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Lotta Continua in Frankfurt, Terror of Turks in Cologne

Migrant Struggles in the History of the Federal Republic of Germany

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There is a difference between a practice of "writing history" and of "telling stories" that some would associate with a change in epoch. The notion of a linear, progressive course of history with inevitable outcomes and grand actors has been discussed in manifold ways within debates on postmodernity. In the history of the immigrant struggle in Germany, these questions have only played a secondary role; here, it is the political context and related questions of subjectivity and political identity which make the decisive difference. The discovery and rediscovery of these struggles was part of the establishment of the anti-racist network *kanak attak,* in both its practical and theoretical respects. Pragmatically, it needed to root itself within a tradition, and learn from a history of victories and defeats. Such an idea of lineage was also necessary in order to deconstruct the image of migrants as mere objects of

racism. At the theoretical level, meanwhile, a historical narrative was needed to show that racism has not always affected the same groups in the same way, and that racism has repeatedly changed with the successes and failures of the anti-racist struggle. Racism should thus be considered a social relationship centered on its struggle, not on racist identities (Bojadžijev, 2002, 2003).

For *kanak attak*, this approach proved to be fruitful: current changes in the migration regime and in naturalization policy were thus seen within their historical contexts. From this perspective, *kanak attak* developed a critique of the notion of integration, which, in the face of historical conflicts, appears as merely the demand for individual assimilation. The promise of integration conceals the fact that most migrants in the German Federal Republic have been deprived of their rights, and that historically they have always struggled against this dispossession.

Two of the most famous examples of Germany's virtually unknown history of migrant struggles illustrate its continuity with the current migration regime.

The Frankfurt housing battle

In autumn of 1970, students, homeless families, and foreign workers began squatting an empty house at 47 Eppsteiner Strasse in the Westend district of Frankfurt, probably the first such case in post-war Germany. The houses at 20 Liebigstrasse and 24 Corneliusstraße were taken over by squatters one month later. The immediate response to the squats was very positive within the local press (with the exception of the FAZ), national TV broadcasts, among the local population, and even with some members of the ruling Social Democratic Party (SPD), which regarded the squats

as an illegal but nevertheless legitimate means of drawing attention to the miserable conditions within the housing market.

For the students, the squats were self-empowerment actions, asserting the right to "finally escape the isolation of the landlady's musty attic and patronizing, repressive parental homes" (Stracke 1980: 100). They were motivated by discrimination in the housing search, astronomically high rents, and revulsion towards tiny student dormitories, unwilling to solve the problem by starting a family. From there, the movement developed into a far-reaching critique of the Fordist way of life: "The apartments clearly show they were built by profiteers, with no regard for the well-being of their occupants. They are built so that you can just watch TV and then go to bed, to be ready again for work the next day" (leaflet "Wir bleiben drin" [We Will Stay], Housing Council / AStA 1973).

Migrant workers were most strongly discriminated against in the housing market. For the first recruitment contracts in the mid-1950s, they were mostly accommodated in dormitories provided by their employers. To minimize costs, companies organized barrack settlements meeting minimum requirements: a bed, a wardrobe, a seat, and one toilet for every fifteen workers. In today's refugee accommodations, these conditions do not seem to have changed much. Room furnishings include one bed and one chair per person. Burners, tables, and cupboards are split between three people (cf. Kühne / Rüßler 2000, p. 151).

Those who wanted to bring their families to Germany or simply escape the shabby dormitories discovered that the free housing market had little to offer. Foreigners lived in areas designated nonresidential: extreme emission zones or severely dilapidated neighborhoods. In the early 1970s, two-thirds of the migrant

workers in Frankfurt – aside from those in factory-owned housing or camps – stayed in run-down old apartments or single rooms whose rents were too high for German tenants. Given the greater housing shortage, foreigners found themselves forced to accept those conditions (Borris 1973). Less than one third of the migrants in Frankfurt lived in houses with furnishings comparable to the German average. However, the majority paid rents appropriate for modern luxury apartments. In 1971, although most of them were entitled to it, only three percent of non-German tenants received housing assistance benefits, and a mere 60 applicants were granted public housing.

