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The Movement Against the French Pension Reform

A multitude of local struggles which had, for the most part, the common aspect of mobilising stable worker fractions threatened or eliminated by the closing down or restructuring of their company or branch, assembled in the struggle against the pension reform. Without any hope of victory and without any illusions, a fraction of the working class, in France autumn 2010, lived again, in an ideal way, the myth of worker's identity and unity.[1] Workers' identity, eliminated with the restructuring of the capitalist mode of production in the 1970s and 1980s, was revived in an *ideal* way as it was no longer the meaning and general content of the

[1] 'The previous situation of the class struggle rested on the contradiction between, on the one hand, the creation and development of a labour force set into action by capital in a more and more social and collective way, and on the other hand, by the forms of appropriation of this labour by capital in the immediate process of production and in the process of reproduction, which appeared as limited. Here is the conflictual situation which unfolded as *workers' identity*, and which found its immediate landmarks and modalities of recognition (of confirmation) in the 'big factory,' in the dichotomy between employment and unemployment, labour and training, in the submission of the labour process to the social whole of the working class, in the relations between wages, growth and productivity within a national sphere, in the institutional representations of all that is implied by this, at the level of the factory just as much as at the level of the State.' (*Fondements critiques d'une théorie de la révolution*, p. 40, Ed. Senonevero) Within the self-presupposition of capital, there was production and confirmation of a workers' identity through which class struggle was structured as the *workers*' movement. That has all been annihilated by the restructuring initiated at the beginning of the 1970s, which eliminated workers' identity and a whole declining cycle of struggle, from the official workers' movement to workers' autonomy.

present relation to capital. This 'ideal' wasn't nonetheless fortuitous. It fed from local struggles and found an adequate common denominator in the subject of the struggle *per se*, i.e. retirement, *a symbol of workers' pride*.

The uniqueness of this movement lay in the fact that it was the first, since the French movements of 1995, to occur after this phase of the relation of exploitation went into crisis. In this movement, workers' identity imploded because it had been revived as the fantastical complement to base-unionism. What we will coin under the term 'base-unionism' had to acquire some 'old clothes' in order to accomplish *its own tasks*.

Firstly, we will briefly look at the pension reform within the present course of the relations of exploitation which can define this phase of the mode of capitalist production. How could this reform become a general problem? Secondly, we will look at how the various practices, which made the movement into what it was, implicated with one another, that is, as a unity of the movement wherein its totality is defined as a relation between *base-unionism* and *ideal unity of the class*. At that point, we will also look at why this movement, despite some of its appearances and the rags it sometimes draped itself, belongs to the present cycle of struggles. At the end, we will aim to show the way in which the struggles of this movement took activism (as yet to be defined) out of balance.

1) The Pension Reform within the Capitalist Mode of Production's Phase of Crisis Opened by the Restructuring of the 1970s

> We have to be clear, some topics do not have the possibility to conclude with an agreement, at bottom because they do not pertain to the field of social negotiation. (Nicolas Sarkozy)

> There is no point in striking nowadays. (Eric Woerth) (At the time of events, Nicolas Sarkozy was President of the Republic and Eric Woerth, Minister of Labour and Social Affairs)

a) Asystematicity of the Demand and Workers' Identity

The first essential determination of this movement was the asystemic character of the wage demand. The asystematicity of the demand is, within the activity of the class, the practically expressed content of the disappearance of the workers' identity. In the previous cycle of struggle, which ended at the beginning of the 1970s, the existence of the working class was produced and confirmed in the reproduction of capital. Struggles over demands were assumed as a systematic part of the regime of accumulation of that period. The asystematicity of demands and the disappearance of workers' identity are thus inseparable. Some particular or local demand may still be accepted, but the global relationship of capital to labour cannot concede to demands. The shortage of surplus value does not explain it all. While it is true that the 'money is not there', it was just as much 'not there', if not more so, in France or the United States during the 1930s. The asystematicity of demands is fundamental to the structural and qualitative definition of the relation of exploitation in the phase of capitalist production which today is going into crisis. Restructured capitalism has integrated, as a functional feature, the attack against the value of labour power. This feature is structural and permanent: it is not meant to come to an end.

At the end of the nineteenth century, cartelisation and the headlong rush into accumulation of Department I (the production of the means of production) was the reaction from the capitalist mode of production to the loss of balance between the Departments of production, a loss of balance which had brought about a fall in the rate of profit and the 'Great Depression'. In the beginning of the 1930s, Hoover preceded Roosevelt. In the beginning of the 1970s, the politics of 'Keynesian boost' preceded Thatcher, Reagan, and the austerity plan of 1983 in France. In the same fashion, at the beginning of the year 2010, the pressure on the value of the labour force intensified in order to increase the rate of surplus value. Each time during the first phase of a crisis, the capitalist class reacts spontaneously by intensifying that from which the catastrophe came. What follows after is determined by the course of the class struggle, a struggle whose historical forms are specified by the nature of the relation of exploitation which has entered into crisis.

b) The Struggle Against the Pension Reform and its Content

The second determination of this movement has been its generalisation from the defensive starting point of the *status quo* which, *de facto*, was for the most part obsolete. Within a system of 40 years of added labour time, one is compelled to acquire a protected job and an early career in order to make some sense of the perspective of retirement. Such a situation tends to appear increasingly as a dinosaur among the working class. It is because this defense of the *status quo* transformed itself into a more thorough critique that the movement continued, overcoming the appointed cycle of demonstrations. The system of 40 years of added labour time is a *life sentence*.

