

OH SIT DOWN!

**Accounts of sitdown strikes
and workplace occupations in
the UK and around the world**

Compiled by libcom.org - a resource for discontented workers

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Editors' notes

This booklet was compiled very rapidly* 2008 following a series of workplace occupations which workers have launched in response to redundancies.

As employers use the financial crisis to make layoffs, attacked pensions, pay, and working conditions, an increasing number of workers are beginning to resist.

As we go to press, hundreds of workers sacked with no notice or redundancy pay are occupying Visteon car part plants in London and Belfast to demand treatment in line with their contracts with Ford. Workers at the Prisme plant in Dundee have been occupying their workplace for weeks, demanding redundancy pay.

This booklet reproduces accounts and analysis, some very short, some very detailed, of some workplace occupations by other groups of workers in the UK and elsewhere over the past 40 years. We hope that the experiences and lessons gained by workers in the past can be a small contribution to help inform and inspire our fellow workers today.

***libcom.org** is an online organising resource and archive of news and information on workers struggles*

* So please forgive any errors!

2001: Brighton bin men's strike and occupation



A short history of a victorious strike and occupation of their workplace by contracted-out bin workers that was assisted by local residents.

Refusing Collection

In the week between the 11th and the 15th of June, 2001 a workers' struggle of a kind not experienced in the UK for a long time took place in the refuse collection depot in Brighton. In defiance of the dominant spectacle of social peace, the bin men of Brighton took collective action after being sacked for refusing newly imposed work routines. Quickly, their struggle took the character of a complete refusal to continue working under the same management, passively embracing a large part of the community of Brighton.

On Monday the 11th of June, SITA, the French company which was contracted by the Brighton and Hove Council to run street cleaning and refuse collection imposed new working routines, ones which were completely impossible to achieve, such as cleaning a 17 mile stretch in eight hours with a broom.

On hearing these new measures, twelve workers refused to carry them out and were immediately suspended. When this happened, the twelve called in their fellow workers who had already left the depot and explained the situation. In response, they all returned and blockaded the entrances of the depot, refusing the management's action and demanding their immediate re-instatement. SITA management responded by sacking them all. As a consequence, and in an act which has not happened in Brighton for at least 20 years, the workers occupied their workplace and demanded:

- * the immediate re-instatement of all workers (full-time and agency),
- * the termination of the contract with SITA.

A day later the following demand was added to the list:

- * the formation of a workers' co-operative to take control of street cleaning and refuse collection

The Council responded by giving SITA 48 hours to prove that they are capable of carrying out the work that they were being paid to do. In its attempts to do this, and to break the workers' 'strike', SITA used local (private) employment agencies in order to

employ scabs. The jobs of the 240 suspended workers were advertised in the local papers (not only in Brighton, but also in surrounding areas like Worthing and Crawley).

A few of us (direct action anarchists and communists) joined the struggle as soon as we found out it was going on, and participated with workers in the various actions that were deemed necessary. The first was to go with some workers at the other depot from which the scabs were leaving and to stop their trucks from coming out. This was hugely successful: one of us locked himself underneath the first scab truck at the entrance of the depot, effectively stopping any other truck from leaving, while the workers who were there persuaded the majority of the temps not to scab by either explaining to them the situation, or by threatening them that their union would make sure that they would not be able to find another job in Brighton. When the fire brigade was called in to de-lock our comrade, the shop steward from the depot explained the situation and in an inspiring act of solidarity the firemen refused to participate, leaving as quickly as they had come. Most temps who had turned up refused to work after realising that they would be scabs (the job was not advertised in exactly those terms), while SITA and agency managers who had also turned up to supervise the situation were seriously fucked off with the development. Only a truck that arrived later could be used, with a crew of three people, to do a job which usually required more than 30 trucks, each with five people as crew.

The second action that we took concerned the agencies that were employing scabs in Brighton. In collaboration with the union and after their request, we wrote a leaflet warning workers that taking up the job made them scabs, and handed them outside the agencies. The management of the agencies freaked out and tried to stop us by calling in the police. The fact was however that there was nothing that the police could do apart from giving us abstract threats. After the agency management realised there was nothing they could do, they promised that they would not recruit any more scabs. The same thing happened at another agency that SITA employed which was outside Brighton, in the neighbouring town of Worthing. After we leafleted the workers there, the agency also promised to stop employing scabs.

The fact that we managed in collaboration with the workers to stop the scabs gave even more strength to the workers' struggle, since SITA was unable to comply with the Council deadline. Negotiations between the workers, the Council and the company would have definitely been very different had we not succeeded in stopping the scabs.

Since the beginning of the occupation, SITA had refused any negotiations with the workers, while the agency preferred using outright threats to break up the struggle. However, after the actions that the workers took and the extent of public support, the Council mediated between the two and a further meeting was agreed. In that, the final agreement was made: SITA lost the contract and would leave the management of the refuse collection in September; all sacked workers would be re-instated and fully paid for the week spent in occupation; the working routines would return to the way they were before the 11th of June; all further dismissals have to be negotiated with GMB, and a council representative would supervise any further changes in the organisation of work.

History

Similarly, the street cleaners represent another bastion of working class resistance, with a long tradition of militancy [1]. Many of the work practices date from the days before the privatisation of street cleaning (which was around 10 years ago!), a situation that SITA had been trying to defeat for a long time--without particular success.

There was speculation going around that SITA had provoked the situation (without however anticipating such a reaction) in an attempt to get rid of the 'bad old days' practices of the workers. Knowing that it would only be able to exert more profit by re-organising the work conditions, the argument goes, SITA staged the initial suspension, knowing that the rest of the workforce would react. By sacking them all, SITA was hoping to re-employ them on individual contracts that came with the new work routines and with effective decreases on their wages and, more importantly, breaking down their strength and solidarity. Their gamble however was unsuccessful: the workers remained united. By taking this unlawful action, the workers forced management into a defensive position. The mediations that an official strike imposes were largely absent.

Conditions of nearly full employment also placed the workers' struggle in a better position. It explains for example why the private agencies were quickly forced to abandon the employment of scabs, or the fact that many of the 'scabs' that turned up in the second depot were easily persuaded not to cross the picket lines, since finding another job was easier than it used to be.

The struggle immediately received the support of most of Brighton's residents, who had felt the effects of the privatisation of refuse collection and the deterioration of the service as a result of SITA taking over which had made refuse collection sporadic and ineffective. Although the streets were piling up with rubbish, we did not in the duration of the struggle come across a single person who blamed the situation on the workers. Their struggle was socialised and thus gained more strength. Similar to the struggles in the railways, where the deterioration of safety (to name but one) was a direct consequence of privatisation, but more dynamic in its practices, the struggle of the bin men shattered social indifference and embraced Brighton's community, though mostly in a passive way. The visible participation of direct action activists in the struggle also testified for its openness and social character.

It also seems to be the case that the Council itself was dissatisfied with SITA but was legally bound from terminating the contract. The strike of the workers seems to have given the opportunity to the Council to exert pressure to terminate the contract. This would explain both the Council's decision to give a 48 hour deadline, which they were not forced to do, and the local paper's negative attitude towards SITA.

Organisation of the Struggle

One of the main positive features of the struggle was the total unity of the workers behind all activities. The majority of the workers spent most of their time at the occupied depot (sleeping rough, eating canteen food and sandwiches, etc), they had a shift system for the entrances, and all were willing to help out with practical tasks (such as flying pickets, driving to employment agencies in other towns, etc). The morale remained high most of

the time. And although that was never made explicit, certain types of sabotage of the machinery took place in order to avoid a forced return to work in the case of a police eviction. Quite a few workers were prepared to fight back in case the police would try to evict them (brooms and other sticks were conveniently close to the guarded entrances), though their expressed aim was to keep this a peaceful action.

The fact that SITA was a French-based company did make us wary of the possible 'national' content of the struggle, but although there were instances in which anti-French sentiments were expressed these were clearly marginal and did not characterise the struggle as a whole. And although the Argus (Brighton's local paper), known for its reactionary attitude, did try to use the racist card^[2], this was not successful.

However, one of the problems that we recognised from the very beginning of the struggle was the lack of communication and information exchange between the workers. The way that the whole thing was organised, everything type of information, every activity and every leaflet went, in one way or another, through the union rep. This had a variety of effects on the struggle:

On the one hand it meant that a lot of workers did not have exact information on what was going on, at what stage the negotiations were, what type of decisions were made. This meant that a lot of rumours were flying about, a fact which sometimes added to their stress about the situation.

On the other hand, we found it difficult to understand the full story from the workers themselves. We were also relying on the union rep (either for practical activities or for information on the general situation) and we could not simply ask any other worker for it. Many times, when we started discussing certain things about the struggle with some workers, as soon as any specific decision had to be made, most of them told us to speak to the union.

An undeniable fact was however that the union representative was a decent and militant person, who did not at any point stitch them up or exploit the trust that they placed upon him, a fact which explained the almost unconditional trust. And the fact was that the union's contribution was conditioned by the militancy of the workers themselves. It was obvious to us after talking to workers, that had it been a different union person there would have certainly been more attempts towards self-organisation or rank-and-file members taking more initiatives.

The fact was that the specific attitude and commitment of the union rep was such that none of that appeared as an immediate necessity. Towards the end, when the union was negotiating with the Council and SITA, it was quite clear to us that should the proposal be unacceptable to the workers, and should they have felt that the union was responsible for a sell-out, the situation would have developed quite differently, and possibly different forms of organisation could have been sought. For good or for bad, it is not easy to speculate on this point. It would be unrealistic however, to argue that there were visible signs of conflict between the union and the workers (apart from some incidents with the agency workers which are discussed below).

Agency Workers

Another promising aspects of this struggle was the degree of unification between the agency workers and the permanent ones. Both sides had decided that whatever happens they would stick together and fight all the way, as if both were in exactly the same position. This was especially important for the agency workers since their position was much more precarious than that of the permanent workers^[3] - many of the agency workers did not even have proper contracts since the agency kept delaying them. One of the workers we met had been waiting for his contract for over five months!

The agency tried a variety of tactics to separate the agency workers from the permanent ones, ranging from stupid tricks to outright threats. Firstly, it asked the agency workers to meet at another depot in order to discuss the situation. Their plan, it was revealed, was to ask them to resume work immediately (effectively as scabs), and whoever would refuse would be sacked on the spot. They were hoping that this would catch them off guard and, separated from the permanent workers, they would be forced to accept or risk their jobs. This however did not work, since all workers understood the plan, and promised to remain solid on their position of refusing work. None of them appeared at the planned meeting with the agency management.

After this plan failed, the agency quickly resorted to clear threats, calling the agency workers at home and informing them that if they did not go to the other depot they should consider themselves out of a job. Most of the workers however spend their time at the occupied depot and thus never received the call (those who did simply passed it on to the others and pretended they had not received either.) At the same time, the union representative and the shop stewards re-affirmed the decision that all workers would stick together whatever happened and that any sacked agency workers would receive full support from the union.

On the third day of the struggle some of us attended a meeting between agency workers and one of the shop stewards. It was obvious that there existed some tension between the agency workers and the union but we never managed to find out exactly what it was about because nobody spoke clearly. What we did understand was that the agency workers were expressing fears that the union might abandon them while making a deal with SITA. The shop steward was vigilant to stop any such rumours and re-assured them that the union is totally behind them, so long as they stay behind the struggle. But he also added, in authoritative tones, that he was aware that 'some' agency workers were going around spreading false rumours and that if this continued he would personally 'take care of it' (whatever that meant). He added that he would not accept anyone backstabbing them and that the agency workers should be cautious of their behaviour since they were "guests" there. Of course, many workers objected to that term ("we are also part of the struggle, we are not just guests" they stressed), and the shop steward quickly covered it up. The meeting ended with all them unanimously agreeing that they would fight until the end, united and in solidarity.

In the next days of the occupation we did not notice any other signs of divergence between the agency workers and the union, though when the union rep came back with

the final proposal from the Council, some agency workers were clearly wary of its exact content because of rumours circulating.

Workers and Activists (and the Union in the middle)

From the very beginning that we joined the struggle it was clear that the workers or the union did not see us as paper-selling politicians, the obvious reason being that we arrived there with food, blankets and the willingness to practically participate in or organise actions. In contrast to the state socialists who arrived later on, we did not have papers explaining to workers what they are themselves doing, but instead joined with the aim of assisting their struggle. The workers greeted us with a lot of appreciation and friendliness, and that attitude was kept until the end (after the end of the struggle, the shop stewards suggested that we should maintain contacts and that should we ever need their help they would be prepared to do so without second thought, by e.g. doing a walk-out for us). And when a few of us got stopped by the cops in the entrance of the depot, the union rep gave us workers' vests in order to walk in and out without any hassle. It was clear that the workers recognised our contributions (including fly-posting and leafleting around town) as part of their own struggle.

At the same time, and although we met and interacted with loads of the workers, our main point of reference was the union rep and the shop stewards. It was only through them that we arranged joint actions (such as practically stopping the scabs or leafleting the employment agencies which were employing them), and in many cases a lot of the workers were not even aware what we were planning with the union rep (though this did not seem to create a problem for them, probably because of their trust for the union). The fact was that the union rep and the shop stewards were prepared to raise the stakes at any moment (and they surely did when the decision was made to stop the scabs) and that was enough for us to remain at good terms with the union.

We did feel in certain cases that the union was taking advantage of our 'experience' in direct action tactics (like locking yourself underneath a 7-ton truck), but we were all aware of that and to the extent that we were in agreement with the actions and their purpose we were willing to ignore that feeling. It was only after a couple of the actions that we had prepared (or carried out) were suddenly recalled by the union that the possibility of taking our own initiatives without seeking the union's approval and by discussing them separately with workers was discussed. Considering however that we remained outsiders to a struggle that never generalised, such initiatives could have been counter-productive. The way things developed though, such dilemmas became insignificant.

What next?

Within the context of the struggle's potentials, the result was definitely a victory for the workers (though some expressed anger to the fact that SITA would remain in management until September). The final agreement granted most of the demands, and the situation remains open for the possibility of forming a workers' cooperative, though as we said we considered that to be quite unlikely. At the same time, such a development does not in itself solve anything. Although work conditions would possibly be better for the workers if a cooperative was formed (at least for a while), this solution effectively

represents the self-management of their exploitation. Of course, every struggle creates its own dynamic and thus its own potentials. Considering that the struggle of the street cleaners did not happen in the midst of a generalised social crisis which would allow for further possibilities to be opened up, and more radical transformations to take place, the temptation is there to say that a workers' cooperative would represent a (partial) victory on the side of the workers. But, disagreement with the potential of a workers' cooperative does not stem from an ideological position which rejects anything that does not concretely attack wage labour and the law of value: by putting them in charge of their own alienation, a workers' cooperative would integrate workers as 'equal' members of what remains a capitalist company, rendering them responsible for its profit-making. This situation would most likely deter many of them from engaging in further struggles the next time that changes in the work conditions become necessary for capital.

Brighton, June 2001

Edited by libcom from a longer article, [Refusing Collection in Wildcat-Zirkular No. 59 - July 2001 - pp. \(german edition\)](#)

Footnotes

1. A lot of the older workers had been working in street cleaning for more than 20 years. The last major strike they had participated in, which many remembered, was a 14-week strong strike and occupation in 1976, which included pitched battles with the police. More recently, just a couple of months before the occupation, the bin men had a sit-in, protesting about the management's refusal to give them the bonuses that they had been promised. That action was as well successful.

2. The Argus reported the workers' victory with "Au revoir SITA" in its front page.

3. As one of the workers explained to us, in the past, there were two main agencies which supplied temps for street cleaning. One of them gave more money than the other, whose contract only gave extra money when a specific amount of hours was exceeded during a week. When at some point workers from the second agency complained about the differences between them and the other agency, SITA decided that an equalisation of standards was necessary and abandoned the first one and re-employed all from the second, thus bringing everyone's wages down.

From <http://libcom.org/history/2001-brighton-bin-mens-strike-and-occupation>

2000: Cellatex chemical plant occupation, France



An account of a group of 153 sacked Cellatex chemical workers in France who won a massively improved redundancy deal due to militant struggle, albeit one with some misguided tactics

Givet is a town of 8,000 on the Belgian border in northern France. The area was largely dominated by steel and textile until the plant closings and restructurings of the 1970s, when it became an ex-industrial wasteland. 22% of the local population was unemployed. The Cellatex plant, where the following struggle took place, was founded in 1903 and produced one of the first synthetic fibres. In the early 1950s it had 700 employees; by July 2000 this number had been downsized to 153, one third of them women. The factory had been acquired by the multinational chemical firm Rhone-Poulenc, but after 1991 it was sold to a series of new owners. The last owner, an Austrian firm, acquired it to loot its assets.

Since 1991, the successive owners had used the usual threats to close the plant in order to freeze wages, cut overtime pay, and to impose early retirements and work on Saturdays and holidays. By spring 2000, there had been months of useless negotiations to avoid a closing. The workers had put up with all this in part because four generations in Givet had worked there - grandparents alongside grandchildren. Still, the plant was old, full of toxic materials, and had never been seriously "modernised". Having accepted so many cuts to preserve a factory inseparable from the life of the town, the workers exploded in rage when the final closing was announced. As one of them said, "We have been completely forgotten in this boom."

As late as June 30, 2000, talks to save the plant continued, but on July 5 a local court declared Cellatex bankrupt. "We were thrown out like so much garbage" said one worker. Upon hearing of the bankruptcy, a 41-year-old woman worker said "I didn't hesitate for a second. I'm so angry I'll blow up the plant." The workers knew exactly where their weapons were, having worked with them for years. The European Union had classified Cellatex as an environmentally high risk plant, having 50,000 litres of sulfuric acid and

other highly toxic and flammable materials. It had occurred to no one that such "good and docile" workers would turn these materials to such use, and the local notables had taken no security precautions against such an action. (During the steel plant closings of the late 1970s, some workers in the region had in fact burned down one company office.)

By 8:30 p.m. on July 5, the Cellatex workers had occupied the plant. All workers signed a statement saying they would blow up the plant unless production was resumed or they received guarantees of far better severance packages and retraining than were required by law. The action was outside the control of all union bureaucracies, and until July 10 the workers made a bonfire of various products and materials in front of the plant. The offices were stripped, all computers disappeared, and the plant gate was soldered shut. A leaflet signed "the hard core of Cellatex" threatened to dump the sulfuric acid into the Meuse river. A court bankruptcy officer, a local official from the labour department and a local member of Parliament were forcibly held overnight in the plant. At a local meeting of government officials, union bureaucrats and various city councils to solve the crisis, several workers poured gasoline on the floor and brandished their cigarette lighters, setting off total panic. Local authorities evacuated the entire area within a 500-meter radius of the factory.[1] Those evacuated apparently showed no hostility toward the workers. When talks resumed to discuss the main demand of 150,000 francs (about \$20,000) per worker on top of normal unemployment benefits, the evacuation was ended.

There was apparently a split in the work force between the "hards" and the "moderates," though not much is known about it. But the unions met a solid front of hostility. "The union leaders are politicians completely dominated by their parties," said one former delegate. "We can't trust them... There is a total divide between workers struggling for survival and the future of their children, and the union leaders who still 'negotiate' all by themselves." The authorities adopted a waiting strategy of wearing the workers down, for months if necessary, a strategy that had worked many times in the past. But with Cellatex they had miscalculated. When they proposed moving the most dangerous chemicals for "security" reasons, one worker replied: "If these chemicals are moved, the negotiations will end minutes later. As long as I don't get my security, they won't get theirs."

Outside meetings of local notables, Cellatex workers demonstrated outside with banners reading "We'll go all the way... boom boom." On July 12, 5,000 litres of sulfuric acid, symbolically dyed red, were dumped into a creek leading to the Meuse. Firemen under police protection stopped it from reaching the river, but the workers threatened to continue releasing 10,000 litres every two hours, a threat never carried out. (The factory had a solid reputation as a polluter, putting 5,000 litres a week of sulfate derivatives into the river.) One CGT[2] high official phoned the factory and demanded the workers "stop desperate actions." The action did, however, result in renewed negotiations in Paris. It also broke through the media blackout on the Cellatex struggle throughout Europe. The government strategy was to divide the "hards" and "moderates," who continued vigorous debates inside the factory.