As a result, migrant apartment seekers played a special role in the restructuring of Frankfurt's Westend. They were charged high rents, despite living in derelict houses, lacking even minimal repairs. In this way, buildings could be rented out for high profits right up to their planned demolition dates. In 1971, some tenants paid up to 900 DM for tiny, pest-infested holes. At the same time, migrants were blamed for the poor condition of the houses. Thus, the citizens' initiative *Aktionsgemeinschaft Westend eV* (AGW), which had collected extensive data on high rents and overcrowding in migrant houses, directed them "to avoid noise and not to throw any waste next to the rubbish bins." The ultimate goal was to obtain an official demolition permit, and the real estate brokers appreciated it if it looked like the migrants had caused the houses to fall into ruin.

A case from 1972 illustrates how correct landlords were in assuming they need not even treat the migrants as legal entities. One owner of an apartment building, Mr. Gertler, "had already smashed some of the windows to make the house uninhabitable. Earlier, he had expelled Turkish and Yugoslav workers, who lived on the second floor, by loading them and their furniture onto

trucks against their will. They would be taken to 'camps outside of Frankfurt,' explained Gertler. To outraged residents, he responded, 'What I do with my tenants is my business'" (FAZ, 29 August 1972). Police were alerted, but did not open an investigation. Less dramatically, some owners simply entered their tenants' apartments. An Italian tenant described his landlord this way: "He went to the kitchen and peeked in the pots to see what we were cooking. How often he said: 'You eat very well and use a lot of electricity and gas.' 'You're consuming too much,' he always said. . . . Did he knock on the door first? No. Then he began to walk from one room to another, to the bathroom and the toilet. . . . The first time, I thought, 'Maybe this is some German custom.' The second time, I said: '*RAUS*! [get out!]'" ("Hausbesetzer erzählen," Häuserrat 1974, p. 120)

Apartment owners could rely on cooperation with municipal authorities and the police, but not on acquiescence from the migrants. After some Italian families had already joined the first occupations of autumn 1970, a new form of the housing struggle emerged in the summer of 1971: the rent strike. Several Italian activists from the *Unione Inquilini* (tenants union) had been visiting the foreigners' quarters in the Westend for weeks to discuss the housing situation with the residents. They began with the inhabitants of the house at 20 Ulmenstraße. At a press conference, they explained the principle behind rent strikes: only ten percent of one's salary should be spent on rent. However, the strike took some time to develop completely.

The following February, the occupants of 220 Eschersheimer Landstraße changed the course of their actions. Having already unsuccessfully attempted to improve their situation in the courts and through the Housing Office, they realized that "A housing strike has no strength; it must seek allies" (Häuserrat 1974, p.

111). They prepared flyers and organized a demonstration with over 1,000 participants. In the houses, they not only composed slogans for banners, but also songs about the rent strike, which were played daily on Turkish and Italian radio broadcasts.

From February 1972 onwards, numerous other migrant housing communities followed that example. By the end of the year, dozens of houses were on rent strike, with up to 1,500 migrants involved. This migrant engagement no longer took place in any of the subsequent squatting movements, such as those of the early 1980s. The wave of strikes differed from the first actions in that the different houses' inhabitants had begun to communicate and work together. The strike grew through the experience that everyone should be involved in broader concerted actions, from the core rental strike to the political strike. While the movement was initially driven solely by poverty, which had already forced many families to go on individual strikes, there were now common enemies in the courts, the police, and the municipal authorities. The rent strike, therefore, evolved into a critique of living and working conditions in Germany. From the first Italian family who joined the Eppsteiner Strasse squatters to escape high rents and racist neighbors, the protest had expanded to objections against piecework, poor workers' accommodations, and the lack of access to kindergartens for migrant children.