The struggle against the pension reform does not reveal anything else other than that which is inscribed into the reform itself. The question is the reorganisation of the *labour market* in the capitalist mode of production as it came from the restructuring of the 1970s, which means precarisation, unemployment for those under 25 years old,[2] and the dismissal of those who are more than 55 years old (2010 saw 350,000 agreed redundancies).

In the new forms of exploitation, the global social labour force is available to capital as a single labour force that is endlessly segmented. This segmentation is a division, a creation of categories, but equally a *continuum* of positions which exist together in the same ensemble infecting one another.

While, until the end of the 1980s, the goal of state action was to encourage withdrawal from the labour market, the capitalist class is now trying to maintain the supply of labour through a great number of new apparatuses. The target is no longer to decrease the rate of unemployment, but rather to increase the rate of employment. In France, there is now more than 10 million workers who are affected by low-salary exemptions, and 8.5 million who receive the *Prime Pour l'Emploi* bonus exemptions. The change of scale is very clear: in 2000, only 2.8 million workers benefited from such employment policies.

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[2] According to the Job Center, in France during July of 2010, the rate of those under 25 who had been looking for a job at least within the year had raised 72% in 2 years. This consisted of 109,000 people.

Because it was its real content, the struggle against the pension reform naturally integrated the refusal of and struggle against the organisation of the labour market. *That is how it became a general movement*.

But, if the pension reform involves the totality of workers because it concerns the labour market, for the exact same reason, it involves them in different ways.

This struggle against the pension reform—just as, in a completely different context and with other elements at stake, that of the *Indignados*, the *Occupy* movements, or the Arab revolts—has posed the question of the present definition of the working class in its segmentation.

c) Unity and Segmentation of the Class

There will not be any unity of the class for itself. This is the third determination of the movement. The question of segmentation is inherent to this cycle of struggle.

The formation of an increasingly unified global labour market as a *continuum* of segments of the proletariat, the implementation of neoliberal politics, market liberalisation, and international pressure to lower wages and worsen working conditions, amounts not only to the disappearance of a workers' identity, but also means that the common situation of the exploited is nothing other than their separation. The tension towards unity exists within the conflict of such separations. This tension is then, for proletarians, a contradiction with their class belonging. The way in which such a situation is solved is not predetermined: the proletariat calling into question its class belonging, or 'barbarisation', racialisation, sexing, that is to say, forms of counter-revolution which are the closest to revolution. The counter-revolution closest to the revolution is the constant possibility that what is the dynamic of the cycle of struggle becomes its limit. Such a possibility exists in the fact that when struggling as a class is the limit of class struggle, revolution and counter-revolution are closely linked. The revolutionary dynamics of this cycle meet, in its own possibility, the real basis of the counter-revolution.

Three essential determinations have defined this movement: asystematicity of the wage demand, generalisation on the basis of the present labour market, and the disappearance of any unity of the class for itself.

However, at no moment did class belonging appear, nor was it even fleetingly produced, as an external constraint. It only folded itself as an *ideal* unity of the class whose demonstrations were a *representation*, unfolding as a *base-unionism*.

2) On Workers' Identity as Base-Unionism's Ideal: Demonstrations, Strikes, GAs and Blockades

a) General Direction of the Movement

The 'strong popular roots' of the struggle against the pension reform constantly referred to by the media was real. It was a social feeling made with the material of an antiquated and obsolete workers' identity. The foundations of this movement were the strikes within the professions which have a particular status or which are still highly structured by a stable and often qualified form of employment, and in sectors where strong collective bargaining agreements organise employment and working conditions. They were at the same time the basis for this ideal unity and workers' identity. Nonetheless, both that which had to be fought and the conditions of struggle dictated by the labour market were the very mark of their obsolescence. In fact, it was another fight that was led, one which belongs to the present; one which comes from a precarised and segmentised labour market. It was led against the crisis of restructured capital, but draped in old rags and invoking the blessing of this working class as it was but is now no longer. The issue of the struggle allowed it to happen, and even called for it. The movement, as a totality, was the fragile and inconceivable momentary synthesis of this contradiction in terms.