The workers kept up the pressure inside and outside the factory, tossing chemicals into large fires in front of the factory gates and setting off small demonstrative explosions for the media. Hundreds of cops massed nearby, out of sight of the factory.

On July 19, new terms were proposed to the workers, and were accepted unanimously. Each worker received

1. a special indemnity of 80,000 francs (following the initial demand of 150,000, they were first offered 36,000)
2. a monthly supplement to unemployment insurance so that all workers with more than six months in the factory would receive their full salary for two years
3. special advantages for retraining.

The agreement also established a body to oversee the execution of the agreement (and to prevent any renewal of the struggle by workers who had "taken precautions"). The minister of labour rendered homage to the unions and local politicians.

In the aftermath, the message of Cellatex to workers throughout France was "struggle pays." In endless commentary about it, however, what came through from all economic, political and trade-union leaders was the fear of seeing such struggles break out anew, with unforeseeable consequences. All the sociologists were mobilised. Some said that Cellatex "was the cause of all those who do not see themselves in the claptrap about the Internet revolution, the blossoming economy and shortening unemployment lines."^[3] In fact, in the two weeks following the Cellatex agreement, similar struggles broke out in a number of French workplaces. Some ministers spoke of "terrorism" and "ecoterrorism." In other plants, surveillance of "dangerous materials" was tightened, and various forms of trade-union, political and administrative intervention were updated. The dialectic of class struggle, however, is like a jack-in-the-box, always breaking out in new forms while the experts try to nail down the old ones.

The Cellatex strike was in summer 2000. In the summer of 2001, former Cellatex strikers were interviewed. Almost none have found a new job. Almost all are still unemployed, and they know there is no work for them. They told they still believe that their action and strategy was right, and that if it had to be done again, they would do it, and they would even do more and harder!

In the following year, many other groups fired workers, such as those at the Mossley factory, acted in the same way.

Footnotes

1. The authorities also cut off the telephone lines in the area, in order to prevent contact between the occupiers and people outside. Our solidarity messages, sent by fax, couldn't reach them... [CNT-AIT]
2. The CGT is France's biggest trade union confederation. It is largely run by the Communist Party, and is highly reformist, [despite its anarchist origins](#) [libcom]
3. Others sociologists tried to counter with articles in the mainstream media saying that

"Cellatex wasn't political, but terrorism, and it doesn't have anything to do with a return of anarcho-syndicalist ideas..." And if not, then what is it do do with? [CNT-AIT]

Notes on the text

The text is a translation and abridgement by Loren Goldner of a much longer article appearing in the Summer 2 issue of the French-language journal Echanges. We are publishing it as an example of how one group of workers successful refused to accept the fate that capital had decreed for them, but instead took militant action to defend their interests. At the same time, we would hope that it would be possible to use direct action tactics that pose less danger to ourselves, or fellow workers, and the environment in which we all must live. [Anarcho Syndicalist Review]

Some comments and a postface were added to the text by the CNT-AIT, France, and it has been edited by libcom.

Readers with a knowledge of French can obtain the full article from Echanges, BP 241, 75866 Paris Cedex 18, France.

Taken from cnt-ait.info

From <http://libcom.org/history/2001-brighton-bin-mens-strike-and-occupation>

2007: Migrant workers' occupation wins, France



Sacked workers occupying the Buffalo Grill restaurant for one month have beaten their employers and been re-instated with their employment status regularised.

The one-month occupation of the restaurant and parking lot of the Buffalo Grill in Viry-Chatillon outside Paris has resulted in an important victory for 20 undocumented migrant workers fired at the fast food chain.

With the support of the Commerce, Distribution and Services Federation of the CGT (FCDS-CGT), and international support from the International union IUF, local authorities have yielded to the groundswell of support for the workers and agreed to regularize their employment status.

The July 5 decision followed three rounds of negotiations with local authorities initiated after the workers' expulsion from the parking lot on July 3.

The FCDS-CGT, declaring that "a battle has been won but the struggle continues", has thanked the IUF and all who supported this important mobilisation.

From <http://libcom.org/news/france-migrant-workers-occupation-wins-11072007>

2004: Strike and occupation of IT workers at Schneider Electrics, France

Article about the strike and occupation of offices by IT workers in France, which was co-ordinated by directly democratic methods.

The situation at Schneider Electrics seems to us to be the most interesting struggle in France this autumn. Because up to now that have not been many collective and offensive conflicts in the IT sector so every experience is important. Because with the decision to occupy the office building the workers went beyond the limits of the bourgeois law. Because it was clear that they had to use their means of production and their knowledge of production as a means of strength against the company. Because they did not actually have their backs to the wall, it was not about immediate redundancies. Because the strike had a direct international effect. Because the strike and the occupation was initially not controlled by the union, but rather decisions were taken daily at a full assembly. Because the end clearly shows once again what the workers can expect from the union.

Schneider Electrics produce electronic components, from simple switches to complicated junction boxes. About 74,000 people work for Schneider worldwide. The strike was lead by the IT workers in Grenoble who play a variety of Admin functions for the company such as the intranet, the PC hotline, computer network maintenance etc. About two thirds of all Schneider's IT workers in France work in Grenoble. The trigger for the strike was the decision by Schneider management to outsource the IT department to the company CapGemini. CapGemini already does some of the Schneider IT work - on both a contract and freelance basis. The decision to occupy the offices, and thereby have control over the actual servers, was also so that those workers could not so easily scab. Schneider Electric had signed a 10-year contract for over 1.6 billion Euros to outsource the whole Schneider European IT department to CapGemini. About 800 Schneider employees would move over to CapGemini, 400 of those in France. 500 people from subsidiary companies would also be affected. Other sources talk about 1,350 Schneider employees being directly affected in Europe.

Since June 2003 the employees that will be affected have waited for the results of the negotiations between management and the unions to find out about what conditions were being put forward for the shift to CapGemini.

Finally the answer came back: no guarantee of continued employment, worse work conditions, no compensation for those for whom the shift would mean extra costs and inconvenience and every worker would have 500 Euros a month less take-home pay. The financial situation of CapGemini also does not look so good: in the first half of 2004 they suffered 135 million Euros losses.

Some of the workers suspect that CapGemini got the contract largely because the executive director is a friend of President Chirac. One of the demands of the strike is to

secure the work contracts for the ten years of the contract - something that does not seem to be the case with the deal as it stands.

Faced with this threat the employees decided on November 15 to begin an indefinite strike and occupation of the office building in Grenoble town centre. The unions asserted that about 80 percent of the French IT workers were taking part in the strike. This is a report we wrote at the time, after visiting the building:

“About 250 IT workers are occupying the main centre of the IT department and have shut down the server, in order to stop the work of any strike breaking home-work. There is Beaujolais in the morning, the atmosphere seems good, at 2pm every day there is the daily assembly. It is their first real strike and they say that before this they were more individualistic. The offices look out directly onto the World Trade Centre and the various other banks and glass boxes round about. One of the IT workers speaks German and another English. Neither are from the union but describe themselves as workers who struggle because they have to struggle. They say that about 60 percent of Schneider workers in France are on strike, or affected by the strike. They have heard from colleagues in Italy that the strike is also affecting the work there. Some of the production workers have given donations for the IT workers strike fund.

A few people go the other sites and branches to inform them about the strike. They've got an English translation of their leaflet and probably contact to Schneider sites in other countries. They are also in contact with some unionists at CapGemini who give them information. One guy said he thought management would not give in. The management was demanding an end to the occupation for new negotiations to take place, but the feeling was strong enough to stay in. In the strike kitchen it was discussed that the relocation of parts of the company to Paris was the first attack that they should have reacted to. They were also discussion what they should do about the bailiff that comes every morning and asks for the names of those within. They compared their situation to the conditions of textile workers in the region, when the textile industry was under attack some decades ago.”

During the strike there was a website discussion between the strikers and IT workers from other companies about the strike.

(<http://forums.munci.org/viewtopic.php?t=2026&view=previous&sid=93b1aced066109ed0945277a6aa38779>)

Amongst other things it was reported that the company's internal mail system between Europe and the USA stopped working. Some more possible actions or measures were discussed, but it was also mentioned that the really effective means of struggle were often thwarted by the unionists, because they could be help personally legally responsible for the consequences of sabotage. Others said that sabotage actions were unnecessary because the strike itself was enough to stop the server and the hotline functioning. The company management let it be known in advance of the negotiations that the strike had not had a big technical impact on the running of the business.

The following information is from two articles in the daily newspaper "Liberation". On 23 November there were further negotiations but without concrete results. The workers 'gave up' the building, which was a management demand for the negotiations. In the building were also other companies. The workers occupied a Schneider call centre in a suburb of Grenoble as an alternative place. The management cut off the phone lines.

The official CGT rep said that they are not "Vandals", that they do not want to destroy the work equipment, that the best weapon is "passivity". They had the possibility to paralyze the whole network of the company, but they didn't do it. They simply didn't work any more, the people could not phone up to find out their PC password when they forgot it, there were no new uploads of the anti-virus program etc. Normally the technical hotline gets about 1,500 calls a day from Schneider employees and customers. One striking worker said: "We don't like the transfer of Schneider employees to a service society. At Schneider we come under the metal sector collective contract. Service, that sounds like precariatization". The average age of the IT workers at Schneider is about 45, the average length of employment about 18 years. The people talked about the problem that in the last few years one could take out a mortgage on a house with the wage, but these are not paid off and with the drop in wages it could become difficult to do so.

On 28 November a vote at an assembly to continue the strike was won by 107 out of 180. And this was despite the CFDT union, who had a majority in the company, announcing in the previous days that they were very "pessimistic" about the strike. The CFDT called for a second vote on the 29 November at which only 60 percent of the people voted to continue. As a consequence the CFDT withdrew their support for the strike, which really broke the strike. The strike ended 15 days after it began without any promises or commitments on the side of the management.

From www.prol-position.net

From <http://libcom.org/library/strike-and-occupation-of-it-workers-at-schneider-electrics-france-2004>

2008: 23 day long occupation of major power-plant in northern Greece ends in police repression



After 23 days of blockading the input and output conveyor belts of one of the major power-plants of Greece by the Union against Unemployment, demanding re-employment, environmental reform and withdrawal of charges against rebel workers, riot police evicted the Agios Dimitrios Power-Plant occupation. Serious clashes have ensued in efforts to release the arrested Union members.

In the morning of the 10th of May 2008, the residents of Agios Dimitris, a town near the north-Greek city of Kozani, where the National Electric Company (DEH) holds its major units, employing the vast majority of the working population, having formed a local Union against Unemployment occupied the north gate of the Agios Dimitrios Power-Plant, interrupting the function of the feed-belts carrying lignite, as well as the ash-belts from the factory to the disposal area. The blockade was manned in shifts by all the residents of the township, including children, in solidarity with the industrial action. The Union demanded the reemployment of sacked workers at DEH units in the region, measures for the protection of the environment, and an immediate withdrawal of charges pressed against 70 residents of the area for similar mobilisations last year.

In response, on the 18th day of the occupation, the National Electric Company pressed charges against the Union arguing its action is causing it enormous losses, for which it claimed one million euros compensation per day (the minimum salary in Greece is 650E per month). Aiming to put public pressure on the squatters, DEH claimed the occupation was threatening to put on hold all four units of the Agios Dimitrios Plant, one of the biggest in the country, thus putting the electric supply of the entire country in danger. In reality the industrial action was decreasing overall electric production capacity only by 500 megawatt. Nevertheless, in the following days the DEH monopoly waged a media campaign warning of the necessity of black outs in response of the crisis.

Some days later, the squatters refused to hold talks with the local authorities and the minister of development when they demanded the unblocking of the conveyor belts as a guarantee of the negotiations.

On Monday the 2nd of June 2008, 5 am, riot-police forces violently ended the 23 day long blockade of the Electric Power-Plant at Agios Dimitris. The police warned the squatters to clear the DEH premises, and when the latter refused, the riot-police attacked arresting 6 men: the president and four members of the Union. During the consequent protest march in the industrial city of Kozani three more people were arrested during major clashes with the police, with one protestor seriously wounded. After the economic secretary of the Union warned the police to release the 6 arrested or "face a general uprising; we shall torch the power-plant with crude oil and explosives, and get rid of this nightmare for ever", the authorities agreed to release the arrested members of the Union who will stand trial next September.

The Union and the totality of Agios Dimitris residents pledge to continue their struggle.

From <http://libcom.org/news/23-day-long-occupation-major-power-plant-northern-greece-ends-police-repression-02062008>

1992-4: The incomplete story of the University College Hospital strikes and occupations



The story of the (ultimately unsuccessful) struggle to keep a hospital open despite the efforts of the government, the Area Health Authority, management, University College London and the Wellcome Foundation and Trust.

From the <http://www.endangeredphoenix.com> website.

Occupational Therapy - the incomplete story of the University College Hospital strikes occupations of 1992/3/4 was put together by a number of individuals in the UCH occupation together with help and suggestions from others, London 1995.

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The First UCH Strike

(late November/early December 1992)

The first strike at UCH comprising of an occupation cum work-in against the phasing out of the hospital took place in late November/early December 1992. It was said at the time

that it was the first occupation of a hospital in the UK.(1) Everyone who worked at UCH knew that some kind of crunch was coming. Staff had been accused of “over-performing” and it was mooted that 60 nurses were to be sacked. The purchasing authority had let it be known that they found UCH too pricey and also, in the background, the Tomlinson Report had pointed some kind of unspecific finger at the hospital.

The strike started simply enough. One day in late November some managers marched on Ward 2/1 — a general surgical ward — to close it. There was an immediate spontaneous response as nurses linked arms to form a human chain at the ward's entrance. as one nurse said, “We decided as a Ward, without any union involvement, that as nurses we could not leave Ward 211.” From there, it escalated into an indefinite strike as more and differing people were sucked into the conflict Patients refused to leave the threatened Ward and porters refused to move them. Briefly, the traffic on Gower Street and Tottenham Court Road was blocked by strikers and within no time there was a lot of support from other workers, mainly in the form of generous donations to the strike fund. COHSE was to make the strike official but NUPE didn't.

It was something of a breakthrough as effectively the threatened part of the hospital was soon run by time health workers themselves. As one said, “management where being completely circumvented.” Unlike the later occupation in September 1993 (c/f main text) the first one took place in a functioning situation where all kinds of day to day nursing practicalities had to be considered. For a brief moment, many of the quite nasty divide and rule mechanisms in the hospital hierarchy were diverted and perhaps the most important obstacle of all was overcome. A hospital occupation/work-in cannot succeed without the support of junior doctors and this, it appears, was forthcoming. Generally junior doctors are loathe to support or take any action as they are utterly dependent on consultants good reports and are prepared to take shit waiting for that fat salary at the end of the 72 hour per week work rainbow (there was however, a junior doctors' strike in the 1970s and this might be worth looking into). Equally (or not so equally), experienced nurses tend to give junior doctors hell as they know that they'll be handing it out like hell when in a consultants position. All such understandable pettiness aside, finally and most importantly, the harassment of junior doctors is largely to do with worries about cock-ups on the ward. Although responsible for everything on the ward, the nurse-in-charge is under medical supervision from the doctor. The usual situation is inexperienced juniors having responsibility over and above their skill and age. The subsequent panic felt by the nurse-in-charge who usually knows the score in a potentially life or death situation translates into hassling and nagging juniors.

But in a subversive dynamic, everyday relationships quickly change, affecting even the most hidebound. In the UCH occupation, it seems that the consultants' attitude had changed too and was sympathetic to the action taking place. To the annoyance of managers, consultant Dr. M Adishia even transferred a patient to Ward 2/1 a day after the occupation began. This kind of thing was unheard of. Prior to the free market reforms consultants 'ran' the hospitals. They were seemingly all powerful, often terribly arrogant and, inevitably, hated by all. Thus it was easy for the new hard-nosed management to take power away from the consultants as no one was prepared to defend them. Having

created such (unheard of) unity among the hospital staff it wasn't surprising that one UCH striker had cause to say in early December 1992, "we need workers councils in hospitals."

The only force pitted against them was the new, economically insecure, limited contract, cadre management employees. These managers didn't ideologically believe any longer in what they're doing but are scared stiff to do anything else knowing that the dole could be in waiting for them tomorrow. Blindly ruled by money terrorism, they've seen their proletarianisation on the horizon and they don't like what they see. A nurse at UCH whose ward was closed by management in the space of two minutes without any medical consultation or warning commented, "the manager said she knew it was wrong but there are other managers waiting to take her place." Shits though they may be, they're hardly the stuff who could make a solid defence based on conviction come a more concerted, more general attack. Headless chickens come to mind.(2)

The strike was successful though and the management backed off giving oily-written undertakings that all wards due to close for Xmas would re-open on January 4th and dropping all disciplinaries against strikers. Probably they were nervous after all the tumult (hot air really) about miners a month previously. Possibly too, they were nervous about the rank'n'file Health workers Co-ordinating Committee, a body boycotted by the Health Unions themselves, thinking it was a more potent body than it was. In reality, the Health Workers Co-ordinating Committee was a made up/fake co-ordination (in comparison to the rather more genuine co-ordinations in the UK strikes in 1988/89) pick'n'mix of various Trotskyist factions each running their own party recruiting campaigns and little demonstrations - a unified, on the ground response being the last thing on their minds.

Of course, as a lot of people knew, UCH management were biding their time when they could hit a lot harder and nastier... And how!... read on...

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Occupational Therapy

Comments on the struggle to save UCH and free health care

The strike

On August 17th 1993 about 50 nurses and porters at University College Hospital in central London came out on indefinite strike against management plans to begin closing down the hospital.

From the beginning the 50 strikers were - and remained - a minority of the total work force of the hospital; this was one of the main weaknesses of the struggle. In the original strike ballot well over 50 voted to strike - but UCH management announced that those taking industrial action would be banned from the building, so making it impossible to provide a rota for emergency cover for patients as had been done in the December '92 action. This discouraged some nurses from striking - and numbers were further reduced by the divisions of the trade union structure — i.e. ambulance drivers were to be balloted separately, some nurses were RCN members (with a no-strike agreement) while others were casual/temp staff employed via agencies.

Once the strike began there was some support from other workers — ambulance workers refused to move patients out of closing wards; British Telecom and other workers would not cross the picket line to dismantle closed wards; postmen and women leafleted their rounds; and tube workers at nearby Goodge St used the station tannoy to report and publicise the strike. There were a couple of one day strikes by catering, ancillary and clerical staff at UCH - and also by staff at the nearby EGA and Middlesex hospitals. Same public sector workers - teachers, posties, DSS and council workers - came out unofficially for the Day of Action on September 16th (the teachers despite being threatened with disciplinary action by their union if they did so).

Local people and other supporters also turned up to the marches and rallies during the strike — in fact the best marches were the ones that formed themselves spontaneously from the rallies and went streaming off through the central London traffic. With the cops unprepared and confused but not wanting to be publicly seen getting heavy with a nurses-led march, Tottenham Court Road was brought to a standstill in the rush hour a couple of times by 150 people.

Other marches were more tame, controlled and less effective — due mainly to the union branch officials getting afraid that the rowdiness would upset the union bosses too much.⁽³⁾ Nevertheless, the September 16th march still managed to completely block Whitehall for a while - or at least the riot cops did, so as to make sure we didn't get to Downing Street or Parliament.