Simultaneously, there were strikes by migrant workers at VDM in Frankfurt and at Opel Rüsselsheim, where they stormed a German works meeting chanting the slogan "One Mark for All!" issued by the political organization *Revolutionärer Kampf* [Revolutionary Struggle]. At the first German Federal Republic migrant demonstration, in 1972 in Frankfurt's Westend, there were banners against landlords as well as against the "bosses." With the slogan *Fiat-Opel-Autobianchi dei padroni siamo stanchi!* (Enough of the

bosses at Fiat-Opel-Autobianchi!) they also addressed capitalist exploitation of migration. Mainstream German solidarity was not sufficient within the company or in the region. Apart from the work of the left-wingers and the squatters' movement, relations with German society were marked by racism. In light of their housing situation, the "poor guest workers" were pitied at best.

From 1973, rent strikers were swamped with more than 140 lawsuits, eventually halting the movement. Despite the support of the "comrades' attorneys" and *Sponti* activists of the Housing Council, housing communities were overwhelmed by this attack. After losing more than 90 percent of the trials, they were no longer able to launch a new offensive.

In spite of the "cultural revolutionary" effect the actions had within the migrant communities (leading to increased politicization of the notion of procreation, questioning of gender roles, takeovers of public space, and collectivization), a certain narrow-mindedness, akin to nationalist thinking, seemed to lead to the bleak situation that followed. It was not just the fact that the houses which were particularly well-organized were relatively ethnically homogenous, and were therefore free of internal linguistic barriers. There was tension over friendships between Turks and Italians, and an unspoken hierarchy, at the top of which the "most political" communities stood.

The Ford strike in Cologne

Perhaps the most famous of the unknown migrant battles in the Federal Republic of Germany was the so-called Turks' Strike of August 1973, at the Ford plant in Cologne-Niehl. It was triggered by the firing of 300 Turkish workers who had extended their four-

week annual leave without permission. At a works meeting a week before the strike started, the Turkish workers declared solidarity with the dismissed, while the majority of the German employees applauded the dismissals and disciplinary proceedings. The Germans, who, as foremen, finishers, or master craftsmen, primarily held the superior positions, thought the firings were justified: They were always punctual, so why shouldn't the same standard apply to everyone? And they had little understanding of the Turkish workers' situation. At least ten days of their four-week vacation were needed just for the trip to Turkey and back, meaning that they did not truly have even a three-week break. Nevertheless, some German colleagues did initially participate in the strike, albeit hesitantly.

When it became clear that the unattended labor from the dismissed workers would be redistributed to those who remained, their resentment increased. They swore under their breath, and the mood was tense, nevertheless the work continued, until one Turk called out loudly: "Coworkers, how long do we have to accept this situation?" breaking the silence. Within a few minutes, an entire assembly hall was on strike. Later that day, a protest march was led through the whole factory. On the evening of August 24, 1973, a few thousand workers gathered onsite with three basic demands: reinstate the dismissed workers, increase all salaries by one mark per hour, and reduce the speed of the assembly line. During the next two days, the strike spread to other Ford factories. A group of German leftists, named the Cologne Ford Workers, distributed flyers in workers accommodations and among Ford employees, demanding further concessions, such as extending paid holidays to six weeks.

Simultaneously, the works council was negotiating with the management. On Monday, August 27, 1973, as it became clear that

the negotiations had stalled, and with a majority of workers feeling the council no longer legitimately represented them, the strike reached a turning point.

Up to that moment, the media reported about an illegal but understandable work stoppage, notable for the fact that German workers had also joined the strike. On August 27, 1973, *Frankfurter Rundschau* reported that the management was taking under consideration that "German workers also support the demands of their Turkish colleagues," and the *Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger* reported about the "efforts of the Federal Chancellor to bring the demands of the metalworkers on track." However, the management and the works council had apparently changed their strategy after a meeting which led to the election of an independent strike committee. Through radio, television, and even loudspeaker announcements in the streets, the workers of the late shift were urged to stay away from work during the whole weekend. The management wanted to end the strike by reducing the number of strikers. In contrast to the German trade union's tradition, it was not a strike "at home." The Turks, some Italians, and the few Germans remaining stayed in the upholstery warehouse of the Ford factory and organized the strike from there.