Anywhere the strikes started and more or less lasted, the struggle 'against the pension reform' contained more outmoded struggles for the improvement of working conditions and the upholding of purchasing power and employment: refineries, ports, garbage collectors, mail carriers, particular lines of the Paris regional train, etc. The strikes remained within their specificities. Actions were sometimes done in common

through different sectors in struggle (e.g. blockading of highway tolls or other traffic points), although they remained a *juxtaposition* of forces. The unity of the class revealed itself in the movement as an outdated dream in which the demand for the withdrawal of the pension reform was only *symbolising*.

b) The 'Inter-Professional' Assemblies

The inter-professional GAs,[3] which became unnecessary in the course of the strikes, remained very marginal in their expansion and impact within the development of the struggle. Sometimes they were simply the gathering of unemployed, precarious workers, and students who found a way of participating in the struggle. Under the name of 'inter-professional', they were eventually only the gathering place and activity of a particular segment.

The inter-professional assembly, as is shown by their very late formation, was an admission of weakness in the movement of 2010. In the places where the strength or the will to hold a strike was absent, the scattered workers (mainly teachers, railway workers, and city employees) gathered in order to 'do something' or to keep themselves warm. In other places, it gave the opportunity for the inter-union to upgrade itself, or to go beyond its normal audience.

The unions were never 'outflanked'. The GAs mostly contented themselves with waiting, hoping that the unions would call for a hardening of the movement or a general strike. They never represented the slightest unification of the movement, and neither the unification of the various strikes; they could not do so.

The GAs brought together rank-and-file union militants opposed to or critical towards their hierarchy; unsatisfied and determined striking employees; young workers; precarious workers and unemployed with no

[3] Translator's note: Ordinarily, general assemblies are made up of strikers from a particular workplace, organising, for instance, students at a particular facility separately from the teaching staff, and certainly separately from post workers down the road. 'Inter-professional' assemblies are assemblies which are held together by strikers from different workplaces and so on.

place to meet others and for actions; leftists with experience enlisted, or not, in any small group; etc. Confronted with signs of the failure of the inter-union strategy, they organised themselves belatedly as 'inter-professional' assemblies—sometimes renamed 'city assembly' or 'citizen assemblies'. The ambition to overcome the union monopoly collided with the absence of the means to do so and with the impossibility especially in this movement of a *critique of unionism that would not look merely forced or artificial*. The inter-professional assemblies, locked within this contradiction, resigned themselves to the role of an unruly auxiliary, a voluntarist refuge for militants dreaming of union acknowledgment, igniting direct actions like a shot in the dark which quickly transformed, through the resonance of the internet, into grandiose actions.

Because they had no means to extend the strikes, the GAs made the blockades their flagship activity, especially as students and precarious workers were often the majority within them. Blockading was one of the most debated questions. The GAs tended to see them as a form that went beyond the strike through its effectiveness, an effectiveness which came from its *potential* to overcome the demand and therefore to have a 'revolutionary impact'. If the so-called 'inter-professional' assemblies were not the expression of any unity of the working class (or of the proletariat), or if they often were the mode of organisation of a particular segment, one has to ask the same questions about the blockades. Were they, in this movement, the practice through which the segmentation of the working class and its struggles were overcome? Were they the realisation, even partially, of their unity?

c) The Blockades

While stories and testimonies abound, and despite some flights of fancy, at the end of the day, they all ultimately tell us that the blockades were inscribed in the specific course of each strike, sometimes compensating for its weakness, that they presented another aspect of the same struggles, and that union directives were never overstepped.

An emblematic example is that of the refineries: 'Most of the strikers, to my knowledge, were not even present at the pickets. They were

staying home and the core of union members mobilised were not enough for the blockades. They had to therefore accept some help through the inter-unions assemblies of the city, and as such had to accept ending up with a few turbulent individuals, ones however who could basically be controlled from a distance, if not isolated. In any case, the famous external blockades also offered the benefit of the 'blockaders' staying at the gates of the sites, or in the surrounding area, never coming inside.' (Peter Vener, *Trois lettres sur les blocages*)

That the present forms of struggle (e.g. blockading and GAs) are not in accordance with the preferences of the regular union leadership does not mean that they express the overcoming of unionism. Unionism, which is a necessary function of the existence of the proletariat in its reciprocal implication with capital, is an activity that does not limit itself to union organisations. A coordination of the simple activities of strikers can be unionist, without any apparatuses or unions. A base-unionism can exist formally or informally, or conversely, embedded in the most official organisations. As was shown by the struggle against the pension reform, unionism is not structurally a question of organisation or of a formal institution, but a mode of activity. Unionism, with or without institutions, is always invented anew in the class struggle.

The end of workers' identity, recognised and confirmed in the reproduction of capital, contains a crisis of the trade union and political representations of the working class. With this, unionism in its broader sense has become diffused, and this is what we call 'base-unionism' in this text. The asystematicity of the wage demand adds even more sensitivity and instability to this phenomenon. During the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, there was an overflowing of union activity. Autonomous organisations appeared, rank-and-file strike committees fought, often with physical violence, against the central unionism. The latter did not modify its strategy, and persisted against those *contestations*, a mode of existence, which fundamentally expressed the conflictual, but functional, role of the demand and acknowledgement of workers' identity in that period.

