04 2006

Resistance and Organization in Postfordism

On the Attempt of a Militant Research of Precarious Labor

Robert Foltin

Translated by Aileen Derieg

A tool for recognizing class composition[1] is the "militant research " (or "questionnaire" or "workers inquiry" or "joint research"), which is currently experiencing an astonishing comeback in various contexts. The *con-ricerca*, which emerged in Italy in the 1960s, was intended to recognize the technical composition of the working class, and to not only recognize its political composition or recomposition (in other words the workers battles and organization), but also to promote and influence it. Communication and mutual information among the workers were to be set in motion and, as it was once bombastically formulated by Wildcat (still as the city paper for Karlsruhe), to *prepare "spontaneous" battles* (Karlsruher Stadtzeitung reprint 1985).

Based on the experience that many small actions of resistance against the capitalist system occurred again and again, especially after the major student strike in spring 1996 in Vienna and

Austria[2], a small group was founded in 1997 that called itself "Koordination". Its goal was to promote communication and information about the battles and to step out of the ghetto of the scene at the same time. The name was inspired by the "Coordinations" in France. These had formed in all the strikes since the mid-1980s and never became integrated in dominant structures. Leftist organizations attempted to introduce permanence into the Coordinations, but they did not allow themselves to become bureaucratized as the self-organization of the revolts. They vanished with the end of demonstrations and strikes, but reappeared again with every new confrontation and picked up from their previous experiences.

Our "Koordination" was intended to be a tool to make communication and information available to the "small" battles. To this end we produced a regularly published information bulletin and also made its contents available on the net, which additionally served as an information pool for radical leftist papers (such as TATblatt). Due to a lack of battles in Vienna, however, in the long term we limited ourselves to collecting international news.

Influenced by K. H. Roth's "Wiederkehr der Proletariat" ("Return of the Proletariat"), we also turned our attention to our own precarious working conditions: Roth's argument was that many leftists (academics) had adapted their living and working conditions to those of the workers, so that "going to the proletariat" was no longer necessary. He claimed that the failure of all previous traditional politics (socialist, communist or anarchist) has made a more open and grassroots-democratic new beginning possible. In addition, according to Roth, at the global level a "commonization" of the proletariat is taking place, and the positions of the classes are being leveled between the first, second and third world in terms of the communication possibilities offered for battles against

proletarization and pauperization. As people living precariously, we saw ourselves as part of this class and attempted to establish organizational and militant connections between us and the people outside the leftist autonomous "scene".

It was our experience that many people we knew lived in precarious situations. On the one hand this had to do with switching between different jobs and receiving social benefits, and on the other with the dominance of non-ensured working situations such as work contracts, limited-term employment, casual employment and project work. This led to the idea of conducting a "militant research" based on our social contexts. The questionnaire was designed to be flexible; the aim was not to produce results but to develop discussions, which should then promote the flow of information and perhaps even make battles possible. Almost all the questions allowed for either a positive or a negative interpretation (e.g. the advantages of non-guaranteed working conditions were mentioned, such as having more free time).

Responses came from about fifteen people, which were supplemented with conversations and discussions about the questionnaire. The "results" were also influenced by reports and accounts from colleagues and coworkers of those who completed and discussed the questionnaire. Because of the selection of those questioned, most of them were interested in engaging in battles, but also had hopes of no longer being exploited, although the precarity that we live in is to be seen as relative. One reason is that in the scene there is less social pressure to represent something that can only be achieved with money. In addition, there is a secured social environment, from which recognition can be derived. Despite awareness of capitalism, the concrete working and living conditions were usually hardly discussed outside the discussions about the questionnaire. Up to a certain point, the working

conditions were chosen voluntarily, even though some things had simply turned out that way, and the focus was on life in the scene and/or political and cultural activity. And even though there were neither migrants nor the frequently cited supermarket cashiers among those questioned, the differences in working conditions were nevertheless substantial. They ranged from computer projects, in which a lot of money could be earned in a relatively short period of time, all the way to casual employment like hanging up posters for very low wages. What was typical of all situations was the long-term insecurity and the oscillation between a barely manageable amount of work and free time that was often linked with financial and economic problems.

Labor in Fordism was characterized by relatively high wages for men and the inclusion of the unions in the relation of capital. The power relations between workers and capital was expressed in the wage level. This was linked with the discipline in the factory and outside it (from school to the prisons) and the dominance of patriarchal oppression in the family. In Postfordism the factories have not vanished, but have outsourced parts of the work (to small companies or also to precarisized workers such as temporary workers, casual employees, staff with limited term contracts or work contracts). These forms already existed in Fordism just like part-time employment for women. Whereas "precarious" work for men was regarded as a transitional phase in Fordism, for example during studies or as a flight from the factory into political or cultural activity, this tendency has now become much more widespread. Nevertheless, normal working conditions have not disappeared in Europe.

Again and again it is stated that less resistance is possible in Postfordist working conditions, because isolation makes communication more difficult. The purportedly collective protest

of the workers seems to have something to do with uniformity in the factory (or in the office?). People are said to come together less under the new working conditions. Yet even under Fordist conditions, people in "proletarian" organizations, such as the social democracy, did not gather primarily in their places of work, but in their living places and in their free time. The demand for "equality" ("equal pay for all") is the only one that hardly seems suitable now for Postfordist circumstances: differences were "artificially" created in the factory to pit workers against one another on the basis of wage groups, but also on the basis of ethnic divisions or gender. Due to the manifold different living and working conditions in Postfordism, it is difficult to imagine a measurable "equality". It is no longer equal pay for all that could be a demand of this kind, but rather a guaranteed basic income for all.

