04 2005

MAYDAY MAYDAY! euro flex workers, time to get a move on!

Alex Foti

__Synopsis of previous conflict episodes__

Since 2001, a network of Italian, French and Catalan media hacktivists, rank-and-file unions, self-run and squatted youth centers, critical mass bikers, radical networks, student groups, labor collectives, immigrants' associations, assorted communists, greens, anarchists, gays and feminists have given life to the MayDay Parade taking place in the afternoon of 1 May in the center of Milan, Italy. Milan MayDay has steadily grown in participation and meaning from 5,000 people in 2001 to 50,000 people in 2003. MayDay 2004 mobilizations of precari@s in Milano and Barcelona saw 100,000 demonstrators parading for organizing and social rights as a way out of generalized precarity. MayDay has proved to be a horizontal method of cross-networking the Genoa movement with the radical sections of unionism - thereby enabling an alliance between two generations of conflict based on subvertising, picketing, organizing and the proliferation of multiple methods of action. MayDay has also triggered multifarious urban actions and labor conflicts in the Milano metropolitan area and, soon after, across the rest of Italy - mobilizing young temps, partimers, freelance and contract workers, researchers and teachers, service and knowledge workers.

Many of the deepening transeuropean networks - cross-pollinated at the Florence and Paris Social Forums - have effectively begun to assess the existing political scenarios and realise the possibilities for the radical organization of young precaires on a eurowide scale. There is now a widespread impression across these networks that two decades of precarity have brought a new, and possibly disruptive, sociopolitical identity into being - an identity based on the young/female/foreign-born workers laboring in the service, retail, media and knowledge industries. These are the people agitating and striking for their rights in all of the European metropolises.
Let's see what it's all about!

__PRECARITY: a generalized condition searching for a radical transeuropean subject__

For two decades, neoliberalism has first and foremost been a system of labor precarization and deunionization at all levels of urban and suburban living. This process has created a precarious existence deprived of basic social rights for the majority of working women, youth and migrants. At the core of this process of neoliberal accumulation lies flexible and contingent labor by casualized workers employed in crucial reproductive and distribution services and in the knowledge, culture, and media industries that provide the raw material on which the system functions: information. We, active temps of Italy, call ourselves PRECOG because we embody the precariat working in retail and service industries and the cognitariat of media and education industries. We are the producers of neoliberal wealth, we are the creators of knowledge, style and culture enclosed and appropriated by monopoly power.

Many in the syndicalist CreW that organize pickets, promote MayDay and edit ChainWorkers.org have this strange profile of having a union past and a present working in Milano's media industry. Living in a country where commercial TV brought a dumb tycoon to near-total power, we well understand the persuasive power of pop culture and advertising techniques. Our intent has been to advertise a new brand of labor activism and revolt (i.e. subvertise) by using language and graphics geared to people who have no prior political experience other than the wear and toil of their bodies and minds in the giant outlets and office blocks. We aim to achieve this through the constant reporting of labor conflicts and corporate misdeeds in malls, franchises, megastores, and call centers around the world. We also comment on developments in labor legislation and look at aspects of media activism and popular culture related to commercial and service spaces. We, in the syndicalist CreW, were surprised to find a huge and receptive audience.

And no wonder. There are 30 million partimers in the new EU. These people - and the countless temp, contract, contingent, intermittent, black-economy and migrant workers that escape these figures - are the multitudes toiling in the vast postindustrial economy of the European continent. They will be excluded from most kinds of public welfare and social security, and hence unable to make plans for the future - subject as they are to that raw existential instability that bespeaks of falling through the net because of mishap, disease, madness, obsolescence and old age. The danger of social exclusion hangs in balance over our heads as a sword of Damocles.

We are those precarious people. We are the women of Europe in a feminized workforce and economy that nevertheless reserves to xx people more discriminatory pay and roles than to domineering xy

people. We are the consumerized younger generation left out of the political and social design of a gerontocratic and technocratic Europe. We are the first-generation Europeans coming from the five continents and, most crucially, the seven seas. We are the middle-aged being laid off from once secure jobs in industry and services. We are the people that don't have (and mostly don't want) long-term jobs, and so are deprived of basic social rights such as maternity or sick leave or the luxury of paid holidays. We are hirable on demand, available on call, exploitable at will, and firable at whim. We are the precariat.

The precariat is the sum of all the people with non-standard job forms that have the social standard around which collective life increasingly revolves. It is a condition of generalized social precarity and singularized job precariousness. It is the exclusion of a whole generation - and soon, an entire society - from social rights bearing guarantees of collective self-defense. These rights must have either a continental or eurowide coverage - or else they won't come into being at all.