During the autumn of 2010, unionist blockades accepted the support of all people, despite the obvious preventive moves of the CGT against

anything unsupervised. In the same fashion which the inter-union assemblies organised the demonstrations, the support of blockades was accepted precisely as a support for fair demands connected to the largely unanimous wage demand for the defense of pensions. As a form of struggle similar to the blockades, the flying pickets, of which the former are the latter's *raison d'être*, do not carry any *potentiality* written into its DNA. One can hope for 'intensifying the balance of power', but that doesn't express anything about the content of this 'balance of power', and above all, one can intensify only that which tries to achieve intensification, and when such is the case, this quickly becomes clear. Obviously this was not the case in the movement of autumn 2010.

The blockading of production ends up being considered in itself as the last act before the passage to revolution (communisation). The struggle for demands would somehow, through the course of the struggle, overcome itself and its demands-based character. Here emerges a loop between the concept of the blockade and the 'necessity' of intervention.

The really existing blockades inscribed themselves within the activity of the strikes. In each case, their efficacy remained conditioned by the continuation or non-existence of the strike on the blocked site. The flying and episodic blockades were conditioned by the general continuation of the strikes. Only exceptionally have the blockades 'overflowed the frames imposed by the unions' (leaflet *Premier Round* distributed on the 28th of October demonstration in Paris), who had, from the beginning until the end, initiated and controlled the large majority of them. At the points where the blockades were able to have minimum efficacy (the refineries), it was obvious, even in the speeches of the media and the State, that 'blockaders' and 'strikers' were identical. Whether it was in Avignon, Strasbourg, or Rennes, the autonomous GAs realised that their attempted actions were little without the 'local union bureaucracies'. The only thing that could make blockading into a particular practice would be its 'generalisation' in the form of 'blockades of the flows'. But if one looks at the October movement, enthusiasm has to be revised. Blockading is not an abstract practice which contains a meaning that is always present with no regard to the movement in which it is embedded. By

such reasoning, one ends up considering the October movement to have not gone far enough, thereby ending in a state of divergence with one of its own practices; or that it is one of its own practices which ended up in a state of divergence with the movement, which is to say the same thing.

The actual practice of blockading is then compared to an intrinsic sense of the Practice of Blockading (with a capital 'P' and a capital 'B'). Alongside the enthusiasm aroused by the blockades, the evaluation of the really existing blockades was always made in relation to a practice of blockading out of any context or 'actuality'. As soon as one essentialises elements of the real, one is then forced to talk in terms of *potentiality* (see further down concerning activism).

Aside from their demands, the blockades didn't ask for anything other than struggle. In the refineries, the very unionist blockades were genuinely existing strikes. Both the strikes and the blockades had demands; the situation was not that of the *banlieue* riots in 2005 or December 2008 in Greece. On the contrary, one can understand the extension of the blockades as the circumvention of the weakness of the movement, as a kind of palliative, or even as the effect of a strong reluctance to engage in a tougher conflict aware that it would lose. There is evidence from the movement of an awareness that the demand playing the central and unifying role would not achieve anything worthwhile. It is not a matter of coincidence that strikes were more or less not in the majority and that they could sustain themselves only at those locations where they engaged in conflicts other than that of the pension reform. The reason the strikes of autumn 2010 did not paralyse the economy was not because they were controlled, but because they were not widely supported nor massive (except on the big demonstration days or in particular sectors).

Nevertheless, one cannot, by correctly reducing the blockades to demand activity, disregard their specific meaning *within the demand activity*. First of all, the practice of blockading is related to the general conditions of wage labour, unemployment included. Processes of production whose locations are fragmented, and the segmented labour force that this calls into being, creates corresponding forms of struggles which are their own. If in the autumn 2010 movement, we were generally faced

with strikes in those sectors with 'communities of labour' which are more or less stable but threatened, nonetheless the presence within those strikes of blockades, and the diversity of the participants mobilised, signify that *those 'communities' are nothing other than moments of a general segmentation of the labour force*.

Secondly however, what might seem strange in the movement is that the blockades, which undeniably correspond to the general present forms of wage labour and the global utilisation of the labour force, appeared in locations where the term 'communities of labour', largely reduced to almost nothing by capital in its restructuring, is not completely obsolete. Those 'communities of labour', where they still could formalise themselves, have been the referent and guarantee of the movement in its characteristics and constitutive contradictions, utilised as a pivot for the blockades and as a gathering force. But, those 'communities of labour', being too weak to even progress on their demands which were both specific and anachronistic in respect to their existence, gave themselves the form of the general within those blockades without abandoning their particularity. This form of the general was determined by the modifications acquired by the wage relation, that is to say, *by that which signifies their anachronism*.

d) Base-Unionism

Blockading is an emblematic activity of what we call 'base-unionism'. The activity of blockading manifests a class unity in a period when the existence of such a unity is no longer confirmed in the reproduction of capital as a precondition to revolutionary struggle. Since the restructuring, and even more since the beginning of the crisis of this phase of the capitalist mode of production, unity is empty if it does not entail the proletariat questioning its own existence as a class.