Although UNISON had apparently said they would back the strike even before balloting for it had begun, it was obvious all the way through that they did not want it to be effective or help the strikers in any way. They obviously wanted, at the most, to negotiate some kind of structured closure program for the hospital with maybe a few token concessions thrown in — and parade this as some kind of victory (see leaflet). UNISON only officially came into existence on July 1st 1993 through a merger of the NALGO, NUPE and COHSE unions - so forming the largest public sector union in Western Europe, with 1.4 million members. This was their first major dispute and they were keen to prove to management that they were worth negotiating with and could do the job - i.e. by proving they had control over their members and could deliver an obedient work force to the bosses. The union disassociated themselves from any “unofficial” actions (such as a brief occupation of hospital chief executive Charles Marshal's office) and sent circulars to other hospitals ordering workers not to support it. UNISON withheld all strike pay for 6 weeks. It was finally paid the day after the union had forced the strikers to return to work.

The strikers tried to get support from other workers - they were constantly visiting different workplaces. But it was nearly always done through union structures — i.e. by approaching shop stewards rather than by talking to workers face to face. All this usually resulted in was a resolution of support being passed at the next branch meeting, a money donation and a promise to send a few people down to the next rally.

In 1982 in Yorkshire nurses were able to bring out thousands of miners and car workers by bypassing the union structure, by simply standing outside the workplace and

appealing directly to the workers for solidarity. This should have been tried by UCH nurses and porters, but the prevailing faith in the unions (encouraged by SWP ideology) prevented it. In Leeds, in 1982, support came from engineers and public sector workers. The best example was some construction workers who were building miners' baths at Wooley Colliery. The shop steward there had a brother in a hospital in Leeds (long stay) and got in touch with the nurses at the hospital to picket himself and other workers out. When striking nurses arrived they had no difficulty in stopping the construction site, although there was a visible chillness from local NUM officials. One of the construction workers drove straight through the nurses picket line. This led to an extension of the construction workers' strike for three days. It all ended when the builders caught the scab, took the wheels off his car and emptied his wallet into the health workers' collection bucket. In 1982, there was still too much reliance on union structures - mainly on a shop steward rather than full time official level. This was because of inexperience and workers being over-awed by the myth of the shop steward. Defeat was ensured by reliance on the union structures and ideology, with unions turning militancy on and off like a tap, leading to disillusion. But 11 years on at UCH, so many defeats later and in a Central London workplace — there was much less chance of repeating such a success.

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And then the occupation

Ward 2/3 in the Cruciform building of UCH was occupied on September 15th -it had recently been emptied of patients as part of an ongoing closure of this wing of the hospital. The idea was first suggested to some local people on the picket line by someone who we later found out to be a full time SWP official. The occupation was originally planned to end after one night, merely being a publicity stunt to coincide with the Day of Action occurring the next day — but it was eventually decided that the occupation should continue indefinitely.

The majority of the strike committee were initially against an occupation, although 3 nurses did take part on the first night. It's very likely that some were against the idea simply because it was promoted by those strikers who were SWP members — there was already some resentment about SWP manipulation within the strike committee and this was probably thought to be another example or vehicle for it, some of them at first assumed that we occupiers were all SWP Members.(4)

Those in occupation decided during the night to argue for not leaving the next day; this was mainly in response to full-time UNISON official Eddie Coulson turning up at 1 a.m. with hospital managers (who he'd been in conference with for over an hour before hand) to try and make everyone leave. Coulson stated in front of hospital chief executive Marshal and two strikers that UNISON members would be disciplined; he said that he wouldn't be surprised if there were further management disciplinaries; he was prepared to drop all the demands of the strike, some of which he was only paying lip service to anyway, if Marshal would drop the disciplinary threats. He said he could guarantee a return to work within 24-36 hours if Marshal did this. He also talked with Marshal about the "damage" the dispute had done to UNISON, and how he would be looking at ways of disciplining UNISON members through the machinery of the union (these are almost

direct quotes from a letter of complaint sent by the UCH branch to their union leadership). At the end of the strike Coulson was quoted in a paper as saying that UNISON had “lost control” of the dispute, giving the “unauthorised” occupation as an example.

Still, at the time, the strike committee were divided about the occupation — some now not only wanted to continue in Ward 2/3, but also to open another ward (the rest of the 2nd floor was empty). During the rally on the 16th September all the strikers came up to the occupation — initially just to protect the 3 nurses already present from disciplinaries and to walk out with us down to the rally. But when we told them we didn't want to leave this started an emergency meeting. It was an urgent situation —if we were going to take another ward it should have been then, with all those people outside. The whole rally of 1,000 or more people should have been encouraged to enter the hospital and become a mass occupation, taking over empty wards.

In the middle of all this, in walks Tony Benn, and as he waffles on, the rally marches off towards Whitehall... Somebody went out of the occupation to try to get the march to turn around — they did manage to stop the march for a bit but, amid the confusion and argument, the march eventually continued on to Whitehall.

Back at the hospital, the strikers took a vote about continuing the occupation -they were divided half and half for and against. It was decided that for the moment we wouldn't open another ward and that the fate of ward 2/3 would be put off for now until it could be discussed further.

Most of the strikers then went off to join the march, while we waited in 2/3 for the marchers' return and the strikers decision. While waiting we heard that UNISON had cancelled the National Day of Action they'd planned for November 11th — this was in response to our occupation. We also learned that management were taking advantage of the fact that the march had moved off, leaving nobody behind to carry on picketing: they had immediately begun to close another ward. This news was relayed to the marchers, who were by now blocking Whitehall, and the march set off back to the hospital.

When the marchers returned some quickly stormed into the hospital chief executive's office, occupying it for a while. Some others came up and joined the occupation. Meanwhile the strikers went into their meeting - it was 6 hours before their decision to bold on to Ward 2/3 came back to us.

The best day of the strike and the strikers spent most of it in meetings!

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Early leaflet supporting strikers by soon-to-be occupiers;

SAVE OUR HOSPITALS

WHAT IS HAPPENING AT UCH?

Predicting the future of any hospital has become almost impossible since the government forced their 'internal market' — competition for less resources - on the health service. NO HOSPITAL IS SAFE, and the situation at UCH is increasingly unsafe.

Under the new rules, an increasing number of well-paid managers, many of whom have no knowledge of health matters, are trying to cut costs, while pretending that all is well. The local health authority, through which government money comes, is having its funding cut by £21 million, with other cuts not yet decided. The health authority, whose members are appointed, not elected, recently complained that UCH was 'over-performing' - carrying out too many operations! Apart from private patients, those with 'fundholding' GPs have been able to jump queues while there is 'no money' for others.

THE MARKET MAKES US SICK

Between them they plan to reduce UCH to a skeleton emergency service — those considered non-emergency or needing more than 2 days care will be sent elsewhere, and GPs will not be able to send patients. This skeleton service will not work because the Accident & Emergency section has always been dependent on the wide specialist knowledge of the other sections. Any cuts mean a reduction in the range of skills available to bring us back to health.

A reduced service also means more pressure to classify patients as non-emergency, and that any major tragedy, like the Kings X fire, will simply not be catered for. Their idea for sending people somewhere else doesn't make sense anyway, when these other hospitals are also under threat.

HEALTH NOT WEALTH

As for the other parts of UCH and its associates, the Cruciform building is being emptied, to be bought up by UCL and Wellcome (the drug company that made billions out of expensive dodgy drugs tested on AIDS sufferers) for medical research, to add to Wellcome's coffers (and with the local poor, and our pets, as guinea pigs?). The latest leaflet from management says that the Middlesex is not closing, but that everything is going to move to the UCH site, which means it is! The private patient section is of course safe.

Last year, over 20,000 patients from Camden and Islington, mainly from the poorer parts, were treated at UCH etc. and we are dependent on it. We don't need this chaos and these closures. We need a general, local health service, responding to our needs, not the needs of the market, and controlled by the people who use it and work in it, not by a bunch of managerial parasites.

DRIVE OUT THE HEALTH BUTCHERS

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Life is a hospital (for a while)

Although determined, aggressive tactics are going to be increasingly necessary if we are to keep some kind of free (albeit through national insurance contributions) Health Service intact, the occupation of Ward 2/3 wasn't about "militancy" as such. Weren't we there basically because it made you feel good (good enough to want to fight rather than just fulfilling a dull political duty) and gave you one hell of a lift? A new world begins (or is at

least glimpsed) instantly in such actions — simply in meeting, laughing and messing about with barricades etc. with people you've largely never met before. Quick as a flash, that horrible imposed isolation knot - an isolation much worse today than its ever been - is loosened and that single factor could possibly be the most important in any future occupations.

For the first few days of the occupation we were more or less left to organise ourselves. Leaflets were written and distributed; a picketing rota was put in operation (which meant for the first time there were to be some 24 hour pickets); developing local contacts brought in more people and donations of food, cash, etc.. A great atmosphere and infectious buzz was in the air for those first few days and everybody involved felt the occupation had great potential as a focus for the struggle — people were openly discussing things and coming up with new ideas all the time. A hardcore of a dozen or so people were so involved in what was happening that we were basically living on the ward for a while.

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Early occupation leaflet;

EMERGENCY - WARD 2/3!
SUPPORT THE UCH OCCUPATION

Ward 2/3 at University College Hospital has been occupied by striking health workers and supporters, angry at the destruction of the health service. The strike has been on since 17th August and the occupation since 15th September.

Since the strike began management have closed down 4 wards as part of their plan to close the whole hospital. Because the government is trying to force our hospitals to compete against each other for smaller crumbs of a smaller cake, hospitals have been starved of cash — resulting in indefinite waiting lists, unnecessary deaths and increasing chaos for staff and the public.

This is part of management's reign of terror in the health service, with staff being victimised and intimidated and patients being treated like prisoners as they try to close hospitals.

The success of this occupation and strike depend massively on outside support — which means YOU! So get your finger out, get stuck in and come on down and Join us! We can't win this struggle any other way — people are needed on the picket lines and at the occupation. We also need food to keep us going, messages of support, donations etc.

If we can wipe the smug grins off the faces of these health butchers, just think how healthy it's gonna make you feel!

(The occupied Ward 2/3 is on the corner of Grafton way and Huntley St — easily recognisable by the banners outside!)

JOIN THE LOBBY OF CAMDEN & ISLINGTON HEALTH AUTHORITY 4.30 - 5.30pm
Tuesday 21 September @ Friends Meeting House, Euston Rd (opposite Euston station)

POPULAR COMMITTEE FOR MAINTAINING THE UCH OCCUPATION

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COMING DOWN WITH A DOSE OF THE TROTS

But, alas, the spell was soon broken. We had been requesting a meeting with the strikers for a couple of days, and one was eventually arranged between the full strike committee (i.e. all available strikers) and the occupiers; but instead we were met by just a few union shop stewards who were all SWP members. One of these SWerPs was also the union branch secretary at UCH, and although she was not even on strike - she was one of the clerical workers and they had not come out - she very much used her union status to play a dominant and often manipulative role during the strike. They proceeded to tell us of their plans for completely restructuring how the occupation was to function - we were led to believe (wrongly as it turned out) that they were speaking for the strike committee as a whole and only relaying to us what had been decided by it. In fact it was an SWP engineered coup, done behind the strike committee's back as much as ours'.

They wanted vetting to decide who should be allowed into the occupation — this was to be carded out by the branch secretary and chairperson - both SWP members. People would have to book themselves onto a formalised rota days in advance just to be able to spend a night in the occupation — reducing it to a duty and a chore, killing off the social dynamic going on. They also intended that there should be at least 6 strikers on the ward at any time and that there must always be at least one striker on the picket line with us. They justified all this by saying that if anything bad happened in the occupation or if things got “out of control” this would jeopardise the strikers — by giving management an excuse to legally evict the occupation and to victimise the strikers (6 of them already faced disciplinary actions due to activities in the strike).

By the time this meeting occurred, most of the occupiers were tired out from a lack of enough sleep due to late night picketing, leafleting and generally running around trying to organise stuff. We were stunned by these sudden proposed changes (although in retrospect we should have been expecting something like this) and did not resist them as we should have done; this was partly due to simple fatigue but also because we were being guilt tripped about the necessity of protecting the strikers' interests as a priority. The implication was “how would you feel if a nurse lost her job because you lot fucked up?” The answer was obvious but the likelihood of it happening was exaggerated and used as a weapon against us.

Although none of us were happy about all this, we weren't able to respond effectively — and as we mistakenly thought that these were decisions taken by the strike committee as a whole we didn't feel in much of a position to argue. We should have said we would consider these proposals and then discuss them with the full strike committee as soon as possible, instead of just capitulating. If we had known that these issues had not even been properly discussed by the strike committee and that there had already been strong

disagreements within the strike committee about SWP manipulation then we wouldn't have felt so isolated with so few options. I~ was also partly unfamiliarity with what was a pretty unusual situation as well as a (not unrelated) lack of confidence and assertiveness in ourselves and other simple personal failings that led to our downfall. It can't just be explained by the supposed absence of enough organisation or of a certain kind of organisation, as some have tried to do (see Appendix for more on this).

Their plan was to make the occupation a centre for union and SWP organising and to fill the place with SWerPs. Having seen that we were good at organising ourselves and developing our autonomy the union/SWP hacks felt threatened — partly because they judged us by their own miserable standards and thought we were really some secret anarchist group (possibly Class War!) come to try to take things over. Rumours were flying amongst the strike committee that this was the case.

They also wanted to reduce the occupation to a publicity exercise - i.e. getting media celebrities and MPs to visit and be photographed there. In fact it seemed they had decided that getting public opinion on the side of the strikers was going to be the main weapon to win the strike with. Some occupiers now felt they were being treated as a token pensioner, a token mother and child, etc. to be displayed for the cameras. One woman was even offered a spare nurses uniform to wear in case there were no real nurses around when an MP came to visit!

The effects of these changes being imposed were several: a lot of people, particularly locals who visited regularly, were put off coming to the occupation. And there seemed little point in giving out leaflets encouraging people to come to the occupation if they'd all have to be vetted first. The atmosphere was totally changed, with people now feeling they were only there with the permission or tolerance of certain officials and no longer as joint partners in the struggle. The openness of the occupation, with free debate flowing back and forth informally, was replaced by an atmosphere of intrigue and secret whisperings...

"In those early days one related to the occupiers as strikers, local or non-local or all mixed up together. You were curious about their lives, background, last night's binge, learning about hospital jobs, what immediate tasks had to be earned out, etc. Ideology just didn't really count and you couldn't give much of a fuck what political persuasion anybody had. It was only after the attempted SWP mini-coup that you really started relating to strikers as SWerPs or not. And that was REAL BAD. After that, paranoia, whispered conversations (from them) with doors closing behind you as if you were an unwelcome intruder. And so hypocritical! A poster then appeared: "NO DRUGS OR ALCOHOL IN THE WARD." And yet it was only a few nights previously that an SWerP had been openly rolling up spliffs. Previous to this laying down of the law there was no trouble at all with anybody getting out of their heads. In fact even occupiers who were regular boozers had hardly touched a drop, being so occupied with what was going on. It was only after the SWP coup that people were drunk on the ward — and they were mainly SWerPs come back from the pub. After that occupying was more like work; a duty; a painful task to be undertaken. Wage labour felt freer than this! Better to occupy the

Morgue which was just below Ward 2/3 — at least that would have been a bit of life in death.”

The SWP’s plan was to draft in large numbers of SWP foot soldiers, but this was never very successful — some did turn up (although a lot who were told to didn’t) but never in sufficient numbers to completely dominate or alienate the rest of us; as they usually only came for one night they still had to ask those of us staying there for information about the general functioning of the place. Some rank ‘n’ file SWerPs were fine to be with (5) and we could talk and relax with them but the real hacks were often vile — functionaries and mere appendages of the party machine, mouth pieces for faithfully parroting the banalities of the party line, with no social graces or warmth at all.

In fact it might be said that leftist militancy is a diagnosable disease in itself, with definite schizophrenic behavioural tendencies! The personality split between political duty and real desires, voluntary submission to party lines and hierarchies with repression of doubts and contradictions, obsession with manipulation of others and conversion of others to one’s own rigid beliefs, etc...

In the early days of the occupation it was the Trots who’d left bunches of Socialist Worker around (along with the Revolutionary Communist Party etc. leaving their rags lying about) ready for piling propaganda in the occupiers’ heads. At the same time these politicians spotted in a flash one Class War newspaper lying innocently about and what’s this? — a man called Vienet’s book on the French occupation movement in May ‘68 - things that somebody had bought or nicked for one’s own personal enjoyment on the day. So an ideological construct was fearfully assembled: “Its Class war anarchists in there”; “Is that a destructive lunatic fringe?”; “Should we Kronstadt the bastards?” The mind boggles at the lurid fantasies possibly conjured up.

The bunch that became the mainstay of the occupation were a mixed bag - partly determined by the fact that we were the ones who could devote most time to it. On the dole or on the sick, single mums, pensioners, casual/part-time workers or those whose jobs were flexible enough to take time off (builders, dispatch riders, etc.). Some had known each other before, some hadn’t, but most had some involvement with the strike from the beginning; some who already knew each other had been involved in producing their own leaflet and poster for the Day of Action prior to the occupation, having been inspired by some striking nurses. People came from a wide variety of social and ‘political’ backgrounds and experiences — most had been involved in other struggles in the past. Different people had served time with various political groupings, ranging from the Labour Party through Trot groups, ultra-left marxism and beyond. Others had never touched politics with a barge pole. None were hacks or Party animals (in the political sense!) and there was a consensus of distaste for such beasts. One or two of the more ‘eccentric’ characters could at times get to be a pain in the arse but generally they were responsive enough to get the message if you told them so; unlike some of the devious lefties who had the cheek to call these people “disruptive.”

Some of the strike committee at least had a stereotypical view of just who they wanted as permanent overnight occupiers. Lots of worker delegations carrying TU banners or representative of community/tenant organisations, etc.. What they got was just what they didn't want: the 'freak' or mongrel proletariat — those not that much into work and who largely had never seen the inside of a trade union but who were prepared to put their heart and soul into the occupation. Instead of the 'straight' working class (at least as the leftists saw it) they got those without the correct image.

The SWP turned the occupation into a political arena where all other forces were seen either as rivals or subjects to be submitted to their will. In an atmosphere of intrigue, plots and manipulations we were forced into being less open and more secretive ourselves as protection against totally losing our ground. This is often the effect on struggles of self interested political factions with a separate agenda for themselves — to combat them you are often forced to adopt some of their tactics - resulting in the social dynamics of the struggle being stalled and energy being wasted on simply trying to stand your ground and contain the effects and spread of the Trotskyist virus.

But it's too simplistic to blame the SWP for everything - another sect could have played the same role, as could any other union bureaucrats or a group of timid, conservative workers in different circumstances. It's no good seeing the SWP cadres as the shit part and the rest of the strike committee as pure light - sometimes the SWerPs took the more radical initiatives, in opposition to more conservative strikers. But it's important to remember that the non-SWerPs were never as inflexible and ideological and therefore could be more imaginative in many ways.

Avoiding the routinisation of struggles seems to be a real challenge. All sorts of forces combine to turn an occupation or strike into just a different kind of work. The Trots are usually the visible cause, but it's often that they are filling a vacuum created by people's own uncertainty — it's inevitable in any genuine autonomous struggle - but the way in which vanguard groups use that uncertainty means they turn it into a weakness. Ideally they could be wrong-footed by a bit of playfulness and craziness, but when the situation becomes tense and 'serious' and people start worrying and falling back into the workday mechanisms, autonomy gives way to 'common sense.' At least in this experience at UCH people got out and about which lifted the weight a bit — a lot of occupations become sieges and in that context the vanguard and all the other military metaphors start giving the appearance of making sense. Isolation is another problem — especially if the occupiers are seen to be a 'minority.'

It's true to say that the SWP's goal is not firstly to advance a struggle, but to advance their influence on a struggle, and it is this which determines their choice of tactics: this was illustrated by the way their attitude to the occupation was to change.

