problematic protocol by Unedic, the French unemployment fund, as "the rescue of the *intermittents*", as if it was her personal achievement. To make things clear: it is not the case that the employees are campaigning for extra privileges. They are resisting the substantial damage of an austerity policy, of a 'counterrevolution' if you will.

This new movement can inspire the cultural sectors in other European member states. It should be noted that the special labour contact of the *intermittents* was already tackled in 2003. This reform tightened access to benefits and subjected the *intermittents* to patronising and incompetent administrative control. It led to a

major protest movement in the summer of 2003, resulting in the cancellation of the Festival d'Avignon, among others. This protest was received broad support, also by the powerful French Socialist Party (PS), which was in opposition at the time. Still, the protest did not achieve its objective in 2003; the reform remained in force. Sarkozy won. But conflict remained on the agenda, mainly because since then, the *CIP* (*Coördination des Intermittents et Précaires*) was able to organize all sorts of regional branches.

The French 'barricades'

The CIP is an organized network that, beyond the boundaries of the artistic disciplines and their corresponding institutions, stands up for the interests of the portion of the 'working class' that have a precarious contract or are looking for work. The depth and effectiveness with which this new movement is developing is something that can inspire cultural sectors in other European member states. Three issues are important in this regard.

Firstly, the CIP is in the first instance an *employee* organization that is able to convince cultural workers to jointly defend their interests without losing sight of diversity in the sub-sectors. Aside from its fundamentally flexible democratic structure, what is unique to this organizational form is that it directly mobilizes around a specific theme. In this way, everyone concerned is immediately involved. It is thus not the case that all the artists or cultural houses must be gathered into an interest group in order to specifically hold consultations from that standpoint. Nor is it the case that points of contention depend on the agendas of certain unions, the leaders of which are unfortunately still embedded in party politics.

In the meantime, we have passed the fifth anniversary of the 2008 banking crisis, the worst crisis since the Great Depression of 1930. An historic opportunity missed: instead of broad popular rebellion against international neoliberalism, the community is now paying the bill by means of a permanent austerity policy, about which even many liberal ideologists are crying out that it only makes the recession worse. Defensive resistance from left-wing parties and unions obviously miss the mark. New, offensive movements are needed that work slowly, step-by-step, in the long term, and in particular speak in clear and plain terms. The CIP is a textbook example of this.

This brings us to a second point. The CIP opts for a joint struggle of the French cultural workers with people outside their sector that find themselves in the same working situation. This is logical not only ethically, but also from a strategic perspective because in this way, the criticism of corporatism – that they fight for their own (elite)
interest – immediately falls to the wayside. The figure of the *intermittent* goes against the logic of the individualization of wages and social rights.[1] The freedom that the CIP defends is that of everyone. One of the slogans from 2003 was therefore: "That which we defend, we defend for everyone."

Since 2003, the CIP – and the *CGT culture* union – has therefore been consistently working on an alternative model for labour legislation and unemployment benefits from a different political choice, even a different societal vision. This alternative model fights for social rights in the context of the contemporary labour market in which 85% of the labour contracts are ad hoc, precarious or of a specified duration. These are the labour contracts of the '1,000 euro generation', as it is called in Italy, or of the '700 euro generation', as they say in Spain, Portugal and Greece. The fact

that the CIP places great importance on solidarity, against the contemporary culture of divide and conquer, is apparent for instance from their basic functional organizational model: rather than dealing with people individually, case-by-case, two comparable complaints are always handled simultaneously during the consultation hours at the CIP permanent centres, so that people in the same situation learn to listen to each other's issues. In this way, together with raising awareness and moral support, social contacts can also be developed. In practice, many pregnant women, who are particularly targeted by the reforms, have in this way already organized cooperatively: the *matermittentes* (intermittent mothers).

Over the walls

Thirdly, the joint organizational form of the CIP testifies to thorough and sustained commitment. Whereas many cultural sectors, as regards to activism, often do not get further than flash in the pan protests that moreover are generally but a brief reaction to current mediagenic reality, here we have a collectively coordinated opposition that, for instance, protests systematically at the obligatory annual re-ratification of the 2003 reforms. In this way, every year, for eleven years now, they refer back to point where cultural policy took a wrong turn. It also appears that most *intermittents* are well aware of the basics of a technically complex file, such that deception tactics intended to demoralize or sow confusion have little impact. This is because the CIP has social centres in 35 locations, providing a local point of contact.

In the Summer issue of the CIP magazine, "*Interluttants*", we read how the various cells find support in the CAP (*Conséquences de l'Aplication du Protocole*): a headquarters that, somewhat like our Renters Union, informs, advises and gives guidance for problems.

This headquarters also provides representatives that are present as support at local public meetings. Furthermore, there is the *CIP d' Île-de-France* in Paris itself that, in collaboration with various academics and cultural individuals, centrally coordinates the network as a consultancy.

In short, the CIP displaces the issue of social protection for *intermittents* onto the issue of social protection for all wage earners with a discontinuous job, a variable income and different clients. It is not only engaged on the terrain where everyone expects it to be: the strictly cultural terrain. This is also the wealth of this movement: it breaks through the consensus that sees the cultural as 'an exception', an exceptional position whose movement the policy wanted to restrict in order to control it. The CIP, on the contrary, demands new social rights so that this exception can become the 'rule' for everyone that needs it. This approach is already contained in the name CIP. With this, the movement commenced a political battle on the front of precarization and impoverishment where a growing percentage of the workers are victims, often under the silence of shame: artists and so many others.

For those who would like a few tips about holiday literature:
http://transversal.at/transversal/0607/corsani/en
http://transversal.at/transversal/0707/lazzarato/en
http://transversal.at/transversal/0207/lazzarato/en

In his Against Austerity (2014), Richard Seymour aptly explains the importance of mobilizing new, offensive social movements against the current, permanent austerity policy. As concerns the CIP, Les intermittents du spectacle. Enjeux d'un siècle de luttes (2013) by sociologist Mathieu Grégoire was recently published. It is a scientific overview of the history of the CIP. Also see the video report including a

speech by Grégoire during an Audition Intégrale à l'Assemblée Nationale. An older but updated study from 2009 under the guidance of sociologist and philosopher Maurizio Lazzarato is available online on the CIP-IDF website. Lazzarato also wrote an analysis about the importance of this new organization, available in the open online magazine, Multitudes, which already in 2004 devoted an entire thematic issue to the intermittents. In that same magazine in 2004, also see the article "Les intermittents et l'exception culturelle" by art critic and activist Brian Holmes, and the article "Le capitalisme à la sauce artiste" by sociologist Anne Querrien.

This English translation is an updated version of a Dutch article that appeared early summer in the cultural magazine Rekto:Verso. Many thanks to Hugo Franssen, Kobe Matthys, Wouter Hillaert and Chris Gemerchak.

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[1] In his book, *Tous sublimes* (Flammarion, 2003), Bernard Gawzier compares the *intermittent* with the Parisian skilled workers of the nineteenth century that claimed for themselves the name '*sublime*'. The *sublime* was a relatively educated labourer who, due to his expertise, was the boss of his own commitments and could choose his own schedule. CIP points out a crucial difference between the figure of *le sublime*, who disappeared with the Fordist organization of labour, and the contemporary figure of the *intermittent*: the first committed to the logic of individual advantage, while the latter is precisely against the 'everyone for themselves' mentality, and for reciprocity.