What appears as a unity is the Brownian motion of elements which are constantly eluding their own belonging to the same set, in the comings and goings between one place and another. In these struggles blockades did not *produce* class belonging as an external constraint, but instead

experienced as alien, which had to be re-discovered as an *infinite sum* to be constructed. The unity is then nothing more than juxtaposition and sum; it is nothing in itself.

On the basis of, and against, the objectified unity of the class within capital, the rebuilding of a kind of radical and autonomous workers movement as a precondition to revolution is no longer possible. The only way to have unity within the class struggle is rather through communist measures. The present necessity to overcome their condition is found by the wage earners within themselves, that is to say, *in their relation with capital*; in their inability to associate themselves without questioning the relation that bonds them together *for capital*, and which divides them *for themselves* in an infinity of situations and practices.

The unity of the class exists; it exists *within capital*. The differences are not accidents to be erased. The situation of the class has become an alien objective unity within capital. What is at stake in class struggle is not the suppression of the segmentation in a unity. This is a formal response that is already obsolete. The dynamic is *not* to get rid of the segmentation, of the differences. The dynamic is rather the contradiction between, on the one hand, those class struggles in their diversity and, on the other, the unity of the class objectified within capital. The point is not to say that the more the class is divided the better, but that the generalisation of a movement of strikes, the multiplicity of struggles, is not synonymous with the unity of the class, i.e. with the overcoming of differences that are considered solely as accidental and formal. One has to understand what is at stake between those diffuse, segmented and discontinuous movements: *the creation of a distance from this 'substantial' unity objectified within capital*.

The movement against the pension reform wasn't removed from this situation but rather gave it a very individualised tone. From the particularities of the central demand and with the specificities of the main sectors involved in the strikes, and against that unity of the objectified class within capital which is for itself only segmentation, the movement understood itself as the recomposition of the unity of the class for itself.

But this could only be an *ideal* unity. Base-unionism produced this ideal unity of the class as its necessary complement and completion, and found the representation of this unity in the large demonstrations. It was, in fact, the confirmation of the disappearance of the *real* unity of the class for itself.

It is through the particular actions of *base-unionism* that the *ideal identity* is actively produced at the same time those actions, within these characteristics, reveal this identity to be ideal. Base-unionism is not a way out of unionism. Nor, in the same way, the reciprocal support between sectors in struggle is a way out of corporatism and segmentations; it is rather their addition.[4] Nonetheless, its diffuse character is not only a formal change; it means that the question is now that of the unity of the class, that of the modalities of its objective existence within capital. The question is that of the struggle as a class being the limit of class struggle. *The way out from the division is not the sum of the divided elements, it is rather the suppression of what divide them*: the fact of being proletarians and therefore to have the unity of their existence as a class represented against them as objectified in the reproduction of capital.

The asystemic character of the demand is not merely a new situation, a type of framework in which struggles with demands unfold without undergoing any change, and having the sole new characteristic of not being able to achieve anything. The asystematicity of the demand is a transformation of practices with demands which double themselves: on the one hand, into base practices which are local and more or less autonomous vis-à-vis union confederations (which are themselves, for example with the CGT, filled with contradictions), and on the other hand, into the production of *class unity as the ideal that those practices invoke and contradict*.

Each segment in struggle, although remaining in its particularity, considers itself as a segment of the 'proletariat in struggle'. This was the role of

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[4] This can even sometimes be an algebraic sum: for example, in Marseille, the support of the strikers in the West Bay stands antagonistic to the interests of the strikers of the East Bay, wherein the support of one set of jobs meant the destruction of another.

the big demonstrations *and* of the circulations of the actors in the blockades. During these demonstrations, one could hear the sound equipment announcing the segments present just as how delegations are announced during the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games. The magical word of 'convergence' has been used everywhere from the union hierarchies to the most anarcho-activist committees of struggle. The task was then seen as the restoration of workers' identity even though the importance of what was happening in the disseminated struggles lay precisely in its disappearance. Through the blockades and the GAs, the workers in struggle were indeed going from each sector assisting one another. But as the Italian *operaisti* would have said: there is no longer any sector which is able to play the role of the crystallisation of a 'class recomposition'. During the whole history of programmatism, up until (and including) workers' identity, the unity was always something that defined itself as such and was for itself; unity was more than the mere addition of the parts.