Although of course the SWP strikers at UCH sincerely wanted to win the strike, its nevertheless true that the Party's tactics are generally determined not by how to advance or win struggles but by how to prove that if everyone had listened to and followed them then things would have worked out better - this often entails directing struggles and

demands at the union bureaucrats, so that when (inevitably) they don't do what they're asked to, they can be shown to be wrong and the SWP "correct" (this cynical attitude to the working class was spelled out yonks ago by their arch-guru Trotsky with his theories of the "transitional demand" etc.).(6)

But even in their own terms, none of their own plans for the occupation ever worked well. They could never draft in sufficient numbers for a total coup: very few union officials turned up; and only 3 or 4 'left' Labour MPs turned up, attracting very little press coverage. (It was laughable to later read Socialist Worker's claim that, due to pressure of public opinion and the strike highlighting the health issue, the Labour Party had been "forced" to send some prominent MPs down to the Ward. They had been phoning up loads of celebrities and these were the only ones who ever bothered to come).

The political vetting they'd wanted became impractical as it turned out that the branch officials were too busy to impose it — and as the Party faithful failed to materialise in sufficient strength we were needed to make up numbers anyway.

The picket line was another main casualty of the imposed changes. It was impossible for the strikers alone to mount successful picketing — there were 10 or 11 different exits all connected by underground tunnels that the management could use to sneak patients and equipment out as they closed more wards. During the occupation we had begun to organise 24 hour pickets with walkie-talkie contact between the picket and our Ward; we still didn't have enough people to cover every exit but it was certainly an improvement. But it seemed that part of the reason for the reorganisation of the occupation was that the union/SWP officials had given up on trying to develop effective picketing in favour of getting public sympathy on their side through publicity stunts. We had shown that we were serious about trying to make the picket effective and more than just a token show of strength — and possibly it was thought that this could lead to a clash on the picket line that would have further pissed off the union and would not have looked good in the media ('Picket Line Fight at the UCH' etc.). The officials had demonstrated no real enthusiasm for the idea of mass pickets at the hospital — and the possibility of growing numbers of local people and others organising themselves independently (in co-operation with strikers) on the picket line would not have appealed to them (just as it didn't in the occupation). They eventually discouraged us from all night picketing by saying that management would not bother moving stuff at night - shortly after we stopped night picketing they did start moving things at night.

We wrote a leaflet to the strike committee outlining our concern about how the occupation had been changed but it was never actually distributed to them; the strikers found out that UNISON had been going behind their backs to stitch up a deal with management to try to get them back to work. So the strike meetings were too busy trying to deal with all that to time to discuss the occupation with us .-. we were advised by a sympathetic striker that this was not a good time to distribute our leaflet.

But a lot of these conflicts might not have happened (or at least not so quickly) if more people, especially from the council estates nearby, had joined the occupation. If there

had simply been a big toing and froing of 200 people or so (or even of less) then the event could have taken on a momentum of its own whereby other empty wards would have been taken over as a matter of course as more beds were needed to sleep on at night, etc.. This would have made it harder for the officials to dominate events.

UNISON eventually issued an effective ultimatum to the strikers - to go back to work or the union would withdraw support for the strike; which would have left the strikers wide open to dismissal and possible legal action against them. In their isolation without wider effective support, this didn't seem like a risk worth taking.

The union bosses said that with only a minority of the UCH work force out the strike could never win. Not that UNISON wanted other workers to support it - their attitude towards the strike was hardly going to encourage more workers to get involved. The union machinery did its job of keeping the strikers isolated from other sections of the working class who could have given the active solidarity needed for victory; and the strikers were not capable of overcoming this isolation. The strikers met and voted to accept the deal whereby they went back to work in return for all disciplinaries being dropped and full trade union rights to organise in the hospital being restored.

The strike committee held its last meeting where two delegates for the occupiers were finally able to attend. A large number of strikers were elected as shop stewards at this meeting, this being proposed by the branch chairperson and the secrets (both SWP). This was a way of trying to re-integrate disaffected workers back into the union structure and to re-ignite faith in it - some of those elected had earlier thrown their UNISON badges in the bin in disgust. Obviously workers must "radicalise the unions," "push the leadership leftwards," "force the TUC to call a general str... blab blab yawn" - in SWerP speak this translates (they hope) into more positions of influence in the unions for the SWP "workers vanguard."

After all that was settled the occupation was discussed. We said why we thought the occupation should continue — the main arguments are set out in our leaflet [below] (which, again, was never actually distributed because during the first part of the meeting a union bureaucrat from UNISON head office was present and obviously we didn't want him to see it. When he left, the occupation was discussed and it was eventually voted to end it. After that, there seemed little point in giving out our leaflet).

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Undistributed leaflet:

TO THE STRIKERS
FROM SOME OF THE OCCUPIERS IN SOLIDARITY

We have written this statement because we want to sort out where we stand, to clarify our relationship to the strike committee and to the struggle to keep UCH open, which is also our struggle.

We have been involved in the occupation as NHS users, getting involved either from the start or from the Thursday demo, and have been trying to build the occupation as part of the struggle. We have helped build support in the local community, getting more people to join in and to widen the distribution of leaflets, getting local shops to donate food and display campaign material, along with community centres and others.

We produced our own leaflet, in consultation with a number of strikers, to put the case from the perspective of the community, of service users, calling for people to get involved. We have found that people, like us, do want to get involved, directly in the struggle for their health service, not just signing petitions or marching, and the occupation has given them a focus and an opportunity to start to get involved. We have also joined in the picket and enabled it to be extended a few times to 24 hours.

But it now appears that members of the community are at best to be tolerated, rather than allowed our own ideas and initiative. Even though a rota was being successfully developed, a formal rota has been imposed, controlled by the branch officials, making it more difficult for people to be involved on their own terms. Some people already felt they were being treated as 'token' pensioners, etc., and these changes have discouraged some people from returning.

More general involvement by local people and workers is being substituted by party political contacts. Occupiers have been forced into a position of passive observers as decisions taken elsewhere are carried out. These changes were presented to us on Sunday by a few branch leaders who seemed to be speaking for the strike committee, though it appears they weren't. On the grounds that we cannot be allowed to do anything to jeopardise the strikers or the strike (which we have no intention of doing) we have in fact been prevented from doing anything for ourselves. If allowing us any initiative is a threat, then the occupation should be staffed by cardboard cut-outs, not real people. Replacing the active solidarity of local people and other supporters by a strategy of using the occupation merely for public sympathy and visiting celebrities will not win our struggle. The miners had plenty of this sympathy and have still been destroyed.

Another justification mentioned in passing for dealing behind our (and others') backs was the problem with the union. We recognise there are problems – we just want to be able to discuss these things openly, we want to help.

We are not suggesting the occupation be separate from the strike – we want to work with the strikers to save the hospital, not just be assigned tasks as if we were workers and the union officials our managers. We are not here to disrupt, we are not a political group come to muscle in, we want to fight with you, for our health service.

We would like to meet and discuss all this with the full strike committee A.S.A.P.

- IN SOLIDARITY

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The debate eventually became a political argument - the SWP putting their line forward that community action like our occupation can only be useful and successful as

secondary, supportive action for worker's industrial action. They didn't like it when we put forward the obvious example of the Poll Tax to contradict them. At the time the SWP's line was that workers would defeat the Poll Tax by refusing to process the information, handle the paperwork, taking strike action, etc... Such actions happened only on a very small scale. It was what was happening outside the workplace that defeated the Poll Tax. It's significant that the only mass struggle in over a decade that in any sense could be called a victory was community based; neither union sabotage nor anti-strike legislation nor isolation could be used to restrict the movement. At this meeting and another later on in Ward 2/3 with more occupiers we managed to add some discord to the familiar refrain of the SWP union chairman giving a summing up lecture on what lessons could be drawn from the strike (7). He claimed it as some kind of victory that management had been shaken by (a defeated Arthur Scargill put it this way: "The struggle is the victory"). This desperate line from brave strikers has gained momentum since the miners' defeat in '85, as the defeats pile up as each group of workers is picked off in isolation one by one. With every defeat the bosses are inspired to tighten the screw a little more.

The occupiers later held their own meeting where we voted by a narrow margin to accept the wishes of the strikers and so end the occupation.

But the fight goes on and we can at least reflect on our failures in the hope of making our position stronger as we wait for the next cut of the Health Butcher's scalpel.

The strikers and occupiers walked out together, with one occupier being pushed out in his bed, and went their separate ways. Now calling ourselves the "UCH Community Action Committee" the occupiers headed straight for the nearby head offices of UNISON. A crowd of us pushed our way in to the building, leafleted workers and vented our anger at some bureaucrats for the union's role in sabotaging the struggle. They didn't call the cops on us, thereby avoiding more bad publicity for them. The building's entrance was later graffitied with "UNISCUM" and another wall saying "Unison sold out UCH nurses and porters". A stranger later added underneath "so what's new? NALGO sold out the Shaw workers" (i.e. workers in the nearby Shaw library).

The Action Committee kept holding regular meetings and did some actions. We decided to visit Wellcome, the multinational drug company involved in the sell-off of UCH. As luck would have it, when we arrived we discovered that a board meeting was then in progress. Fifteen of us snuck up the stairs and stormed straight into the Wellcome boardroom. Much to the shock of both them and us, there we were, in the heart of the dealers' den, facing the biggest and slimiest drug pushing cartel in the world(8). We immediately started haranguing and shouting at the bow-tied and blue-rinsed board members, demanding that they pull out of any deal to buy the UCH Cruciform building. We stayed for half an hour, arguing with them and eventually forcing them to leave and hold their meeting in another room. Then three van loads of cops arrived outside, including riot cops. Once they saw we were a motley crew including toddlers and pensioners, and not a gang of terrorists, they sent in a few to tamely escort us off the premises.

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Leaflet for Wellcome action;

SAVE OUR HOSPITALS
NO WELCOME TO WELLCOME

We have come to Wellcome because we object to their involvement in the closure of our local hospital, UCH. The UCH Cruciform is being closed to make way for a multi-million pound bio-medical research centre, with funding from the 'charitable' wing of WELLCOME (the multinational drug company), in association with University College London (UCL). A 'replacement' hospital, if it happens at all, is planned for "within the next TEN YEARS". In the meantime, WELLCOME and other businesses UCL have links with can rake in the profits while we suffer as the NHS is dismantled.

The Cruciform must stay a much needed hospital, and not become another site for business, even if it is medical research. What is the use of such research when our hospitals are closing,

We also question the nature of the research, including the testing of dangerous drugs on animals. WELLCOME have made £billions from the manufacture of the faulty drug AZT, at the expense of AIDS sufferers. Although they were reported to the Department of Health in 1992 for "false and misleading" claims about AZT, and also condemned by the Committee on the Safety of Medicines for the same, they are still managing to make profits from this drug, which some claim is not only useless but highly toxic. WELLCOME are in an extremely powerful position, having got AZT recognised as the main treatment for AIDS in the USA, which means other potential cures are being ignored.

WELLCOME are vampires on the NHS. At Leeds general infirmary, for every pint of bloods given by donors to the NHS, the NHS gets only 10% and WELLCOME get the rest for profiteering bloodsucking research...No welcome for Wellcome!

Although the strike and occupation at UCH were forced to end,; the struggle to keep our hospital open continues. Half the Cruciform is still being used as a hospital. It is not too late to re-open the empty wards and stop UCL/WELLCOME dancing on all our graves.

SUPPORT THE DEMONSTRATION/VIGIL OUTSIDE UCH ON THURSDAY 14th OCTOBER? ALL DAY? AGAINST THE HOSPITAL CLOSURE.

For more information contact:

UCH Community Action Committee, c/o BM CRL, London WC1.

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Later that day we gate-crashed the UCL Provost's office, interrupting his lunch and puncturing his self-importance to the point where he was reduced to calling us names and shouting at us to "get stuffed". We then moved on to the nearby offices of UCH boss Charles Marshall, which we invaded, disrupting a business meeting in the process. A few of us stayed for a while to argue the toss with him. All in all, not a bad day's work.

We also kept demonstrating once or twice a week outside the hospital and tried to organise to resist more wards being moved out, but we were never strong enough or well informed enough of management's plans. In the run up to November 5th a Virginia Bottomley guy was taken round the local area to raise money and a few laughs. We also attended and heckled meetings of the local Health Authority; who were discussing plans to deal with a £21 million cut in their budget by not sending any more patients to UCH; this would leave only a casualty department without adequate back-up facilities, with patients allowed a maximum 48 hour stay before being moved on. In order to compete with other hospitals for patients, UCH management announced a 10% price cut. This was to be achieved mainly by the axing of 700 jobs - but even this wasn't enough to satisfy the "Internal Market". Ex-strikers we talked to said there was no mood for a strike against these cuts amongst UCH workers.

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A Second Occupation

An NHS "Day of Action" had been organised by the TIJC for November 20th, basically as a token safety valve to dissipate the growing anger and pressure from health workers and others. Originally planned for Thursday 18th, it was changed to Saturday 20th - this was decided during the UCH strike in September, apparently due to union fears of a growing militancy amongst health workers. For the unions, the unpleasant possibility of effective action being taken - such as solidarity strikes or at least the major disruption of central London weekday traffic - would be greatly lessened by holding the demonstration on a Saturday. The unions' publicity for November 20th was very low key and half hearted - neither the demo nor any other real activity was emphasised, just the symbolic slogan "NHS Day of Action", with the demo mentioned in small letters at the bottom of the posters. The unions obviously have the resources to organise a massive demonstration to defend free health care if they want to, but this was not on their agenda.

Members of the UCHCAC decided to use the Day of Action as a way of combating the inactivity planned by the unions. We also wanted to do something to try stop the imminent closure of the Cruciform building. So we arranged for a group of us to reoccupy Ward 2/3 on the night before the Day of Action. Seventeen of us and some friends waited while a few people cracked open the ward. We all eventually sneaked in to find a bare ward: no beds or furniture this time.

The next morning we hung out some banners from the windows, as people began arriving for the UCH feeder march which would link up later with the main demo. At about 10.30am the hospital security guards finally noticed us. They came and asked what we were doing and then disappeared.

Most of us went off to join the demo, leaving a handful to "guard the fort" and stay put. Our faction marched under an anti-TUC banner saying "Tories Unofficial Cops sabotaging struggles." It was a boring march with 20-25,000 people on it; but the rally at Trafalgar Square was more interesting. We heckled a lot through a megaphone at the TU bureaucrats and celebrities, taking the piss and expressing our anger at the pathetic farce. It was ridiculous to see actors from the TV soap "Casualty" being invited to make

guest appearances and talk crap on the platform while real nurses who wanted to speak were prevented from doing so by the union bosses.

We also handed out leaflets at the demo explaining the UCH situation and asking people to come and join the occupation. About 25 people responded by coming to the ward after the demo — some SWP and Class War members and the other half various non-aligned individuals - 25 out of 25,000 - pathetic. We had a meeting and all these people expressed support for the occupation but most left never to return. Four or five stayed the weekend with about eight of us, and a friendly hospital worker managed to smuggle us in plenty of spare bedding to make us more comfortable. Some of the visitors went off to attempt their own occupation in south London but were apparently quickly evicted without any legal formalities by the cops.

Within a few days we were reliant on the same old familiar faces to maintain and publicise the occupation — our aim of using the occupation as a base to get more people involved was not succeeding. It was becoming a strain on the dozen or so hard core of people involved to keep things going and the lack of response was depressing. Sometimes there were just 2 people in the occupation and the boredom weighed heavy. We had a few supporters dropping in and some donations of food but very few people willing to become actively involved - even staying overnight occasionally was too much of a commitment for most people.

Although we had been very clear from the start that the occupation should not just be another token publicity stunt, we were now getting desperate and the brick walls of apathy around us were beginning to close in. So it was decided to contact the media in order to spread the word that we were here — our own local leafleting and flyposting having had so little effect. But we were agreed that no media people would be allowed inside the ward as this would create a totally different and unwanted atmosphere and would also be a great security risk (but not everybody stuck strictly to this agreement).

Management tried at first to ignore the occupation, fearing that any action against us might give it more publicity, but responded immediately once we contacted the media. Carlton TV said they'd come down and interview from outside while we talked to them from a window on the ward. Carlton phoned UCH management just beforehand to get their side of the story - which prompted management to cut off our electricity just before the cameras arrived. But the interview went ahead and was shown on London-wide TV news. We made sure our mobile phone number was prominently displayed to the cameras. This led to three people phoning us, two very supportive and one abusive. Considering that millions of people saw the interview and phone number on prime-time TV news this seemed to be one more example of how apathetic people felt. But in all our statements to the media we emphasised that our main goal was to help spread and inspire more occupations; we can only hope that we have planted some seeds that have yet to grow.

The SWP were even less supportive than the rest of the bourgeois press — it was only after we got some media coverage that they mentioned the occupation at all in Socialist Worker - and only after we had been evicted!

There were attempts to involve more people by holding a weekly under-5s afternoon, alternative health workshops, an acoustic music session, etc.. But general conditions plus the impossibility of long term planning made these hard to develop.

The few remaining wards in the building had been steadily closing during the occupation — and without the active support of staff or large numbers of other people there was nothing we could do to try and stop them closing down the building. Once the last patients had been moved out the management also cut off our heating. Now without heat or electricity we nonetheless stuck it out; we stubbornly dug our heels in and just wore more clothes and used candles, lanterns and camping gas stoves.

During this time we had a public meeting at Conway Hall - 22 people turned up, including a few militant health workers. We all had a good discussion with interesting ideas being suggested. It was generally felt that more effort should be put into making links with like minded groups and individuals. But again, only one or two people showed any willingness to get involved with the occupation. Still, we did make contact with some good people.

It was no surprise when we eventually received a High Court summons notifying us that proceedings were underway for management to regain possession of the ward. We went to the court hearing and, joined by a crowd of friends and supporters (including a few ex-strikers), we picketed outside the court with banners and leaflets. We lost the case, despite our solicitors arguing that the management were unable to produce any title deeds or clear evidence that they had any right to the building. The court case also attracted more TV, radio and press coverage.

We had a small but noisy spontaneous march back to the hospital - afterwards a few of us climbed on a flat roof opposite the UCH Chief Executive's office windows and blared out a tape of the old working class anthem "The Internationale" at the management for a laugh, while waving banners saying "Spread the Occupations". At around this time we received a couple of amusing phone calls; we had managed to get an article published in Pi, the UCL student magazine, about UCH and University College London's involvement in the sell-off of the Cruciform building:

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Student magazine article; Pi 553

[inline:IMG_0002_0.jpg]

news

The Provost Makes Us Sick

Students at UCL might like to hear about the involvement of UCL, and of the Provost, Derek Roberts, in particular, in the closing down of our local hospital UCH. They might also like to hear about an action taken against Roberts in protest at this involvement.

Derek Roberts is one of a committee appointed to close the main ("Cruciform") building. Others on this committee are Charles Marshall (former Private Secretary to minister John Biffen and Chief Executive at UCH), Sir Ronald Mason (Chief Scientific Adviser to the Ministry of Defence), Professor Laurence Martin (Director of the right-wing think tank, The Institute for International Affairs) and John Mitchell (Fellow King's Fund College).

Once the UCH Cruciform building is fully cleared of patients, UCL management have plans to turn the building into a multi-million pound "biomedical research centre" with money from the "charitable" wing of the multinational drugs company Wellcome. (Wellcome, it might be remembered, was responsible for the dodgy drug AZT, which made them billions at the expense of people with AIDS). With the involvement of Wellcome, the Ministry of Defence, and the institute for International Affairs (though by some to be an MI5 front organisation), it is open to question what sort of "biomedical research" UCL intend to carry out at the vacated hospital. But even if it were "legitimate research" (you know, that stuff where they drop chemicals into rabbits' eyes), this would still be no argument for closing down a hospital in its favour, when hospital waiting lists all over the country are growing.

In reality, the closure and expansion into the UCH Cruciform building are part of UCL's moves to strengthen connections with business and commerce. UCL is trying to get funding for research through two companies – UCL Initiatives Ltd. and UCL Ventures Ltd. Naturally, like any other business concerns, these two companies care nothing at all about the welfare of people with no hospital to go to and no private medical insurance.