An important experience that we gained from the research was that for precarious workers the conditions for battle and organization were just as difficult or just as easy as in the Fordist factory. How much (individual) resistance is offered depends more on the identification with the company structures than on the size or (still) Fordist organization. And those who remember the days of political agitation in Fordist jobs will know how great the irritation was with the conformity of the workers and how difficult it was just to talk about wages, let alone battle measures and strikes. Mobbing and competitiveness among workers were and still are quite widespread, as are sexism and racism. It is not necessarily precarity and the Postfordist character of the work that makes resistance more difficult.

Since there were practically no openly conducted battles during the period of the research – there were only a few reports about confrontations in the past – the responses of those questioned were limited to individual forms of resistance. *Playing sick* is generally

only possible in jobs where there is a formal employment situation, in other words in temporary jobs or those with a limited term contract. Where the conditions are given, people make use of them. There is a reduction of sick leave claims in every field, however, which has to do with generally increased pressure on the part of the employers and is only linked in part with "new" working conditions. The fear of being fired has also increased or has always been present in "normal employment situations" as well. In fact, playing sick is used more often by people with limited term contracts, who are not counting on an extension, than by permanent employees. Of course, this possibility does not exist for new self-employment and contract workers.

Working slowly, writing down more hours or demanding more is almost always possible as a defensive form of action. The entrepreneurs often have no control over the actual requirements and the time needed to fulfill the work requirements. Even with forms of new self-employment there is a certain scope despite competition, because the suppliers of products and services know that entrepreneurs cannot estimate the value and avoid insecurities due to the search for new partners. Sometimes it even seems as though a blind eye is turned to this, just like the breaks and passive resistance in the Fordist factory. When several colleagues work together, however, it is important that they have a good relationship with one another, so they cannot be played off against one another.

How limited militant activities were was shown in one response that *ranting* or making fun of the bosses was characterized as "class consciousness". This even happens where personal relationships of dependency on the bosses exist. *Sabotage* and *theft* are taken as much for granted in precarious circumstances as they were in Fordism. The conditions for this have nothing to do with

precarious or "normal" work, but rather with the possibilities for circumventing controls.

Making *wage demands* is linked with the same difficulties as in Fordist companies, depending on the scope that the entrepreneurs have and the pressure that the workers can develop together. There are even situations, in which precarious workers, limited-term employees or contract workers have better conditions to start from, because the entrepreneurs are under time pressure and unable to find a replacement within hours even if there is a work force surplus.

In summary, it can be said of the results of our researchs from 1997 that almost all known possibilities for individual resistance occur and are made use of in precarious working conditions. Even the new self-employed workers, who are really to be characterized as pseudo-self-employed in this case, only identify with their work to a limited extent and therefore make use of many of the possibilities for being against work.[3]

What remains open is the question of organization; hardly anyone can imagine which forms of organization might be found. Suggestions for organizing outside the realm of work (organizations of the unemployed, squatting) were assessed positively. Nothing was expected of the Austrian unions, so perplexity was the main response to the question of "unionizing" precarious labor. Perhaps this should be seen as an advantage, however, since it means that no bureaucratized forms of organization can emerge. I would tend to see one approach today in an experiment that was taken up not too long ago from the anarchist spectrum. Regular meetings of (not only) precarious workers were organized to provide external support for individuals in confrontations, for instance by producing flyers or with publicity work. This group disintegrated when there

were no more concrete battles (before that it had to do mostly with working conditions in alternative structures). The "union" organization should attempt to tie into these kinds of social contexts.

The "Koordination" disintegrated due to internal contradictions. Some thought we were stuck in our own quagmire, as the discussions hardly went out beyond the scene, also influenced by the "scene character" of our militant researchs. We moved outside our own narrow social field most in the case of trainers and teachers in adult education, who usually had limited-term contracts. When one institution was closed (IKL – Interkulturelles Lernen), we took part in the protests. There were hardly any aftereffects. The fact that workers in adult education are more active today has less to do with our project, but is more because many politicized academics from the field of humanities end up in these kinds of jobs. Nevertheless, the proposals for our (flexible) questionnaires within the framework of a militant research of precarious working and living conditions were picked up again in the context of the EuroMayDay Parade in Vienna.

The "results" (or non-results) of the attempt at a "militant research" are subjective and tendential and were also presented this way. My interest was in finding forms of living and organizing in confrontations and battles, attempts to overcome capitalist exploitation. Even though our project failed, I regard the "militant research" as an excellent method for recognizing and discussing connections. If it becomes more widespread, this could be a means of combining struggles, supporting them, making them visible and strengthening them, or even just encouraging people to open their mouths again. In conclusion, I would like to quote a remark from a personal conversation: "It is fun to resist" – and then to talk about it, particularly because a large portion of working conditions are

still unpleasant and alienating. Fighting is fun, establishes communication and relationships. And besides that, then you have a story to tell.

---

[1]On the one hand, class composition is arranged and structured by capital, applied by technologies or the labor organization within and outside the factory, and the composition of the workers to guarantee exploitation (technical composition). On the other hand it is the resistiveness of the workers, their willingness to fight, and their possibilities for fighting (political composition).

[2]The strike was against financial constraints for students. What was characteristic for this movement was that it was decentralized and included students who were not necessarily leftist.

[3]Among the participants there were no interns, who are forced to work for free, and also very few people working in the academic field, who work more and for free in the hope of making a career.