Nonetheless, in the struggles of autumn 2010, class belonging as a limit only appeared as an ideal to be (re)established; it was never produced as an external constraint. Objectified in capital, the unity of the class became the dream the proletarian wanted to realise. Its problematic character constituted the whole dynamic of the movement. The central demand, in its character of having no possibility of being satisfied, played another role: that of a symbolic unity. The particular characteristics of the movement (pension as the central demand, the main categories in struggle) made the movement one of seeking to live the exterior unity of the class as an interiority.

'No one represents us' said the demonstrators appropriately since there was nothing to *represent*. Base-unionism is the expression of a movement that is altogether very anchored, diffused and without *representation*. Base-unionism is not a matter of organisation, it does not favour necessarily this or that organisation, or even the absence of a permanent organisation; a union like the CGT can be base-unionist. Base-unionism is a functional mode of existence of the proletariat's relation to capital once there is no longer a preliminary unity of the class opposite capital, that is, when there is no longer a workers' identity. It is the functional form

(that is to say, the form which holds the structure of the relation and doesn't attach itself to any immediate form) of the inevitable existence of demands once demands have become asystemic. Base-unionism permeates this cycle of struggle and it tends to become, in the present crisis, the dominant formalisation of the action *qua* class as a limit. Like self-organisation, with which it tends to get confused with, base-unionism is only the first step, one which has to be crossed in the production of class belonging as an external constraint within struggle.

Throughout the course of the movement, the high school students, by their own presence and activities, have signified that this unity and this workers' identity are, in the present moment, nothing more than an ideal. One hoped and waited for them to appear *as high school students*, but it was *as rioters* that they appeared. In the streets, the high school students were the end of workers' identity in action. They disturbed the logic of the constitutive contradiction of this movement, *a logic which, through the mediation of the social composition of the sectors most visible in the strikes represented, made an ideal workers' identity the natural and necessary complement of base-unionism.*

During the two 'hot' days in Lyon, the State immediately delivered what force it could in order to nip in the bud these types of actions, and focused, in the repression, on the high school students who had no right to be on the streets.[5] Expressed through social, urban, racial, and generational segregation, the workers' identity is dead for good.

The famous 'self-organisation of struggles' in which base-unionism culminates is still a form of relation between struggles with demands and an understanding of revolution as overgrowth.[6] It would be the unity

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[5] The same day, the police in Paris organised a traffic diversion of 500 feet around the sit-in of 150 high school students from a prestigious high school.

[6] Translator's note: 'Transcroissance', or 'overgrowth', is a term used by Trotsky to describe the manner in which he thought the bourgeois revolution in Russia, or other less developed areas, could grow into a proletarian revolution, an analysis that has not been borne out by experience. In the texts from Théorie Communiste, the term is also used to refer to the more general, and for them equally mistaken, idea that everyday class struggle, wage struggles and defense of jobs, etc., can simply generalise into revolutionary struggle. This conception is for them part and parcel of programmatism (i.e. the programme based on the liberation of labour). Adapted from *Aufheben* no. 12, p. 37 footnote 6

of the class, the 'convergence of struggles', the (formal) overgrowth of struggles with demands into the revolution, while entailing at the very same time its opposite, a class that would carry its own negation. In other words: having your cake and eating it too. Completely off on the wrong foot by this base-unionism—whereby it finally saw a unity of the class that could no longer be an affirmation *qua* dominant class—activism thought the time had come for its encounter with workers' struggles.

3) Activism as Misunderstanding

One can today be a railway worker, yesterday unemployed, tomorrow a precarious worker, and the day after that a squatter or undocumented immigrant. Activism is the permanent 'What is to be done?' in an era where everything that constituted workers' identity has vanished. It is a permanent 'What is to be done?' which no longer has the mediation between the *particular* struggles and the *general* existence of the class, that is to say, the workers' identity and/or the (existing or to be built) Party, nor the maturation of the class. In all these definitions, there was, generally speaking, a 'being' of the proletariat to be revealed, whether this 'being' was explicit in its political, trade union, or institutional mediations or impeded by them. This generality of the proletariat implies that all particularities are nothing more than contingencies, accidents.

Caught *without mediation* in between the general and the particular, activism is a set of *tactics* that is always unsatisfied with both itself and anyone else (until the next action). As essentially tactics, activism functions like a tool box: generalisation of the action, overcoming of the categorial demands, self-organisation of the struggle, refusal of mediations, autonomy, etc. Consequently, if it is not definitive, it is a strong tendency: activism is normative. Action is then constructed as a question, i.e. as an intervention. The construction of this question makes an abstraction of the diversity of activities: Practice as an abstraction. The question of intervention transforms what is done (or what cannot be done) in this or that struggle—practices which are always particular—into an *abstraction of practice*. It justifies itself by fabricating a dilemma: intervention or waitism.