It is not that "now the Cruciform building is closing UCL are making use of it by moving in". The plans for UCL's expansion into the Cruciform were floated long before the closure was made public. This is why the Provost was so against the 6-week strike by nurses trying to prevent the closure. Roberts has said "the strike was counter to the interests of patients, the future of UCL Hospitals, and indeed, the future of UCL....there should be great relief that it is over." If UCH was kept open, Roberts wouldn't have such an ideal location for empire-building - of course, he was relieved when the strike finished!

But the struggle against the closure isn't over despite the ending of the strike. In protest at Roberts' activities, members of UCH Community Action Committee – a group formed out of a previous 11 day occupation of an empty ward at UCH by angry local residents – occupied Roberts' office for an hour, while Roberts and two of his associates were trying to eat their lunch. Roberts became increasingly flustered as we plied him with questions about UCH, and he became even more uncomfortable when it was evident that we weren't about to leave in a hurry. Soon Roberts, this shining representative of liberal academic tolerance, was resorting to one-liners like, "Get stuffed!", "Shut your mouth!" and "You're a child!" (this latter remark being particularly ironic considering that many of the occupiers were older, and obviously wiser, than himself). All in all this mini-occupation

was a success, and as we were escorted off the premises by security guards we felt some satisfaction in the fact that we'd made Roberts squirm, and messed up his afternoon.

However, this occupation was nowhere near enough. We call upon all students, whether they are concerned about the hospital into political activism or just bored with the misery of meaningless studies, to take direct action against the Provost and management of UCL. Go for indefinite occupations, or imaginative acts of sabotage. And don't wait for the next union meeting where everything will get bogged down in bureaucracy. Do it now! You will have our active support.

Guy Debord

Note 1: You can contact UCHCAC outside the hospital main entrance from 12-2 every Friday, or c/o BM CRL, London, WC1N 3XX.

Note 2: There is a national demo against hospital closures in London, Nov. 20, with one contingent leaving from UCH, 11 a.m.

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We had then reprinted it as a leaflet and distributed it outside UCH and UCL, which was just across the road from the Cruciform. We also stuck it up inside the college. A few days later we received an angry telephone call from a whingeing student journalist insisting that we stop distributing the article as it was "all lies" and we were infringing Pi magazine's copyright. Realising she was failing to intimidate us, as we laughed and insulted her for being a pathetic crawling lackey for the college authorities, she slammed the phone down. Shortly afterwards we were phoned by a member of UCL management who demanded (unsuccessfully) to know who we were and threatened to sue us — we told him to sue if he wanted to, as we had no money to lose. And if they took us to court for making false statements about UCL's involvement in the closure and sell-off of UCH then they would have to reveal what the truth of the matter was - something we'd all like to hear! The editor of the mag also phoned the author to complain that she'd been called into the Provost's office and given a furious bollocking for publishing it. (The Provost also mentioned that he had checked the student register for the name of the author — and there was not even a "Guy Debord" listed there!). It was clear we were beginning to make them feel vulnerable.

Word had got out that Health Minister Bottomley was due to visit Arlington House, a hostel for homeless men in Camden Town. She was to be launching a new government video about ways to help the homeless be more healthy (of course, this didn't actually include giving them a home). We publicised her visit the best we could, calling on people to demonstrate outside the hostel. Shortly before the visit we heard that Bottomley would not now be attending and would be substituted by Junior Health Minister Baroness Cumberlege. Unfortunately it was too late to change our publicity from "Give Bottomley a lobotomy" to "Give Cumberlege a haemorrhage". The night before, a wall opposite the hostel was graffitied with "Bottomley bottled out" but it was painted over before the Baroness arrived. When she did come she was immediately surrounded by us as she got

out of her car — surprisingly she kept her nerve quite well and stopped briefly to argue with us. As the abuse and accusations intensified she was hustled away by cops to shouts of “murderer!”.

Once again the great silent majority had stayed silent and absent, not responding to our flyposting and leafleting or mention of the visit in local papers. Only about twenty people turned up, most of them already known to us, plus three residents of the hostel. One told us they'd graffitied inside the building but that had been painted over too.

We went back to the ward and had a party that night. We were evicted by bailiffs, cops and security guards at 7.45 the next morning, twenty days after the start of the occupation.

So now the Cruciform lies empty, with the loss of around 350 beds, while in other hospitals people suffer and die in corridors for want of a bed. But a few days after the end of the occupation Bottomley announced that the UCH was “saved” - all that this meant was that there would still be a casualty department (which hadn't been under threat anyway) and a renowned centre for medical research (meaning that the plan to sell it off to the likes of UCL and Wellcome was still to go ahead). This grand announcement was presented in the media as a great act of charity and a big concession; when in fact all that they were saying was that nothing had changed and their plans were still the same. That was newspeak at its most effective - people kept saying to us how great it was that UCH had been saved - when they had just closed down the main building with the loss of 350 beds and 700 jobs to follow! Bottomley also said that she might give some extra money as a temporary subsidy, on the condition that management make even more cuts. This was a way to avoid the embarrassment of UCH finally collapsing due to the pressures of competition in the Internal Market — the money could also be seen as a reward to UCH management for its cuts package of 700 jobs.

Then, to cap it all, three weeks later it was announced that the latest plan being considered was to sell off the whole UCH site (like other hospitals, the land would fetch millions on the property market) and to move parts of the UCH to various other hospitals. Who knows what they'll come up with next?

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Post-occupation leaflet;

**UCH - SAVAGED
NOT SAVED**

The SWP – doing Bottomley's dirty work for her:

Q: What have Virginia Bottomley and the SWP got in common?

A: Amongst other things, they both claim that University College Hospital (UCH) has been saved.

About 700 jobs and hundreds of beds have been lost, and the main Cruciform building – which everyone associated with UCH – has been closed. Yet for different, equally-manipulative reasons, the “Health” Minister and the “Socialist” Workers' Party are both agreed on the lie that “UCH has been saved”. Goebbels - “The bigger the lie, the more it is believed” - would have been proud.

What's left of UCH?

Well – now merged with the Middlesex, there's the administration – really useful if you've had a heart attack. And there the Accident & Emergency – but that was never scheduled for closure in the first place. Instead, as with all A & E's without a hospital attached, it's been left without adequate back-up, giving patients just 48 hours to stay before being moved on. There are, however, 40 or so extra beds for those who need intensive care, who can now stay on a bit longer. Nevertheless, staff are now complaining that whereas before it used to take just a couple of minutes to move such patients to a specialist ward in the old Cruciform building, now it takes up to half an hour to get to the Middlesex because of heavy traffic. What's more, the recent death of a six-month-old baby at UCH A&E shows how dangerous it is to have an A&E separate from the specialists (now based in Middlesex) who were previously on site; at the same time the cuts ensured that the equipment for monitoring the baby wasn't working. It looks like the parents are going to sue the over-worked nurses involved, using the Patients' Charter. The much-lauded Charter is used intentionally to blame individual health workers in order to fend off attacks on the real murders: the managers and accountants who push through the cuts demanded by Bottomley and her genocidal government.

Apart from this, there's a private wing (great!). Also “saved” (we're not sure they were planning it for closure originally anyway) are the Urology department (much reduced), the clap clinic and Obstetrics. And there's a new children's ward: however, at the Middlesex there used to be two children's wards, and now there's only one – which means that between them, one children's ward has been lost, even though on paper UCH's has been “saved”. Similarly, by classifying some beds which were previously the Middlesex's, and by counting the beds existing towards the end of the run-down of the UCH, the health authorities can claim that UCH has lost “only” 70 beds instead of the 300+ that have really been lost. Lies, damned lies and statistics. Moreover, three weeks after Bottomley said the UCH had been saved, it was announced that the latest plan was to sell off the whole UCH site (the land fetching millions on the property market) and to move parts of the UCH to various other hospitals. If this comes about UCH will merely be an administrative label on some bureaucrat's door.

To say all this means the hospital has been saved is like saying that a formerly healthy adults, who has had both legs and arms amputated and is on a life support machine, has been saved. Well, technically yes – but it hardly constitutes the victory the SWP like to make it out to be.

With saviours like these, who needs grave-diggers?

During the Vietnam war, an American general declared, "In order to save the village, it had to be destroyed." With UCH it's more a case of "in order to destroy the hospital, it had to look like it was saved."

Virginia Bottomley says the UCH has been saved, for similar reasons to the government saving coal mines in 1992 – to stop people fighting together, to reinforce the ignorance and confusion about what's happening to the hospitals and to divide up the fight to save them into isolated campaigns for each hospital, separated from a more general movement.

But why does the SWP proclaim "We saved UCH" when those SWP members who have worked and struggled at UCH – some of whom are genuinely fighting to win – know perfectly well this is bullshit? As in all hierarchies, the individual has to repress their point of view and preach "the party line". During the strike, SWP strategy was designed to gain the maximum publicity and to show how radical they were compared to the union leadership, by pushing for demands that they knew the leaders would not meet. The predictable sell-out of the strike by Unison was the "victory" the SWP wanted: confirmation of something they knew beforehand would happen; but did nothing to undermine. In fact, they had encouraged a faith in the union which they knew would inevitably be betrayed. It was only afterwards that they needed to find a happy ending, so that they could encourage others to repeat the tragedy at other hospitals. The SWP's main concern was recruitment to a self-proclaimed image of themselves heroically and successfully leading the working class to victory, even if this victory is a myth. For them this is more vital than the development of any real struggle by the poor, honestly facing the horrific extent of their defeats and the reasons for them.

The struggles at UCH

During the struggles at UCH the SWP did everything to minimise the efforts of non-SWP members. During the work-in aimed at stopping the closure of Ward 2/1 in Nov – Dec '92, SWP members played as much a part as anyone else involved in the struggle – though it was probably the support of the junior doctors which really won this battle, admittedly only a temporary reprieve. In the strike of Aug – Sept '93 they played a more significant part – not all of it helpful by any means. For instance, they did much to ensure that the cheerful demos which had previously disrupted traffic got turned into boring routine affairs. And in the occupation of Ward 2/3 in September, admittedly suggested by an SWP member, though broken into by a non-party hospital campaigner, they did much to dampen the high-spirited atmosphere. When occupiers met with a few SWP union stewards to discuss the occupation, the occupiers were told the stewards represented the decisions of the strike committee, and these decisions were: vetting to decide who should be allowed into the occupation, to be carried out by the branch secretary and chair, both SWP members. People would have to book themselves onto a formalised rota days in advance just to be able to spend a night there, reducing the occupation to a chore and duty, killing off the social dynamic going on. The effect of these changes was miserable: a lot of people, particularly locals who visited regularly, were put off from coming. And there seemed little point in giving out leaflets encouraging people to come, if they had to

be vetted first. People now felt they were only there with the tolerance of certain officials, and no longer joint partners in the struggle.

The openness of the occupation; with free debate flowing back and forth informally, was replaced with an atmosphere of intrigue and secret whispering. It was only later found out that these demands of the SWP union officials weren't at all proposed by the strike committee: it had been an SWP manipulation from the very beginning.

The second occupation of Ward 2/3 was organised by us – UCH Community Action Committee – without, unfortunately, a strike at UCH, and completely independently of any political party. We had hoped to extend the occupation of one ward by getting loads of people back from a TUC Health Service demo on November 20th. We failed, even though the occupation took nearly three weeks to be evicted. During this time, the SWP were even less supportive than the rest of the media – the occupation only got a mention after the evictions. We could never, of course, pretend that “we saved UCH” - not just because it hasn't been saved but, more vitally, because if UCH had been saved it could not have been down to us, but due to a more general and much more combative movement, involving a considerably greater section of the working class than the few people who initiated the occupation. Unlike the SWP, we have no pretension to being an indispensable vanguard, able to win victories on our own. And, of course, UCH has been, by and large, a defeat, and to ignore that is to confuse and demoralise any chance of a fightback, which is where the SWP and Bottomley have so much in common.

If a fight is to develop to save the hospitals or to stop the horrific attacks on the poor, it will not only have to bypass the parties and unions, but attack them as enemies and obstacles to our struggle. Our health and our lives cannot be “saved by the professional liars of the Left, Right or Centre, but only ourselves organising not just an organisation with a name on a banner or logo on a leaflet, which is just an image, but organising specific actions and critiques, correcting our weaknesses and failures.

UCH Community Action Committee, c/o BM CRL, London WC1N 3XX

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Victory prepared by a series of defeats?

As we go to press it seems that some kind of active campaign may be starting up at Guy's Hospital to try and save it from the Health Butchers. From what we have seen so far it seems that the same old mistakes made at the UCH are doomed to be repeated at Guy's; many of the hospital staff appear to have the same naive faith 'their' unions and 'their' MPs etc. - and once again they are encouraged in this by the SWP - who have set up their own community campaign front group, as have two other rival political factions. The SWP now even claim that they saved UCH (see leaflet below). The campaigning appears to be about one hospital only - all the easier to be defeated in isolation. And only a few hundred turned out for a demo, although this is the local hospital for many thousands of people. But these are early days and hopefully things will develop beyond these limits.

So what lessons can we draw from the UCH strike and two occupations that are worth passing on to those who may find themselves in a similar situation?

Well, basically, never trust those who want to represent you and speak for you - fight to preserve your own autonomy if you have it and fight to gain it if you don't. Never trust the unions and lefty parties (despite the fact that there are OK individual rank'n'file members within them) - they'll always try to use you for their own ends.

If you want to gain support then go and get it yourselves — going through official channels is generally useless. Workers need to speak face-to-face with other workers - the union reps will try to fob you off with excuses and tie you up with official procedures.

If strike action is to be effective it will have to be organised outside and against the unions — and ideally there will need to be prior commitment of solidarity from sufficient numbers of workers so as to make it impossible for the bosses to victim small groups of workers in isolation.

And do all you can to immediately spread all strikes and occupations; such may seem wildly optimistic at the moment, but if each hospital is to avoid being picked off one by one in isolation (just as so many sectors of workers have been) then we need a growing movement of occupations and strikes.

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"Our hospital was saved by the kind of action that this bill will seek to criminalise. We occupied, we picketed, we slept outside and we won. All that is under attack. We must stop this bill."

- Candy Udwin, UNISON branch secretary, University College Hospital

[inline:TerryUCH.jpg]

Quote from an SWP anti-Criminal Justice Bill leaflet: Ms Udwin is an SWP member who, during the strike, loudly condemned the dangerous consequences if the Cruciform building was closed with hundred of jobs to be lost. Yet now all this has happened, she faithfully parrots the party lie that this outcome is a victory won by the SWP!

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LIFE IN THE VOID

Alongside other attacks, the Health Service is being torn apart around our but where is the resistance on the scale necessary to turn things around? The last years of accelerating defeat, demoralisation and hardship seems to have created an extreme cynicism about being able to change anything for the better, or even that worth trying to. People have retreated largely into an isolation centred on the struggle for survival day-to-day. The war of all-against-all for shrinking resources has made everyone a casualty — resignation rules. The health service is an issue that affects everybody and yet the amount of active resistance to its destruction is so far pathetically small.

There is at present little strike action taking place in the UK; but when it happens there is more and more criticism by workers of the role of “their” unions in the struggle. UCH, Burnsall and Timex are the most recent examples of this (interestingly, in each case it was a predominantly female work force confronting a typically male union bureaucracy).

The early '70s were often marked by a strong belief in the union as the real sister/brotherhood that would bring about radical social change. Most of that sad faith has now gone although there's still a fair amount of “if only we could get rid of the bureaucrats things would be okay” type platitude - with little recognition that the union structure is designed to be a control mechanism, or that trying to “radicalise” the unions is as futile as trying to radicalise any other capitalist institution. Yet, despite mounting criticism, people feel more compelled to obey the union than in the 60's/70's period when there were rank'n'file movements jumping in and out of the trade union form (almost always to end up in it again) and often initiating wildcat actions that bypassed the union bureaucracy whilst making use of union resources for their own ends: but the bottom line was still that of quite strong TU beliefs.

But all these contradictions reflect the changing role of the unions. why people obey the union today is because of its role as an economic provider: as a cheaper kind of building or insurance society (literally — the unions now provide low cost insurance deals and mortgages to staff); as an issuer of strike pay when you can't get anything off the State; as a provider of legal skills (solicitors, etc.) in an increasingly litigation oriented society where Law Centres are often no longer available for low paid workers; and the union as the place where bitter divorce proceedings or future funeral expenses cost you nothing more than the renewal of a years subscription. In short, working in harmony with the money terrorism of a free market cash-and-carry UK. Thus to get thrown out of the union for engaging in wildcat actions or whatever (a threat increasingly employed by union bureaucrat fat cats) might have serious financial consequences.

UNISON is only the latest but perhaps the most significant example of unions extending their influence from the workplace to other areas of life. Maybe this should be looked at more closely because it may reveal a new stage in the unions' role in society (i.e. extending the disciplinary role, or at least their role of social recuperation in the community). There does seem to be a tendency of unions pursuing a more “consumerist” role, looking after its people on all fronts - no doubt, they would say, the better to integrate people back into the present system. Its different from the old German model of holiday camps and trekking, in that the whole set up is based upon private consumption, leisure and social services. The last thing the unions could (or want to) do is bring people together in a real physical closeness.

At UCH the strikers never received strike pay until after they had agreed to call off the strike. No doubt the accountants are instructed to keep money in the bank, making interest until the very last moment. Although nurses are paid monthly, the porters are paid weekly and they were particularly hard hit during the strike by the union's mean approach. This union strike pay sabotage is widespread: in 1988 striking civil servants in London never received a penny until their thirteen week strike had come to an end.

All the measures listed above are a great form of blackmail - no wonder then that the unions are now such superb organisers of constant and almost total defeat. But again, we can't simply blame the bureaucrats for our own failures - they thrive on our isolation and passivity - and their strength is based largely on what we let them get away with.

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Derailing a runaway train

If we look at the policies promoted by the Tory State in the last few years, it seems that increasingly they do not even serve the long term interests of the ruling class. The fast money, free market "privatise everything that moves" ideology is like a runaway train mowing down anything in its path but having no clear idea of where its going. The destruction of industrial manufacturing in favour of financial capital, the creation of a boom and then bust property market, the lack of investment in training for a skilled work force; these are all measures that have given them short term gains (at the expense of the working class) but have inevitably created deeper problems as they mature later on. The State is not capable of planning logical long term strategy in its own interests - only more cuts, more repression.

This short-sightedness is mirrored in the State's plans for the health service. There is a strategy of wanting to destroy the popular principle and tradition of free health care for all, but the way they are pursuing it means that they could end up wrecking all kinds of health care provision.

At the present time all doctors and nurses are trained within the NHS. With continual closures of so many hospitals, including the best teaching institutions, the effects are likely to be catastrophic for health care in general.

Private health care takes place mainly in NHS hospitals – so the BUPA alternative will be no solution. Being dependent on the NHS for facilities and staff training, it may crash with it. The big increase in BUPA advertising is just a sign of desperation. BUPA is now in serious financial crisis – gone are its eighties hey-days when, for a cheap rate, a BUPA subscription was lodged into many a middle management contract. Now BUPA are desperately revising their services and moving to a position whereby those who are likely candidates for any major illness can get lost/drop dead.

But could we even expect a future total collapse of BUPA to cause the government to pause and rethink its policies on health services? What other country in Western world is making such attacks on the general health of its population? The government recently began running a series of adverts in British medical journals c behalf of the United Arab Emirates government - the ads were aimed at convincing thousands of NHS medical staff to start a new career abroad working for much better wages in the UAE. The government has announced that it plans to cut sick pay - another attempt to force those who can afford it into private health insurance. And since the introduction of water meters in trial schemes thousands of people who could not pay the much higher bills have been disconnected - outbreaks of dysentery and other health problems have been caused by the rising cost of water (it is planned that water meters will soon be compulsory for all).