After that, however, a divisive campaign began. The union and the works council organized their own demonstrations and were able to win over most of the German employees. On Wednesday, August 29, 1973, only the German apprentices and younger German assistants remained on the strikers' side. There were rumors that the workers' radical stances were fueled by "foreign forces." The *BILD* newspaper rumored about "6–8 Communists disguised as technicians, who had snuck onto the kilometer-wide factory site" (August 29, 1973). The chairman of the works council, Lück, stated in the *Express* that "the playground of the radicals had

moved from the university campus to the factories." Headlines such as "Terror of the Turks at Ford" and "Are the Guest Workers Taking Power?" document how the labor dispute was reinterpreted as a culture war. Suddenly, it was no longer a matter of wage demands, dismissals, and working conditions, but of foreigners who did not properly understand the German employment system.

After less than a week, the management violently concluded the strike, bringing in police forces under the pretext of a "counter-demonstration" of those who were "willing to work" who started to arrest the "ringleaders"—in other words, the strike committee. Among those arrested was Baha Targün, one of the first who had been voted into the strike committee by the Turks. He was later expelled from the country, vanishing without a trace in Turkey. More than 100 Turkish workers were dismissed without notice, and about 600 left their jobs "voluntarily" under pressure. No case is recorded where the works council objected to a dismissal.

Ultimately, the strike failed due to the rift between Germans and foreigners. The factory management, works council, and media gradually succeeded in polarizing the already conflicting positions. German workers had the better jobs and earned more, so why should they strike? The strikers had failed to refute this logic. Perhaps it would have been possible to bridge the divide had it not been regarded merely as ideological ignorance, since the racism was mainly materially based. That is, with the inclusion of migrant workers, the federal labor market was segmented along racist lines.

For the Left, that stratification was something of a conspiratorial trick by the ruling class. Of course, the migrant workers held a special position in society, but this was seen as incidental; the working class had always been international. According to them, racism was not a serious problem, especially not structural racism.

Most of the leftist groups, such as the KPD, the KPD/ML, and the KBW, had not been involved in the strike. They had merely provided plenty of flyers, and sometimes cigarettes and food. Within the Ford factory, however, the *Gruppe Arbeiterkampf* [workers struggle group] had worked most closely with the Turkish employees in support of the strike. This joint struggle was more than just a unique occurrence; for the operationally oriented *Sponti* leftists in West Germany, the migrants were a sort of avant-garde.

Legal, Political, and Economic Struggles

The concurrent industrial actions at Ford Cologne in 1973, at Opel Rüsselsheim, and in Frankfurt's Westend, as well as the many barely documented revolts in guest worker camps (Oswald/Schmidt 1999) ultimately failed. Those who wanted to profit, and those who helped them in the name of the people, apparently had greater stamina. If the rent strikes brought unrest—in the form of court cases, electricity and water shutoffs, or gangs of thugs hired by landlords—political actions only seemed to have worsened the situation. The reasons for defeat are too numerous even to begin to catalogue, though it is important to acknowledge it was often impossible to reconcile long-term perspectives with pressing everyday needs.

With these struggles, the connections between legal, political, and economic battles reached a pivotal point that, while not exactly parallel, must be continued today. In that period, for the first time in the history of the Federal Republic of Germany, resistance to housing legislation practices was linked to the fight against repression in worker housing, and piecework in the factories. This enabled an anti-racism, which, by addressing the racist over-

determination of exploitive conditions, no longer had its basis in humanism. This new anti-racism was not concerned with either the recognition of identity, as in multiculturalism, or an abstract humanistic *conditio humana,* nor did it rely on exclusively self-identifying as victims. Rather, it was a matter of uncovering racist divisions in the labor and housing markets, and recognizing institutional discrimination, to form the substantive foundation of anti-racist policies. Instead of appeals to the German conscience, social and economic alliances are required. Instead of perpetuating the division between Germans and foreigners, which is racist in itself, anti-racist policies must be invented which abandon identity. The rent strike movement accomplished this, as did the Ford Strike, and the many other migrant battles in the Federal Republic of Germany. That is why these forgotten struggles are still worth pursuing.

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