And now, in this movement against the pension reform of 2010, with the GAs and mainly with the blockades, activism sets foot upon the unknown land of strikes and worker's demands. Finally, it thought it had entered the promise land.

a) Generality and Corporatism: Activism off on the Wrong Foot

In this movement, activism was off on the wrong foot by the fact that its practices which previously appeared as the most radical, those which are usually part of its formula of 'going beyond', were now precisely bound to 'corporatism', to particular and specific demands. By its very nature, activism was led to an erroneous analysis. It could not understand that the strongest actions and sectors were not the beginnings, or even less, the 'vanguard' (e.g. the student GA of Rennes) of a generalisation of the movement, but rather that these actions existed on a particular basis and were, amongst other things, controlled by the unions.

At that moment when there could have been an encounter between activists and the more or less official strikers, it never took place. On the contrary, what occurred instead was an absorption of the former into what was most particular and corporative in the movement. With the blockades, activists thought they were realising the unity and generality of the class which legitimates their existence and their practice. They did however realise this existence and practice in a real and trivial way: on the one hand, as a conscious and happy auxiliary of the CGT, and on the other, in the practice of the blockade as a dreamed unity, as the 'potentiality' of this unity. Activists were doubly happy: first because they were finally *part of it*, and second, because the CGT was not fulfilling the function of being the presupposed generality of the class; it was now the activists' job to be the revealers and harbingers of this generality. They could not see, however, that their own presence was only due to the disappearance of the presupposed generality of the class, and therefore that their action confirmed this disappearance. Activism, absorbed in the particularities and the activities of base-unionism, got off on the wrong foot. Weightlessness is the nature of the movement of activism. For its dreamed practices, it floated; for its real practices (being nothing more than the

auxiliary of the CGT), it was weighted down by lead soles. Even if it sometimes could be conscious of it, the denial of this situation was ready at hand in the form of another one of activism's constants: potentiality.

b) 'Potentiality'

With the practice of blockading, potentiality had found its form. Militantism always supposes a lack in the situation, as in the existing practice; the lack, the potentiality and the tendency are constitutive concepts of militantism. Blockading possesses the huge benefit of dissolving the invisible boundary which makes it so hard for the 'permanent revolutionaries' to have access to 'where it's at'. From the open inter-professional assembly to the GA, and from there to blockading, there is only a step, and suddenly, the critique of 'interventionism' disappears: there is no longer an inside and an outside. But to arrive to that, one must have developed an ideology of the *blockade form*. The only problem is that, just as for the riot, the question doesn't lie at a certain level of violence, of legality (the strike), or illegality (the blockage), of fusion within action, but in the struggles' real content and in the moment which fosters them.

What allows the ideology of blockading to emerge is that the opposition between strikes and blockades mimics the duality of the demand/its absence, or that of particular/universal. As the strikes are supposed to stay imprisoned in a demand relation, the blockades are then permissive of a way out from this relation *qua* fantastical creation of a zero point that would open all possibilities: the blockading of the economy.

At the point where activism tries to float above the immediate practices in which it was invested in the course of the movement, at the point where it considers itself as implementing this potentiality which is the justification of all its attitudes vis-à-vis all which exists, then all the strategies it invokes as its own consist in recreating the true unity of the class for itself as a revolutionary movement. This unity would be true since it would be without representation or mediation. These practical and theoretical perspectives boil down to an effort at making radical base-unionism permanent, which is in actuality a contradiction consisting in being the expression of a class' existence for itself opposed to its own class situation.

Whether this subject is 'the working class' or the 'whomever' that weaves links 'which are not those that pre-exist a class belonging' (*Rebetiko*), the most intimate nature of activism lies in the fact of presupposing a general subject on which it can act as the *revealer* of generality. The question which, by its nature, activism cannot ask is that of a disappearance of the generality as the presupposed unity of the subject that it addresses (whatever this subject might be). It is completely out of activism's possible range of vision that the class struggle might be the fact of an essentially segmented class in its contradiction with capital, and that nothing in this contradiction can overcome this segmentation (other than the abolition of capital).

c) A Radicalism which Belongs to the Old Cycle of Struggle and an Idealism which Belongs to the Present Limits

Naively and without any prior reflection, activism appropriated the category of the workers' movement and its collapse to the traditional and common life of the class struggle, and then, just as naively, made the workers' movement the definition and prior unity of the class struggle. Activism then asks itself what is the present nature of this unity, of this generality of the struggle against capitalist society, *which is its raison d'être*. Its relative success in the movement disoriented it. Base-unionism, which was the entryway for activism, is for it the foundation of a general unified recomposition of the class. From this point on, activism means, firstly, the obsolescence of the empowering of the proletariat as a stepping stone for the revolution, and secondly, that class belonging has become the limit of class struggle. It means, however, all this only as a symptom.

Indeed, when it is activism which sees in base-unionism the basis for the unity of the class and its ability to struggle as a class against its own situation, this signifies there is no longer the unity of the class as preliminary to its abolition and that the struggle *qua* class has become a limit of class struggle. Activism cannot be this unity because this unity can only exist in an institutionalised way and recognised (confirmed) by capital. With the real subsumption of labour under capital, this unity is always a construction in the self-presupposition of the capitalist mode of

production, which is to say that, by nature, it is for activism a contradiction in terms. When activism projects itself as a unity within base-unionism, it is the symptom of the fact that base-unionism is not a unity. The more it goes in search of this unifying activity, the more the answer to the question it has posed to itself involves inextricable contradictions, that is, the disappearance and recomposition of this unity. There is no longer a unity of the class for itself outside of its objectified existence in capital; to act as a class is the limit of class struggle.