It's worth remembering that one of the main reasons better public sanitation was originally introduced was because the diseases that developed from the filthy slums of the 19th Century showed no class prejudice and would eventually hit the richer parts of town.

It's possible that there's real disarray in the ruling class; crudely put, a conflict between 'finance capitalists' (who are blind to social consequences) and a more socially concerned professional capitalist class. The finance capitalist faction looking for a repeat of '80s privatisation sell-off bonanzas - as they are also aware (rightly) that capitalism can never satisfy all the needs it creates. So they pursue cut-back strategies, with little regard for the social consequences, almost taking a social Darwinist position. On the other side is a professional class which finds some sort of common ground with One Nation Tories. This faction is both trying to secure own sectional interests (more money for managers, administrators, professional etc.) and appealing to a wider social consensus around a program of managerial capitalism. They are, however, under-represented at the top and exist as a middle management of the chaos. What they don't appear to realise is that the system cannot fill all the needs they have set themselves to manage - so they are in a permanent state of frustration, and are becoming somewhat deranged as a consequence.

The most likely outcome of imposing the internal market will be a vastly reduced NHS run as a skeleton service for those with no other options, maybe with a sliding scale of charges according to income. Already Leicester Health Authority is requiring people to pay for non-emergency operations since their annual budget ran out half-way through the financial year. So now everybody will have to wait six months for a free operation - and by then the queue will be so long they will probably use up the funds allocated for the whole year in a month or so. So each year the queue will become more and more endless. This is one way of gradually introducing payment for treatment by the back door.

To conclude: the question mark that hangs over the NHS, to be or not to be, raises a number of related matters which can only be hinted at here.

Can capital overall dispense with an NHS given that powerful chemical companies depend on State revenues to underwrite their profitability? It was commonplace in the 70s to argue against dismantling the NHS on the aforementioned ground as well as emphasising that taking a vast amount of purchasing power (jobs) out of the economy would be a deflationary move amounting to the suicidal. The Thatcherite legacy is fully prepared to explode this piece of economic logic not by refuting the conclusions but rather by accepting the consequences.

What part did war and war time play in the setting up of the NHS, particularly in the need to have a fighting fit workforce able to wage war on capital's behalf? Except locally, conventional warfare on a large scale is a thing of the past hence a further argument against an NHS, but an argument that would have been conducted behind closed doors. Undoubtedly, however, the ideology of a "people's war" (1939-45) helped shape the comprehensive nature of the NHS — so today, its continued existence is probably more

of a political than an economic imperative with a political class using the issue to garner votes, especially from the ageing part of the population. It's conceivable a government could buy out a person's right to free health care by offering a once-and-for-all cash payment. This could appeal to young, healthy people with no money nor perspective on the future.

The potential for political deception and manipulation is enormous. A cull of the old and sick cannot be dismissed out of hand though doubtless it would have to be left to the "hidden hand" of market forces rather than be achieved through mass execution. The prescribing of inferior and cheaper medicine, and the withholding of health care for people over a certain age not only underlines the economic burden of health care and the cost of an ageing population, but the problem of valorisation of capital. A youthful workforce could be turned against the old and sick on the grounds that they act as a depressant on wages. All family social ties would have to be virtually sundered for this program of wrinkle-cleansing to have a chance of social success. The human consequences of the actual workings of the internal market are, however, a taste of things to come. On occasion, competing trusts award contracts to health authorities some hundreds of miles distant. The Bradford Trust won the contract for Virginia Bottomley's (Secretary of Health) constituency in the south of England, which means patients run the very real risk of being isolated from family and friends in a moment of real crisis. This example reflects the way in which isolation accumulates in society at large — just seeming to happen - without anyone shouldering responsibility or cold-bloodedly anticipating the end result. But it suits capital's needs perfectly and a comparison with the practice of moving prisoners away from familiar localities springs to mind.

It would be instructive to draw up a list of property magnates on the boards of NHS trusts. Hospitals tend to occupy prime sites, and the conversion of St Georges hospital at Hyde Park Corner during the late 70s and early 80s into a swish hotel ranks as a forerunner. Similarly, the Harrow Road hospital in west London was bulldozed and yuppie apartment blocks constructed on the site overlooking the canal. By good fortune, the building company and developer, Declan Kelly, became a victim of the property crash and to this day the wretched place has the air of a building site. There is talk of converting Charing Cross Hospital into a hotel for senior staff at Heathrow airport. It's possible too that Withington hospital in south Manchester could be used for similar purposes serving Ringway airport. Recently, St James' University hospital in Leeds concluded a £25 million deal with private developers over 13.5 acres of their site. Doubtless it will be treated as badly needed "proof" that the property wheeler dealings of the trusts do work, with apologists eager to point out how the deal will finance a new paediatric unit and a "ninety bed patient 'hotel' for low intensity care cases" - which does hint that only private patients will eventually be welcome. Nor was any mention made of a likely bonus payable to trust managers. Leeds is however a special case and the fact that land values have risen in Leeds has more to do with its runaway success as a financial centre able to challenge the City of London in some respects (going on for half of all mortgages in UK are lent by building societies based within a thirty mile radius of Leeds). In Leeds too, Tony Clegg, the ex-chair of Mountleigh property consortium, who pulled out just before its financial

potential nose-dived, is still chair of Leeds General Infirmary trust after the preliminary arrangements were put together by the boss of Centaur Clothes store in Leeds.

The presence of property developers on trusts is witness to the determination to recreate all that was associated with yuppie culture. There is some recovery in commercial property but not enough to stop the majority of closed hospitals from being boarded up and left to await the return of the roaring 80s and the stratospheric property values. It could be the trusts are biding their time and drawing some hope from the wave of privatisations sweeping Europe. The majority of States - with France and Italy in the lead - seek to expand by some 20-30% the market capitalisation of Europe's largest stock markets. However, it's not accompanied by fanfares of "popular capitalism" to anything like the same degree as under Thatcher.

The increasingly precarious nature of NHS schemes needs to be situated the multi-nationalisation of the global economy and the reduced significance of nation State as a pro-active economic force. Globalisation is, however, fraught with competing interests and in this present phase the flow of capital vastly outweighs flow of trade. Private insurance ties in with the contemporary dominance of finance capital so different from that described by Hilferding (basically as banker to industry). Its short-termism, money making money, detracts from the goals of industrial capitalism whose relationship with the nation State is somewhat less ambivalent, needing the State as a consumer, an enactor of labour legislation and as an educator. The whole issue however remains highly complex: e.g. money markets eagerly snap up treasury auctions in credit worthy countries and therefore have a vested interest in maintaining a manageable level of government overspend which includes expenditure of health and social security.

[inline:uch1.jpg]

The latest gimmick marking the end of free health care: bed pans, urine bottles, arid vomit bowls - made into fashion accessories by art students and promoted by Vernacare of Bolton who manufacture products for hospitals. Now Vernacare use these selfsame products to decorate hospital walls (as they await closure?).

End-of-art shock tactics to shock people into awareness over the demise of free health care? A likely story. Such shock tactics, now capitalised a million times over, are nothing but a cynical promo by a business out to secure its sales pitch in the plundering of hospital services.

SOME FURTHER REFLECTIONS

When comparing the different Health Services in Europe and North America, economically the most important point to grasp is the weight accorded to insurance companies versus the degree of state subsidy. In France, each individual is charged for hospital treatment but up to 70% is then reimbursed by the state — the rest is usually

paid for by the Health Insurance deducted at source by your employers. The Balladur government wants to increase the role of the insurance companies and is meeting resistance both on behalf of the employees and the employers because it will add to the wages bill. It could also be used as an argument by employers to cut wages. Superficially, when comparing Britain and France things look better here regarding treatment irrespective of ability to pay. In France, each individual is charged a nominal sum for each day they spend in hospital but this money is refunded. Ideas along French lines have been floated in Britain but, at the same time, doctors in France are given an additional increment to their salaries every time they see a patient. So it is in their interest to continually follow up patients and in that sense primary care is better in France. Some attempt will be made to limit the amount of money spent on the French Health Service because it would appear that health spending in France is, in comparison to other countries, "out of control" (but doesn't every government say the same thing???)

In North America, feeble attempts have been made in the last thirty years or so to limit the control of insurance companies over health care. Most recently, President Clinton wanted to reduce the role of insurance companies to 80% of health care costs by 1997/8; which shows just how tepid Hilary Clinton's reforms were before they completely collapsed. (It took less than two years in Atlee's post WWII reforming government for a "free" NHS to come into existence in Britain)(9). In the US, it has been reckoned that the only institutional group interested in preserving the American Health Service status quo are the huge insurance companies. Many powerful industrial conglomerates in the US want a form of NHS so as to ease the burden of medical insurance for their employees. Capitalist arguments are wheeled out in support of an American NHS along the lines of firms will become more internationally competitive freed of a medical insurance burden. Firms also seek to minimise health insurance cover as part of cost cutting, and such ploys have led to strikes such as the Pittston miners' strike of 1989. There is also a current of opinion that the control of the insurance companies in America is leading to a degree of inertia with doctors fearing writs will be taken out charging them with medical negligence in case mishap. Compensation can reach astronomical sums and lawyers love pursuing medical claims (c/f "The Verdict", the Paul Newman film about a beat-up lawyer pursuing a claim). The whole thing becomes a never-ending spiral of increased premiums to cover law suits, with the insurance companies the main beneficiaries isn't this, more or less, how it must be under finance capital; the final "antediluvian form of capital" as Marx put it: is it possible to return health care to an earlier more rational form of capital? All in all isn't it the rough equation: health care funded through equity culture — with the insurance companies along with pension funds playing big on the stock exchange???)

There is another shady area - the amount spent on administration. In comparison to the NHS in Britain, the ratio of administrative cost was something percent here to twenty percent in America. The admin costs are increasing dramatically in Britain as more and more accountants are being employed, particularly fund-holding GPs. In one estimate quoted by the Economist magazine, a former personal director of the NHS, Eric Caines,

has calculated that it often takes seven a half weeks(!) worth of administration to deliver an hour and half of care to patients.

The importance of insurance companies in relation to health care, and who also related to the tempo of class struggle, must be linked to notions of popular capitalism, equity culture and a recognition of the role of insurance companies in driving stock exchanges forward. Concomitant with casino capitalism, beyond the risk-taking and rapacious short-termism, is the notion that on an individual level, a person takes full responsibility for the failure of capitalism; that one introjects and moralises its desperate shortcomings; that its failure is your failure. Not to be covered by private insurance is to be guilty even though its limitations are becoming painfully obvious to more and more people (BUPA has recently removed several medical conditions from the insurance cover, such as Alzheimer's disease). demand "free medicine" is tantamount to being a fraudster, to want "something for nothing" and hence an aspect of "welfarism" to be bracketed alongside dole scroungers, single parents, travellers and, as the net expands, the 'sick' and people on State pensions. Amid the hysteria over the public sector borrowing requirement, it's forgotten that an individual's State health insurance contribution is exactly that of BUPA assuming that the individual is employed. And what is forgotten as the welfare blitz shows no sign of abating is that one aspect of modern welfarism, as expressed within the NHS, grew out of the armies of Empire and, secondly, the need for the bourgeoisie to protect themselves from cholera epidemics etc. through general environmental improvements. Does Mrs. Bottomley seriously believe Flo Nightingale went amongst the wounded soldiery of the Crimea inspecting BUPA cards by the light of the lamp before administering treatment?

The position of the staff nurse with its faint militaristic ring has been replaced by that of the "ward manager" resonant of a business appointment. The "line manager" of an Accident and Emergency Department approximates to that of an "assembly line manager" with patients substituting for the throughput of cars. Terminally ill cancer patients receive chilling letters concerning their admission to hospital from "marketing managers." It's as if a fatal disease has become a marketable commodity, something henceforth to be touted on the market. A hospital closure is referred to as a "market exit", not to carry out a life saving operation is called a "budget under-spend". This impenetrable language is redolent with symbolist abstruseness - a stay in a hospital becomes an "episode in care" a sort of "après-midi d'un NHS" bizarrely evoked by the estranged wordsmiths of monetarism - whose aim is not to concoct some ideal reality through a language torn from its functional context - but to cover up the unspeakable. The circle closes: this inverted apocalypse of language is indebted to the euphemisms of modern warfare where to kill was to "terminate with extreme prejudice" and where villages were destroyed "in order to save them."

The closing down of the NHS, i.e. its privatisation, inevitably forms part of the Tory government's privatisation program. However, the economic context and the circumstances of class struggle in which the first privatisations took place and today's projected privatisations are very different. Privatisation, beginning with British Telecom, was an ad-hoc strategy. The foot-dragging "consensus" propping up subsequent

privatisations was largely manufactured through economic sweeteners. The State crudely rigged “market” price, and sections of the working class throughout the ‘80s were able to get in on asset inflation. However, other than insurance companies, no one will get rich out of the privatisation of the NHS. Such a thing literally tramples into dust any notion of a share owning democracy and a popular capitalism, because all the money goes straight to the fat cats as private insurance schemes are taken up. “Popular” intermediaries are dispensed with who, in previous privatisations, would sell their shares to institutions in order to make a quick buck. The privatisation of the NHS brutally emphasises the concentration of capital, not its pretended democratisation. Misguided individuals may beef about waste in the NHS - the enormous amounts of food surplus to requirements disposed of everyday is still a familiar complaint - but there isn’t even the shreds of a consensus supporting the dismantling of the NHS. The mass of people, including middle class professionals, have been bludgeoned into accepting it and behind every hospital closure, in the not too distant past, is the defeat of section after section of the working class fighting to the death in isolation. True, criticisms of the formerly “fully operational” NHS were broad and manifold, but the ease and speed with which it is being dismantled is different from the “willingness” of factory workers to accept redundancy and closure previously. Then there was an element of gladness to have done with alienated labour - now the attitude is one of resignation and the feeling all protest is hopeless. The public’s attitude is not one of “medical nemesis” — the actual shortening of life through too much medical interference - but the aghast realisation one could literally be left to die in the not too distant future. Whatever the future of the NHS - and a nurse in the UCH occupation did ask for alternative ideas on the NHS to make it more appealing — any renationalisation of health care must necessarily involve re-regulation and a hands on approach in other spheres as well, like, for instance, the stamping out of currency speculation favoured by more rational capitalists out of which insurance companies along with bank, pension and investment funds can do very well. Instead of a minimalist State, more of a maximalist State — all of which evades the vexed question of an autonomous medicine going beyond the rapidly fading institutions of the NHS. No matter how airy fairy such a notion now seems, the realisation of the good life through autonomous class struggle is inseparable from good health.

Both in psychiatry and general health care the recuperation of the everyday is very visible. (This recuperation is not merely carried out in terms of an idealised healthy person - it also carries a political meaning:— the restoration of the power of the status quo). Hospital wards at times come to resemble a homely sitting room with visitors sitting on beds, portable TVs flickering, music blaring, easy chairs at random. Nurses are far less starchy and doctors and consultants are not so sniffy. Belatedly the trauma of a stay in hospital has been recognised and a patient seen to have human and emotional needs. At the same time the gain in informality cannot cover up the dust collecting in corners, the stains, the peeling paint, the dilapidated state of the premises, the clapped out beds. In fact the informality has developed alongside reductions in staff levels. It is as if recuperation has been permitted to exist with the proviso that everything will shortly be gone - doctors, nurses, ancillary staff, equipment, even the bricks and mortar. Here, to kill

is to cure. Waiting lists are abolished by closing all hospitals in an insanity which knows no bounds, and strikes are abolished by shutting down industry.

There are a myriad of other matters one could glance on. The misery of doctors enveloped in a world of serial sickness, endlessly seeing one patient after another, their loneliness, self-doubt and recrimination resulting in breakdown; disastrous love lives often leading them in middle age to pounce upon the first available member of the opposite sex. And then there are the drug company reps that prey on doctors, offering inducements like holidays in the sun, to demonstrate the virtues of some new supadrag - their stylish clothing, large salaries, persuasive selling techniques and at the end of the day nothing but the sting of conscience and alcohol.

And why haven't doctors, consultants and hospital administrators laid bare their professional unhappiness and told it like it was? This failing they share in common with most other professional people who similarly maintain a vow of silence, leaving the rest of us to try and do it for them. It is noteworthy that Dr Chris Pallis of "Solidarity" — a member of one of the best revolutionary group/mags of the 60s - never voiced his unease at being a top consultant, as though clinical practice was immune from the vicissitudes of class struggle. When he came to write on the NHS, he used it as a vehicle to demonstrate the Cardanite thesis of ever increasing bureaucracy. And where NHS staff have written from the eye of the storm it has tended to come from within a Trotskyist perspective (e.g. "Memoirs of a Callous Picket" written by Jonathan Neale, an SWP ancillary worker (Pluto Press, 1983) and Dave Widgery's account "Some Lives" of what it was like to be a GP in a poverty stricken East London borough), Only recently have more autonomous critiques started to appear, and let's hope we'll see a lot more of them when things really start to come to the boil...

Unfortunately, most people (and with all the so-called 'reforms' the numbers grow by the minute) still have some kind of faith that the Labour Party, once in power, is going to ride into the fray on a white charger and clear up the mess, bringing about free health care, building hospitals everywhere. Don't believe it. Basically, they are going to take over the 'reforms' managing the 'unaccountable' trusts with a phalanx of their own personnel. After all, it was ad hoc Labour Party initiatives (pretending to be grass roots and independent) on urban regeneration and single issues in the 60s and 70s that brought to prominence the para—state (as it was then known) which became the precursors of the now notorious and much more powerful (lucratively funded) quangos, staffed with failed government cadres. Obviously, the Labour Party will change to some degree the form and content of the trusts, making them more publicly acceptable (perhaps doing away with the two-tier system and GP fundholding practices?), but any real rebellion from below concerning wages, staffing levels, etc., will the direction of health care, some Leeds health workers asked John Battle - a Leeds Labour MP and Labour left winger — if the Party on coming to power would abolish the trusts. Battle looked as though he'd swallowed a bee accusing them of being wreckers destroying the Health Service - and this at a time when the same health workers were daily facing the new brutalism of trust management... Is this the shape of things to come?

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News item;

Dad slams 'third world' UCH after baby's death

A TOP-LEVEL inquiry has been launched at University College Hospital into the death of a sick baby who was kept waiting three hours in casualty before being hooked up to a faulty drip feed.

Camden New Journal, 21/5/94

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Appendix

Shortly after the first occupation ended, one of the occupiers, who is a member of Wildcat (a 'revolutionary journal') wrote an article about the events ("Managers and unions act in unison" — by "RB"). The article was originally intended to be published in the next issue (no.17) of Wildcat but in the end it was left out. The article is quite critical of the occupiers and our failures - and there's nothing wrong with that, except that unfortunately most of the criticism is based on a misunderstanding of the real facts of the situation. But never mind about that - we respond to a more important point of view in the article, concerning the question of organisation.

In Wildcat no.17 several pages were devoted to the journal defending it against accusations from others that they are vanguardists; that is, that they believe the working class is in need of their political leadership. Wildcat, who are neither Leninists or anarchists but call themselves (anti-State) communists, say in their defence, "the most vehement anti-Leninists usually share many of the conceptions of Leninism. In particular they share an obsession with the division between politically conscious people (such as themselves) and the masses. They see the central question as being how the former relate to the latter. Do they lead them organisationally? (Leninism); do they lead them on the plane of ideas? (Anarchism); do they refuse to lead them? (councilism)... They assume that everyone else is obsessed with the question as well: 'Wildcat have evidently found that their ideas and attitudes little impact on the mass of workers around them...' Who do they think we are – the SWP?" Now contrast this with their statements in their article about the UCH occupation: "We should have set up an occupation committee, and tried to ensure its domination by the more politically advanced people involved, in other words, by ourselves." This hard-talk after the event is a mask for an inability to transcend the limits of the situation any more than anyone else. In fact, RB waited until after the strikers were forced back to work by Unison before distributing to some of them Wildcat's "Outside and Against the Unions" pamphlet - again copying the 'I-told-you-so' arrogant attitude of the leftists.