__Precarity in Europe__

Numerical and phenomenological evidence show that Italy, Spain, and France commonly share large numbers of young employees stuck in dead-end jobs with precarious contracts. Italy alone has 7 million flex workers - not counting the (probable) three million workers paid under-the-counter within the grey economy. In a trend that follows the most developed regions of each European country, Lombardy, Milanos region, uses 1.5 million of the total number of precari. This precarization has already had far-reaching social consequences across the continent. Family formation, for

example, has significantly decreased all over Europe. In familist and Catholic Italy and Spain, fertility has sunk below demographic renewal to reach the lowest birth rates in the history of humankind - thank God for all those migrant families making up for the difference! The precarization of work has turned Mediterranean lovers of large families into one-child, Chinese-like nuclear families or (increasingly) childless couples and singles. Single households are the dream families of the legions of consumer advertisers and corporate marketers: the more lonely you are, the more you need to buy.

Precarious jobs are the major cause behind substandard and poverty wages. The number of working poor has grown in Europe just as it has in America. In 2000, approximately one quarter of workers were paid below average wages in the pre-enlargement EU - with the highest peaks in free-market prophet England and free-market convert Ireland. Women, and especially foreign-born residents, disproportionately bear the brunt of poverty-trap jobs. One third of European women are paid poverty wages. This figure rises to a staggering one half for the foreign-born workers of France and Belgium - countries where strong xenophobic movements give economic migrants an additional measure of grief. For all it's talk about égalité, republican France actually does a comparatively lousy job in economically integrating its foreign-born communities.

Whilst flex work is actually a core element of the contemporary economy, flex workers themselves are still considered peripheral in the public mind and consequently lack any real rights or entitlements. Flex workers tend to concentrate in the knowledge and service industries. The growth of these industries has long been associated with both the shift to postindustrialism as a general mode of production and the shift from fordism to postfordism in manufacturing and logistics. What was taylorized is now

walmartized. The stable class structure underlying keynesian industrialism - with its secure working classes and its loyal middle classes - is now replaced by the darwinist pecking order dictated by neoliberal informationalism where multitudes of precarized workers employed in cognitive sectors produce value to be siphoned off to the world's financial marketplaces. The precariat is to postindustrialism as the proletariat was to industrialism: the non-pacified social subject.

__From the subject to organization: toward a transeuropean biosyndicate of the precariat?__

We are either precaires or cognitaires and we all need to work to make ends meet. We are forced to kneel and bow to hypocrisy, abuse and bullying on the job because we are eminently blackmailable and expendable. In the back of our minds we all know that missing the next paycheck can trigger a sequence of nasty and all too familiar consequences: bills unpaid, basic services suspended, no money for the rent, social retreat, sentimental tensions, sense of anguish as the world seems to create a black hole around you, possibility of eviction, probability of depression, risk of isolation looming, the dark specter of one's own homelessness starkly and painfully in sight.

But how do we best organize and federate? In 1905, American wobblies were able to assemble a new industrial union, both anarchist and socialist in its orientation, that organized unskilled workers from all ethnic and racial backgrounds. What would be the equivalent of industrial unionism a century later, when socialism is a dying ideology and anarchism little more than existential rebellion? There are no easy answers. But it is clear that the social

networks laid out for EuroMayDay now have to transform from events to processes. The times are ripe for constituting a veritable biosyndicate of all temps and partimers across Europe - from Helsinki to Rome, and Lisbon to Athens. By biosyndicate we mean that reticular and direct-action based labor organization built around the communicative practices and conflictual behaviors of the multitudes of flexworkers it inspires and is inspired by.

The San Precario phenomenon in Italy is an interesting case in point. We proclaimed the birth of the patron saint of all flex workers on bissextile 29 February 2004 as we picketed a newly-opened supermarket with a mock procession and surreal prayers to protest the generalization of Sunday work. Within weeks, apparitions of the Saint started multiplying and proliferating across Italian cities. On MayDay this year, a fine statue of the uniformed saint - built and painted by Milanese theater temps - opened the giant parade in Milano. The statue represented a chainworker on his knees in prayer before a luscious altar with his head circled by a tasteful neon halo. Two days later, the biggest Italian daily newspaper began using the term "San Precario" to refer to the radical unions and insurgent flex workers of Italy.

The message was clear: San Precario had successfully become an icon of nationwide conflict. Since achieving popular iconic status, the saints' miracles and holy deeds have multiplied everywhere: Bologna, Roma, Torino, Ancona, Genova, Napoli, Bari, Trento, and many other smaller cities. Building on the iconic success of San Precario, the Italian wing of the MayDay network is currently building a counter-franchise - the Saint Precarious Chain - to give active and timely solidarity to groups of flex workers on strike and provide legal assistance to precari across Italy who need it. The idea is to build social self-representation through metropolitan activism by federating autonomist collectives and local unions around the

social organization of the precariat. As the Berlusconi star finally fades, we are pushing the entire official left for an abrupt change in social policy to ensure existential security for 7 million precarie and precari - and letting everybody know that it is far better to be on the good side of San Precario than to incur his wrath.

The article has also been published in: Greenpepper Magazine, Amsterdam