The question we have to ask ourselves is not that of an *a priori* unity, but that of the extension, or not, of the separations. This is the question asked in the struggles when they tend to generalise: the tension towards unity is only the fact of a collision with the reality of separation. The 'community of situation' is only given in an abstract or general way in what we are within capital; it becomes a real tension only in struggles. But that requires the presence in the struggle of this tension towards unity, that is to say, a dynamic of calling into question these segmentations. This does not mean the maximalist expectation of The Revolution, but rather the production within a struggle of class belonging as an external constraint, the appearance, even a fleeting one, of rift activities, i.e. within the struggle *qua* class, of practices going against its demands-based character, of attacks by proletarians upon all that defines them in their proletarian situation including all forms of representation. This is the only way the segmentation can be posed as a problem: once it merges with the identification of class belonging itself *and not when this class belonging is assumed to contain a unity to which one would only have to give a form*. If this unity has only been considered as an *a priori* underlying ontology, the solution, i.e. the overcoming of this situation of fragmentation, is only formal since its content is always present as a potentiality. It is then considered that some practices would have, by their own form (e.g. blockades, occupations, etc.), the potentiality to make this *a priori* unity become real.

Activism ends up championing what has vanished: the latent generality of the class and its prospect as a revolutionary perspective, i.e. self-organisation. In activism, the latter becomes an ideology and duly

records its own failure by eclipsing the subject which leaves it high and dry. It used to be that the self-organisation *of the proletarians* would lead to the revolution as the confirmation of the class. It is now instead 'the self organisation *of struggles*' whose function is to 'break frozen social identities'. Activism is an idealism of the previous cycle of struggles; it is a mad obsession with the forms that culminates in the 'self organisation of struggles' and their 'convergences', expressions which have not only become empty in their content, but which also, once they are promoted as radical practices, validate the present limit of class struggle. Liberated and purified by the collapse of the workers' movement, the radical forms of the previous cycle of struggle are now supposed to become 'revolutionary'.

The vicious circle of activism lies then in the pursuit of that whose disappearance is precisely the *raison d'être* of its existence. 'Actions are multiplying and strengthening in their convergence', 'the waged rank-and-file ends up an orphan'. The mistake of the first proposition is necessary in order for activism to present itself, and in the second case, as the adoptive parents of the orphan. The comical aspect of this situation lies in the fact that activism conceives and presents itself as the replacement of the workers' movement, the disappearance of which is exactly how it can come to exist. *Activism at present is experienced as the radicality of the previous cycle of struggle, finally rendered possible*, that of the workers' identity and of self-organisation. It is in practice in contradiction with that which it claims to be its perspective: revolution as communisation.

In Conclusion

Beyond their diffuse, diverse and segmented character, and the plurality of their more or less complementary and opposed forms, the struggles against the pension reform in France of Autumn 2010 established a coherence. Between the asystematicity of the demand, the manifestation of an ideal workers' identity, base-unionism, and the role played by activism, we attended and participated not only in the implosion of the

workers' identity, but also in the manifestation of class belonging within the class struggle as its limit. This limit of the present cycle of struggles was there in its specificity, both as much as in the acknowledged asystematicity of the demand with which the rage relating to political representation, but also in this base-unionism which invigorated the movement throughout. This base-unionism, at the same time that it was the pedestal on which the workers' unity and identity could be dreamed, one which the particularity of the sectors at the head of the struggle made credible, was also, in deed, the obsolescence of this unity and identity.

This movement evoked three questions. The first is that of the segmentation of the proletariat, a segmentation which can no longer be considered as the essential and potential unity, but only as the definition of the proletariat. The second question is that of the overcoming of the necessary demands-based character of class struggle, that is to say, the overcoming of the struggle *qua* class in the class struggle. In the alliance between base-unionism and an ideal unity/identity, both questions met and are now combined. The third question, a more general one, is that of the definition of classes and of the proletariat in particular.

But also: ideology of workers' identity, struggles for direct interests, de-objectification of the social relation of exploitation, political representation; all the instances of the capitalist mode of production which compose the class struggle are put into play together, and are made to play with their allocation and the accepted determination of their relationship. There will be ideology, economy, sex, social, societal, and politics in a revolutionary movement which will, in the course of the struggle, overcome all this by the disruption of the hierarchies and determinations between these instances of the mode of production which presupposes itself through their fixity. A final question then appears: that of the definition as *conjuncture* of a revolutionary situation, or more modestly, of an acute and generalised situation of class conflicts.

R.S.