Its not surprising this article was left out of the magazine — it wouldn't have sat very well next to their claims of not being vanguardist. These sentiments, plus Wildcat's own usual obsession with "the division between politically conscious people... and the masses" were echoed by other statements in their UCH article.

"If the working class can be led into socialism, then they can just as easily be led out of it again." - Eugene Debs

For us, we hate the left because their tactics always seek to destroy the subversive, autonomous content of struggles - and without that content the struggle is headed for defeat. But for Wildcat it seems that the left is a problem simply because their ideas and long term goals are wrong: they want to use similar tactics towards different ends. We know that the left's influence on struggles often alienates, drains and demoralises people who have to deal with their manipulations — but RB obviously thinks it's not important if the mass of the working class has a relationship to its own struggles similar to that of a passive TV viewer to their set — as long as they can be prodded and made to act in a prescribed way the "politically advanced" can win struggles by their domination. This is a logic shared by trade unionists, the SWP and political specialists in general.

We know that the leftist party machines always have a separate hidden agenda to pursue in struggles — recruitment, self-publicity, etc., and they believe they are the necessary vanguard that must lead the masses. It seems that RB would like to be the ultra leftist vanguard that outflanks the left - instead of a rigid party machine, a more fluid structure of ultra leftist militants dominating struggles, like "invisible pilots at the centre of the storm." Wildcat often say they are against democracy, partly because it submits all activity to the will of a majority. But to counter this by seeking to submit all activity to the will of a "politically advanced" minority is no solution at all.

RB rightly says that the SWP managed to "destroy the atmosphere of the occupation, an intangible but important thing" - one wonders what kind of appealing atmosphere his plans for an occupation dominated by the politically advanced would create?

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Songs (by Jean)

To the tune of "*John Brown's Body*"

Verse 1

The crisis at the UCH is looking very grave,
They want to close the hospital for the pennies it will save,
But we won't forget the union for the support they never gave,
When they would not back the strike.

Chorus

Un-i-son sold out the nurses
Un-i-son sold out the nurses
Un-i-son sold out the nurses
'Cos that's what scum they are.

Verse 2

Now Marshal down in management is looking very smug,
But when he dealt with nurses he was acting like a thug,
If he thinks he'll get away with that, then he must be a mug,
'Cos he cannot blackmail us.

Chorus 2

Marshal blackmailed all the nurses
Marshal blackmailed all the nurses
Marshal blackmailed all the nurses
'Cos that's the scum he is.

Verse 3

Now its up to the people, to do what we think right,
Nothing's going to close again without a bloody fight,
If we have to occupy, we'll be there day and night,
For we shall not give in.

Chorus 3

UCH is for the people
UCH is for the people
UCH is for the people
So we're going to take it back.

To the tune of "*Daisy, Daisy*"

Marshal, Marshal, give in your notice, do,
We're quite crazy, 'cos of the likes of you,
You're too busy protecting your purses,
When you should be supporting your nurses,
Resign - resign - you waste of time,

And the rest of your management too.
Unison, Unison, give us your answer, do,
We're quite crazy, 'cos of the likes of you,
If you won't back the hospital strike,
You'd better get on your bike,
Get real, get real, or else you'll feel,
Some action directed at you.

To the tune of *"My old man said follow the van"*

Uni-son said, "We'll back your strike,
And we won't dilly dally with your pay,"
But six weeks later they withdrew support,
Poor old nurses were well and truly caught,
Then they dillied and dallied
Dallied and they dillied,
Done some deals with Marshal on the way,
Now they can't trust the union,
Not to stitch them up,
Or blackmail them to stay.

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Dedicated (2006) to Jean Blache, RIP, Beattie, RIP, and to all others who also
participated in the UCH struggle.

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FOOTNOTES

1) This may have been the first occupation of a general hospital, but there are other incidences worthy of a mention. The women's hospital, the Elizabeth Garret Anderson, close by UCH, was the scene of a long and successful work-in in the mid to late 70s, and it would be worth getting together some of the real analysis of that struggle. Also, Thornton View nursing home in Bradford was occupied during 1984/5 when faced with closure. The strike lasted marginally longer than the miners' strike taking place at the same time. Leaflets given out by the strikers constantly called for an open picket but despite this, health care wasn't revolutionised by the occupation — a nursing officer

continued to visit to keep an eye on the nursing, and strict divisions were maintained between staff, patients and general public - although this is a very difficult problem in such a life or death situation. The occupation was brutally broken at night just after the miners' strike was finished off. Worse than that, it was also done in a snow storm and allegedly one or two patients died after the ordeal. Also, in 1979, there had been an occupation of a geriatric community hospital in Oxon.

2) A nurse from Yorkshire isn't so sure about this and likens the managers he's come across as having some sort of Christian Fundamentalist look about them and seem to act from a conviction that is quite crazy. Some of the courses they go on operate very much like "psychobabble cults" creating in the manager a personal dependence on the managerial culture to the extent that breaking with it summons up imaginings of self-annihilation.

3) On one occasion a rally was led indoors for a "meeting" (in fact a speech from a UCH union branch secretary - a SWerP who was not on strike) ensuring that the march started in an orderly way and ended up in a nice quiet rally with a variety of SWP speakers. For a later one, large enough to be interesting, the union had a car ready which drove through to the front to take control — just as some nurses were about to march off without waiting for their orders. At the end of this march nurses and others continued past the rally to block Victoria Embankment The cops were willing to stop the traffic but the branch stewards called everyone back to listen to boring Frank Dobson MP with the excuse that the union had threatened to drop support for any future actions.

4) Other people who we met much later on, after the occupation, and who had been to some of the very early UCH rallies and seen large numbers of SWerPs drafted in to attend them - they also assumed that the occupation was merely another SWP publicity stunt, and so not worth getting involved in.

5) There was one nice guy, an SWP member who had been in the occupation since the beginning, who felt the same way as the rest of us about the Party hacks coming in and spoiling things - he walked off in disgust saying he was finished with the Party.

6) For a good examination of the SWP's crass opportunism see *Carry On Recruiting!* by Trotwatch; AK Press and Trotwatch 1993. Available from some lefty book shops or AK Distribution. 22 Luton Place, Edinburgh EH8 9PE; £2.95.

7) We were also able to get some strikers (including even one or two of the more open minded SWerPs) to question how relationships between them and us, health workers and health users, between different kinds of groups, etc., could work better.

8) For more information on Wellcome, see *Dirty Medicine* by Martin Walker; available from Slingshot Publications, BM Box 8314, London WC1N 3XX — price £15 (729 pages). This book is sub-titled "Science, Big Business and the assault on Natural Health Care" and describes the harassment, persecution and dirty tricks used against those who seek to offer alternative health treatments that could challenge the domination of industrial-medical giants like Wellcome. The persecuted have included those who come from

orthodox medical backgrounds and also those patients who have received effective treatment after conventional drug-based medicine had given up on them. It also details the scandals surrounding the introduction of the “anti-AIDS” drug AZT, its lack of proper testing and the dubious claims made for it. (One criticism of the book is that it misses out the complexities and strengths of the struggles by AIDS activists in the USA. See for example Larry Kramer’s Reports From the Holocaust.) It reveals the systematic attacks and slanders made on the producers of health foods, vitamin supplements and alternative treatments, very often orchestrated by those directly or indirectly in the pay of the processed food industry and drug companies. (Duncan Cambell, the investigative “journalist”, although not with any obvious financial interest, has been particularly active in these shady activities). Wellcome, with their extensive contacts amongst the British ruling elite, dominate medical education and research here - and therefore have a very strong influence on the functioning of the NHS and the nature of its treatment. The author has recently said that “Although, as a socialist, I am committed to the NHS, I’m also in favour of choice and I know that for many of our present-day illnesses, drugs cannot be the answer” (Evening Standard, 14/2/94). Reading his book has only reinforced our feelings that the slogan “Defend the NHS” is far too simplistic in the long run. We must fight for what we have plus a whole lot more, but eventually we have to ask — what kind of free health care do we need and how do we get it? The often toxic and dangerous, profit motivated production line treatment promoted by the scientific-medical establishment is mainly concerned with the maintenance of people to keep them functioning as efficient, productive members of capitalist society. This has nothing to do with healthy living. The book Dirty Medicine is highly recommended.

9)Although it was the Labour Party that brought in the NHS, it was originally the idea of Beveridge, a Liberal and an extension of the post-1906 Liberal government’s introduction of health insurance. Moreover, Bevan, Atlee’s Health Minister, did a deal with the pro-Tory British Medical Association to retain private patients and private beds within NHS hospitals. Bevan said “I stuffed their mouths with gold”: doctors were now being paid for work they’d done in the voluntary hospitals for free, plus they kept the fees for their private work. And this has been the basis for the more fully fledged two-tier system we have today.

1972: Under new management - Fisher-Bendix occupation



Solidarity's excellent eyewitness account, with background information, of the Fisher-Bendix factory and offices against closure. The workers also implemented certain new aspects of work policy.

The workers at Fisher-Bendix, Kirkby near Liverpool, occupied the entire factory and offices on Wednesday, January 5, 1972. This action by all the workers, manual and non-manual, represents an advanced form of struggle. Simply to outline the events, as they happened, will provide more real knowledge to be used by others, than any attempt to interpret what is happening according to particular political outlooks.

On January 11, along with 2 members of 'Solidarity' (Manchester) I visited Fisher-Bendix in South Boundary Road, Kirkby. The factory is in a big industrial estate which has been developed with the help of large government subsidies. Attached to the railings near the main gates a huge notice had been put up by the workers. In letters about 2 feet high it said: 'Under New Management'.

We went to the lodge where a group of workers were in control. All entering the factory had to 'sign in' after passing through an entrance which only permitted single file movement. As visitors we were asked to wait for someone to see us before we were allowed to enter. Tom Staples, Treasurer of the Occupation Committee, arrived in a few minutes. He asked to see our credentials (trade union membership cards). We showed them to him and informed him that we belonged to 'Solidarity', and that it was our intention to learn all we could about their action. We wanted to know if there was anything we could do to help.

Satisfied with our reasons for being there, Tom gave us a warm welcome. He led us towards a building which turned out to be the Administration Block which included the Executive Offices. We were not able to enter before the workers in charge of various gates and doors saw that Tom was with us. We were taken to an office where visitors

were received. This turned out to be the office previously occupied by the Sales manager of Fisher-Bendix. On our way there, we saw the names of various committees on notices which had been pasted up over the names of the various executives whose offices had been taken over.

After making us comfortable Tom and another member of the Committee, Stan Ely, proceeded to give us an account of the background to the occupation. They also told us how the action had been prepared and carried out.

The background

During 11 years the firm concentrated on trying to break the organised strength of the workers. Having failed, they decided to close the factory. 600 workers would be made redundant (all that remained of an original labour force of 2,000).

The firm is part of Thorn Electrical Ltd. Last year the Thorn industrial empire knocked up a profit of £37,000,000. Between 1962 and 1968 they received £6,558,420 of public money in investment allowances. When, last May, Thorn bought the factory from Parkinson-Cowan for £4,000,000 they knew exactly what they would do: maintain the profitable parts of the company sell or transfer plant and surplus equipment and, eventually close down the Kirkby factory. Their reasons are easily understood if one looks at the different wage rates within the company's factories. The Thorn Combine Shop Stewards Committee reported some time ago that weekly rates for some women employed at Merthyr Tydfil were £13.95 against £24 in Kirkby.

The workers had had 12 different factory managers in as many years. The last one, Mr K.G. Lucas, was sacked just before Christmas having failed to carry out his openly stated objective of 'dealing with the men'.

The process which reduced the work force from 2,000 to 600 had been spread over many years. Six unions had been involved in the negotiations. The firm had also succeeded in smashing the staff unions at this factory. The owners, first BMC, then Parkinson-Cowan, and now Thorn have made many top quality products under the labels Fisher-Ludlow, then Fisher-Bendix. These have included Moulton bicycles (a profitable patent was sold to Raleigh), quality sinks (the production of which was later sold to a competitor: Carron's of Scotland), and now radiators and gas fires. Production of other items has been started and stopped at very short notice.

The production of Bendix tumble dryers was taken from the Kirkby factory earlier last year and transferred to a firm CARSA in Madrid, to be manufactured under licence. It should not be necessary to point out that wage rates in Madrid are not likely to match those at Kirkby. The firm had also decided to move production of Bendix washing machines to CARSA. When the workers' representatives produced evidence that all this was going on, Thorn denied it. They lied brazenly even when presented with copies of contracts, etc. In addition they started to move production of radiators to their subsidiaries in Newcastle. While all this was going on the firm was trying to get the men to accept productivity schemes based on measured day work.

All this rationalisation at the workers' expense - and much more was known to the men. The balloon went up when the management finally presented their proposals for a phased programme to close the factory down completely. They had already aired the general idea as far back as August 1971. The decision was not presented as a subject for negotiation. While the stewards were being informed, notices were posted up and hand-outs distributed cynically inviting the workers to assist in the dismantling and transfer of machinery, etc.

Thorn had only taken over the factory from Parkinson-Cowan in May 1971. They had wasted no time. There had been over 500 redundancies between May and October. This provoked token stoppages of one day and half a day. Then there had been a nine-week official strike starting in June. At the time, mass meetings had been held in the canteen, a prelude of things to come. The firm had sent letters to the individual workers and a counter had been set up in the yard, to offer redundancy payments. They had offered an extra £75 on redundancy payments (called the Kirkby allowance) because of the high rate of unemployment in the area and the difficulty of finding alternative employment. Spread over the remainder of most of the men's working lives, the total redundancy payments offered seldom came to more than between 25 and 50 pence a week! An Army recruitment office had even been opened for business. All this was resisted successfully. The firm climbed down and some 400 jobs were saved.

The final notice which brought things to a head outlined the firm's intentions: these included the proposed sacking of 60 manual workers and one staff on January 28, the dismantling of machinery, etc, to begin after Christmas and to proceed throughout February and March along with more redundancies leading to a total shut down by May 31, 1972. At the same time efforts were made to increase production of work in hand.

On December 7 the worker spontaneously stopped work and marched from the factory to the Admin Block shouting slogans, including 'We demand the right to work'. When we said that we didn't think this was a good slogan and that it might sound as if the workers were demanding the right to be exploited, we were told that what they really meant was that they did not accept the bosses' right to decide who should work. They felt that they themselves should be able to decide whether they worked or not and under what conditions. This meant that the factories could not be privately owned but must be managed by the workers themselves. We pointed out that we did not think their slogan made this clear.

On December 8, the Convenor informed the employers that the stewards were not prepared to discuss the closure of the factory - but only how to organise continued work, retaining all the workers. At this stage there were some divisions in the ranks, the white collar workers thinking in terms of better severance pay, and the production workers of how to fight the closure proposal itself.

At about this time there had been a march to the local Labour Party. Local MPs had been contacted (including Harold Wilson) in the hope of bringing pressure on the firm to halt the redundancies. The MPs had agreed to propose a motion in Parliament on

unemployment in Kirkby (where the figures reach 20% of the working population and where some young people are still out of work 2 years after leaving school). But as we shall show the workers at Fisher-Bendix were not going to leave matters in the hands of the Labour Party or any other 'leaders'.

Planning the action

As the firm wouldn't negotiate, the workers began to think about other ways of dealing with the situation. The management were possibly expecting (or even seeking) to provoke a strike, which would play into their hand and result in an earlier closure of the factory, which they would then follow up with alternative methods of dismantling and transfer of the plant. This did not happen. Instead a delegation of Fisher-Bendix representatives decided to contact the UCS workers (at Clydebank) and Plessey workers (at Dumbarton) to see if they could learn anything from their actions. Consultations were also held through the Combine Shop Stewards Committee to see what could be done.

We were told the result of the Kirkby men's contact with UCS. Although Tom Staples was not personally critical of what had been happening at UCS, the Committee did not consider that a 'work in' would be the best course of action at Kirkby. In talking to the Plessey representatives they had found a more useful set of ideas. But the Kirkby men felt that they could do an even better job themselves. They wanted to undertake an occupation before the factory had finally paid the workers off (as had happened at Plessey's). The delegates came back to Kirkby and the stewards then started to plan a course of action. They would still seek to reach an agreement but were also thinking in another direction such as an occupation. They knew that if they announced a date and time for occupation the management would step in and close the factory down before this could be done. The stewards finally got the management to agree to 'negotiate' on the basis of their proposals for the phased closure of the factory. A Mr Karne would be arriving from the firm's top management to lead the negotiations with senior shop stewards on January 5.

The management (and many others) thought that the workers would be unlikely to take action prior to the outcome of these negotiations. It is quite common in industry for action to be deferred in the hope that negotiations will produce positive results. In fact negotiations are often planned and entered into by management and unions, deliberately designed to prevent workers from taking matters into their own hands at the most appropriate time. False hopes are built up that the negotiations will come up with an acceptable offer.

The elected representatives of the workers at Fisher-Bendix were well aware of this process, from a long and bitter experience. They knew full well that the management would not seriously discuss any plan for continuing production. The negotiations began to change in nature. The stewards were now negotiating with their own objectives in mind. According to tradition, workers would hardly be expected to act while such negotiations were actually proceeding.

This was the kernel of the plan. The occupation would take place when least expected. It was agreed that the workers would respond to a call from their stewards, whenever it came, to stage a demonstration inside the factory. All kinds of false trails were laid as to time and place. None, of course, ever mentioned that the occupation would start during the negotiations. The stewards had agreed that this was the most likely time to catch the management by surprise.

Since the unions' proposals of December 7, 1971 (for discussing continued production) had been turned down, the stewards knew that the proposed negotiations on January 5 were 'phoney'. They agreed to turn up, but only as part of their secret plan to facilitate the effective occupation of the works.

The occupation

Came the big day. The senior stewards met the management led by Mr Sidney Karne. He had been sent to ensure no compromise on the firm's proposals to close the factory by May 31. We were told that the stewards, in a last effort to negotiate before finally deciding to go ahead with the occupation, had asked the firm - on January 4th - to reconsider the proposals. The negotiations started with the stewards proposing that there be a 15 minute adjournment for the directors to consider discussing future jobs -not closure! After more talk the directors offered a 26 days standstill on movement of Plant but would not rescind notice of redundancy to the 61 workers due to be made effective on January 28.

While this was going on the workers in the factory had begun to move. The stewards remaining in the factory had given the signal for workers to join in a march to the Admin Block, as previously arranged with the stewards who were 'negotiating'. The workers felt they had every right to be there. About 300 workers proceeded to the main gate where they demanded, and obtained, the master keys. With these in the hands of the workers, the management could not deny the men free access to all parts of the plant. They occupied the restaurant and invaded the Boardroom. They were stamping on the floors and stairs shouting slogans when Convenor Jack Spriggs, on behalf of all the unions represented and of all the workers of Fisher-Bendix, asked Mr Sidney Karne and all the other directors to leave the factory premises.

They protested that they could not leave right away. They were told they had 10 minutes to comply, otherwise the stewards could not be held responsible for their safety. They left immediately and the workers shouted at them all the way out. The workers of Fisher-Bendix were in control - the occupation had begun.

All work in the factory stopped. The manual workers were joined by the staff side who had taken over the Admin Block, once again as planned. The members of 6 unions had become one body of workers bent on pursuing a line of action which would serve their common interests. Differences between them which had been fostered and used by both employers and unions in the past to keep them divided seem to have disappeared from that moment. That certainly was our impression seven days after the occupation started.

From the moment the directors had left a plan was implemented to take over all the main entrances to the factory. All possible points of entry by hostile forces were controlled. The press, radio and TV had been alerted. The whole of the work force available then assembled for a mass meeting. A resolution endorsing the action just taken and calling for maximum effort to ensure the continuing success of the occupation was put to the vote. This was approved unanimously. There were no abstentions. One worker told us that his arm was aching because of requests to repeat the vote so that all the photographers present could get good pictures. Good relationships with the press and TV reporters were established. The latter explained to the workers that, while they would report what they had seen and heard, the workers should not be surprised if reports appeared which would not be very helpful. Some would even be completely false and hostile to the workers. They would do their best, but workers should not expect any help from the press, radio or TV which were controlled by people just like the ones they were now fighting. After security arrangements had been completed, the workers set about organising Committees to take charge of various aspects of the occupation.

Among the Committees was one which arranged a rota listing attendance times. All the workers would take part in manning four 6-hour shifts, to ensure that the premises remained occupied 24 hours a day. Two special day-time shifts were arranged for those, like women with young children, who could not do night shift. Another Committee took charge of amenities. It would look after the supply of food, etc., and arrange entertainment and other ways of using the time available to workers during the occupation. The canteen, which had been run by an outside firm of caterers, was abandoned by them. The workers took it over. We understand that there was an immediate improvement in the service, which was now being run by engineering workers.

Naturally, there was a Committee responsible for handling finances. At the time of writing the fund which had been started some time ago stood at around £2,000. This Committee would be responsible for raising money, which began to arrive from the beginning. Many of the girls in the offices were helping, sending out thanks for donations, etc. Tom Staples was the Treasurer. He told us that a Catholic priest who asked to remain anonymous gave them £5. Many local people including OAPs and other local organisations were contributing. This Committee, along with the main occupation Committee, would be dealing with the question of income for the workers who would not be receiving wages, unemployment benefit or any other income. The Claimants' Union was contacted with a view to jointly working out means of obtaining Social Security benefits as soon as possible. In addition money would be available for distribution when the support from other workers grew, as was confidently expected.

Another Committee was set up to deal with publicity and liaison with other factories and organisations. Fisher-Bendix workers would visit other factories and meet their potential supporters. While we were there some comrades from [left-wing group] 'Big Flame' called with some silk screen equipment for the production of posters. The Liverpool Free Press had already produced a special supplement dated January 9, outlining the workers' case and calling for support. We have used some of their background material in this pamphlet.

The Kirkby workers were in close contact with the other factories of the Thorn empire. These were represented on a united Combine Committee, representing over 20,000 workers. Dockers and other transport workers were being contacted with a view to securing a total ban on the movement of Thorn products. The Merseyside District of the Amalgamated Engineers declared their support for the take-over with a decision for a one day stoppage of all Merseyside members.

Jack Spriggs said "The nine week strike convinced us that Thorn can be beaten. Now we have adopted a new way of tackling the combine. We will fight from within."

Tom Staples, who also happens to be Secretary of Huyton, Kirkby and Prescot Trades Council, and Treasurer of the Occupation Committee said 'The Trades Council are fully supporting our occupation and intend mobilising the support of other factories on the Kirkby Estate in token stoppages and mass pickets. It is the local build-up of support that is immediately important'. Archie Breeden, senior ETU steward, added 'We are now branching out and moving into the rest of the Thorn empire. We have a common policy with a number of factories to fight redundancies and maintain wages and conditions. We are appealing to these people and expect massive support'. In addition to the three shop floor unions (AUEW, T&G, and ETU) there are the staff unions (ASTMS, DATA and CAWU) who have acted together to occupy the Administration Block.

Strengthening the occupation

One of the first things undertaken by the 'take-over' was the removal of spares and supplies from the Fisher-Bendix Moorgate Road Stores, which serves a large part of the North West. These stores, located a mile away, were seized and transferred to the main (occupied) factory at South Boundary Road. There they joined the £200,000 worth of finished radiators, the £50,000 worth of storage heaters, the dozen new articulated wagons and stacker trucks, not to mention the £2 million worth of plant - all already in the occupied factory, and all powerful reinforcement to the workers' bargaining position.

The press did their nut, implying that this was 'looting' and 'theft'. In fact the removal of these stores was one of the main suggestions in the trade unions' proposals of December 7. These had said: 'Point 3: To transfer the whole of the Spares Division, labour and material, to Fisher-Bendix (Kirkby) from Moorgate Rd. (Kirkby). Point.4: That Fisher-Bendix (Kirkby) be the main storage and distribution point of all Bendix appliances, home and foreign.

All that the workers had done was merely to implement what was already union policy. The reason for the angry reaction on the part of the bosses is that all this had not just remained a declaration written on a piece of paper. It had been made a living reality as a result of direct action by the workers. Thorn's public statement was threatening: 'We will take appropriate action to protect our interests'. As the workers pointed out, this was nothing new. 'They have been doing just that for a very long time. Their main interest is maximum profit, regardless of the consequences to the workers and their families'.

Workers are now beginning to consider direct action as 'appropriate' in certain circumstances. As one worker who showed us all over the plant said: 'If they want to start

anything, they can, but they will have to deal with all of us'. He was pointing in the direction of the town of Kirkby and of Merseyside in general.

The Fisher-Bendix workers are only too aware of possible police or other intervention. On the inside of the two massive main gates they have erected massive steel barricades which will take some moving. In addition we saw two hoses attached to hydrants. The nozzles here pointing at the gates not towards the buildings (although they could easily be turned round if needed). Pointing at the gates they say more about the intentions of the workers now in occupation than any speech could. Other preparations (which for obvious reasons we can't outline here) have been made to meet any attempt to move any of the plant or to physically take back control from the workers.

According to the Liverpool Free Press (January 9, 1972) an appeal has been made to shoppers to boycott all Thorn household products and services. These include:

Radio and TV: Ferguson, HMY, Ultra, Baird, Marconiphone.

Rentals: Radio Rentals Ltd, Domestic Electric Rentals Ltd, MultiBroadcast Rentals Ltd, and Home Rentals Ltd.

Thorn radio valves and tubes for domestic equipment. These are sold under brand names - 'Mazda' and 'Brimar'.

Lighting: Mazda and Atlas products.

Domestic appliances: Electric and gas cookers Tricity, Main, Moffat, Kenwood.

Domestic central heating equipment: Thorn Heating Ltd.

Struggles controlled from below

We were often told during our visit that this fight is regarded by the Fisher-Bendix workers as part of a class struggle of which they are only a part. They know that they cannot rely on their own magnificent effort alone to ensure victory. They realise how important it is to link what they are doing with actions now going on elsewhere.

The workers at Fisher-Bendix said that simply abandoning the factory in the old-fashioned way was not good enough. It was better to fight inside: for one thing it was warmer in the winter. And being inside, it was easier to keep the scabs out! More workers are prepared these days to challenge the right of private owners to retain the physical control of the means of production. This is an effective way of fighting for shortterm aims. It also has important wider implications. It is becoming more obvious that this system strictly based on profit for the few at the expense of the many must be challenged at its roots. Those who do the work should take the decisions.

We are moving into a period when ordinary people can show by their actions that they are quite capable of running their own affairs. Selfmanagement is the alternative to relying on self-appointed leaders. The kind of struggle now developing will make it unnecessary to cry 'We have been sold out'. This can't happen if things are firmly taken into the hands of ordinary rank-and-file workers on the shop floor and not left to leaders of unions or parties.

The workers are developing their own self-confidence to act for themselves. They are showing in practice how to solve problems on the basis of real democratic decision making. I learned something very new at FisherBendix. We asked about how decisions were made. How did the committees function? What was the role of the unions in all this?

We were told that the 6 unions involved had all said they supported the action. This was at local or .District level. So far nothing had been heard from the national ECs. There had been no offer of financial help. Some local officials were helping. In fact we spoke to one on the premises.

The Occupation Committee was based on the original shop stewards committee covering the workers as members of different unions. But it was now an autonomous committee with many additions, designed to run the occupation in daily contact with all the workers. This is the great advantage of an occupation. There are always rank and file workers on hand to see what is going on. They can constantly be consulted, or for that matter, intervene if they feel it is necessary.

In the old strike method the workers would sit at home waiting for news from the strike committee which seldom came directly. This often left workers the victims of the press, radio and TV as happened in the postal strike last year.

We were told that, to ensure a full occupation, all the workers were being encouraged to take part in the work of the various committees, in addition to doing their shifts by rota. Also many initiatives were being taken. New ideas were emerging which were bringing the workers closer to one another. When the phones were cut off, it did not take long to get them reconnected. When there was some worry about fuel supplies to keep the place warm it was soon realised that the firm would not risk allowing the workers to find other ways of providing heat. Oil supplies were delivered promptly. The canteen was also a place where workers could exercise some real self-management.

Most important of all was the answer to our question concerning General Assemblies. The answer sent a thrill right through me. They said all participants could attend and vote. And in addition all wives and husbands, children, brothers, sisters, uncles or aunts could attend. Weren't they all involved in the fight? Why should pressure be put on them by the papers and television to make them pull in the opposite direction? After the first such mass meeting on January 12, a wife who had previously been so hostile that she had denounced the occupation to the press said she now fully supported what the Fisher-Bendix workers were doing. I felt very humble. This was how one learned from revolutionary practice to develop a revolutionary theory.

Some conclusions

Just now I don't want to compare what is happening at Fisher-Bendix or at Plessey's with what recently happened at Mold (Flintshire). The work in at UCS is again something quite distinct. But they all have something in common. They are all different attempts, in different circumstances, to deal with proposed redundancies. Each experience must be examined to see what can be learned, what applies and how it can be extended to other situations.

If workers occupy their place of work in connection with a wage claim, or against some managerial attempt to introduce new methods of work - and if this takes place in circumstances when the employer is anxious to keep production going - this method of struggle will have a very different meaning to purely defensive occupations, such as occupations against redundancies.

Occupations may also be seen as a long-term objective, which challenge the employers' right to own and control the means of production. It then demonstrates the ability of workers to manage their own affairs. It raises the level of consciousness and the sense of being directly and collectively involved. It leads to the question of self-management.

In a fuller discussion of occupations we would also need to look both at the role of the trade unions and at the role of 'revolutionary' groups who still assert the need for a vanguard-type party. If occupation is pushed and manipulated by such people, the very form it takes may result in workers being denied the right themselves fully to manage their own struggles. Under such circumstances, occupation would not automatically result in a more advanced type of action. It could lead to a repeat of many disastrous old experiences, in a new form. In these experiences, workers were led up the garden path because of their reliance on professional leaders and because of their own continued acceptance of ideas which keep them enslaved.

In presenting our account of the struggle at Fisher-Bendix we seek to engage all who are interested in an ongoing examination of such problems. We in 'Solidarity' have been advocating struggles controlled from below and workers' self management as the basis of an alternative socialist society in which people will take over the factories and offices, do away with capitalist ownership and establish the means for making decisions based on the widest possible participation.

The action of the workers at Fisher-Bendix has reaffirmed many of our ideas. But they are doing something more. They are teaching us how these ideas can be made a reality. The lessons learnt in such struggles far exceed anything that might come out of discussion alone. In giving the Kirkby workers all our support, and asking others to do likewise, we should also take from them what they have to offer: a living example of courage, initiative, plain common sense in handling their own affairs, and a lesson in self-management.

Joe Jacobs

From <http://libcom.org/library/under-new-management-fisher-bendix-occupation-1972>

2003: Zanon factory occupation - interview with workers, Argentina



An excellent set of interviews conducted with workers at the worker-run Zanon ceramics factory, occupied at the time of the Argentine uprising of 2001. It includes historical and background information.

This was published by Wildcat in December 2003 but has only now been translated into English (for prol-position news #6, July 2006), and a short introduction added. Although it is a bit old, it still contains unique insights into the situation, hopes, difficulties and dynamics of the occupation process and many personal interviews. It has also been translated into Polish and is in German and Polish at www.wildcat-www.de

The Neuquén province, where Zanon is located, was one of the epicentres of the protests that swept Argentina in the 1990s. It was here that the piqueteros first emerged in the town of Cutral-Co, and there are many militant trade unionists. Unlike in most of Argentina, many of the attempted privatizations of state owned enterprises were defeated. In May 2006, teachers won a 40% pay rise following a month long strike. But most famous, is the successful takeover of the Zanon tile factory and its subsequent worker-run management. In 2000 the workers went on strike. The employer implemented a lock out and the workers responded by occupying the factory. In October 2001, the workers officially declared the factory to be 'under worker control'. By March 2002, the factory fully returned to production. In April 2003, the courts ordered the police to forcibly take the factory out of the hands of the workers. In response the workers developed a broad based campaign and as the police began to move in over 3000 citizens of Neuquén formed a picket in front of the factory. During the period of worker control, the number of employees has increased from 300 to 470, and wages have risen by 100 pesos a month, and the level of production has increased. Accidents have fallen by 90%.

The workers of Zanon are currently demanding that the provincial and national governments officially recognize the factory as a workers cooperative under state ownership. This is an increasingly common legal status for the many occupied factories in Argentina and would mean that they could stop worrying about eviction and also trade

their goods more easily. The move is being resisted by the right-wing MPN leadership of the provincial government, and Kirchner's government has shown little interest in the resolution of the issue. However, the proposal has widespread public support in Neuquén, with a petition achieving 9,000 signatures in support of the workers proposal, and the issue is due to be debated in the near future within the provincial congress.

Further information on the Zanon factory can be found at the web site

<http://www.obrerosdezanon.org>.

For more on the factory occupation movement in Argentina there is also a recent documentary called 'The Take' <http://www.thetake.org/>

Zanon – A factory in the hand of the workers, Argentina

Introduction

A whole booklet about Zanon? So many words about a single factory somewhere in South America? Yes, we think that this unusual factory occupation deserves at least this much attention.

Zanon is not a backyard workshop, but a very modern factory with a highly automated production process. Hardly anyone believed that the production workers would be able to get the plant running under self-management. They showed that it is possible. Instead of begging for jobs in times of crisis or trying to make ends meet in informal niches they took over the precious machinery and organised work in such a way that as well as producing tiles there is still always time for drinking mate and having a chat. In that way they are better off than their comrades from the occupied textile factory Brukmann, who have to work much harder at their sewing machines in order to secure their income. The Zanon workers not only showed their capability to run the production 'under workers control'. They were also able to mobilise so much solidarity that all attempts to evict the factory failed. This occupation was not a short episode like many others. For two years now there has been a process of self-organisation and direct democracy developing within the factory, with constant discussions and changes. The Zanon workers did not simply content themselves with their initial gains. They want more. Inside the factory people discuss what a different society could look like and how we could get there.

As everywhere, in Argentina a fundamental change seems difficult to achieve. The uprising of the 19th and 20th of December 2001 was the signal for a social awakening. It was an uprising against politics: state and politicians lost their legitimacy. Everywhere people started to take matters into their own hands. Since then Argentina has been seen as a laboratory for social movements. Unfortunately it remained a laboratory. The virus stayed in the test tube: so far it has not spread beyond the frontiers. The situation in Latin America is tense, but movements still primarily stay within national boundaries. About two years after the uprising politics seems to begin to gain ground again. The new president Kirchner invites the movements to come together at a big round table. The political attempts of this Peronist to tie the movements to his political project are showing initial signs of success. And whoever does not play the game will get acquainted with the old repression.

For Zanon the development of the general situation will be decisive. In the case of the movement stagnating, and the factory occupations remaining isolated, they will have difficulties maintaining their dynamic and radicalism. Without the political dynamic the self-management runs danger of being caught up in the capitalist 'business as usual' (see below: "These guys up there..."). What might remain is a source of income for the workers involved – something very crucial in Argentina today – but not a project which hints towards a different future.

Nevertheless, the workers of Zanon and Brukmann gave an example which is not only of major importance for the movement in Argentina, given that the crisis was not an accident confined to a single country. The slump was an expression of a global crisis of capitalist development. The question that the Zanon workers are being forced to face might be asked in a much bigger framework in the near future. It will help to have a closer look at what is already happening in the remote region of Patagonia today.

Brukmann and Zanon under workers control

In Argentina more than 150 factories are occupied, from workshops, to service companies, to factories and a four-star hotel. Most of them were bankrupt firms or had been about to go bankrupt when the occupations started. In all these companies major changes and developments took place, but only few handled the situation as politically as the workers of Brukmann and Zanon. A lot of occupiers are up to their ears with trying to get their own company running, so that there is not much space left for political activities. The workers of Brukmann and Zanon make clear again and again that for them it is about more than just saving their own work-places and they demand that the means of production be left in their hands without further stipulations. That is the core of the demand of "nationalisation under workers' control", which the Brukmann and Zanon workers brought forward. Most of the occupied companies formed cooperatives. Cooperative sounds more like autonomy and self-management than nationalisation. Actually 'cooperatives' are the current model in Argentina today, with which the state tries to contain the movement. The occupiers are supposed to give themselves a legal framework, to act according to the logic of economy and to recognize private property. Because at the end of the day they are supposed to buy the company from the owner once they managed to get it running. A lot of occupiers rely on this form of legalisation, because thereby at least they can avoid the pressure of eviction.

The Brukmann workers were evicted in April 2003. After months of protest in the streets they finally formed a cooperative in order to fulfil the precondition for the legal process of dispossession. At the end of November 2003 the town parliament of Buenos Aires decided to dispossess the company and hand it over to the workers for two years. After half a year on the streets they are now able to go back in. Zanon still produces "under workers control" without any legal status.

(On the process of dispossession and the discussion on "cooperative or workers control" see the part "The dilemma...").

In the laboratory

In April 2002 I went to Argentina the first time, in order to get to know more about the new movements. Four weeks in Buenos Aires and there was not a single day without demonstrations, blockades or assemblies. Pensioners, tenants, neighbours and unemployed, all kinds of groups protested, including previously unknown groups like the 'betrayed money-savers' who rioted in front of the banks. But at that point there was not much coming from the factories or other work-places, in a country with a long tradition of class struggles (see "Class struggles in Argentina..."). One exception was the occupied textile factory Brukmann from where several actions were initiated, e.g. the first "meeting for the defence of the occupied factories", organised by Brukmann and Zanon workers with 700 participants assembling in the street.

In March/April 2003 I went to Argentina again, this time I wanted to see what was happening in the occupied factories whose numbers had increased. The plan was to work in one of these companies, because generally that is the best way to find out what is really going on. After some enquiries people said that it would not be possible to work at Brukmann, but at Zanon. After initial doubts as to whether it would actually be a good idea to travel to this remote area where I did not know anyone, to a factory where mostly men worked, my curiosity finally won and I set off to Neuquén.

After the first tour in the factory it became clear that it would be difficult to get me a job there. As an unskilled casual worker without experience in tile production all I could have done was sweeping the shop-floor, a rather unpleasant thing in such a dusty plant. But the comrades were fine with letting me take part in their experiment as a visitor. A mattress converted a corner of the laboratory into a visitors room and made it possible for me to stay in this unusual factory for three weeks.

In this booklet thirteen comrades from Zanon are quoted directly. I recorded interviews and conversations with them. A lot of more people showed me around in the factory, explained things, told stories and discussed every possible and impossible thing with me. First of all I took a lot of optimism back home from these encounters. "Se puede...", that is what the comrades told me again and again, we can, together we can do it, nothing is impossible. In the case of Zanon these are not slogans, but experience. Previously Zanon had been a factory where a graveyard silence ruled and where the bosses felt free to make any kind of arbitrary decisions. Solidarity had been an unknown word. At the beginning the comrades who had started discussing how to change things were doubtful: "With these fellow workers we will not be able to start anything, with this working class we will not get anywhere". Today they stand in the front line of the movement together with these very fellow workers. They first took over the factories workers commission, then the union. They enforced the right to assemble in the factory and started fighting back. Against the threat of closure they occupied the factory and got it running. They were able to get the population to support them, they created sources of income and a network of occupiers, combative workers and unemployed. They prevented eviction. They are still there. This is a part of the story of the Zanon workers, told by themselves.

Zanon-Workers who have a say in this booklet...

Rosa and Delia are two of the few women in the factory, they work at the end of the production-line, in the quality control department, for the last fourteen and twenty years respectively. They do not have any official positions in the union, but they speak as representatives in public meetings and press conferences. Ana has worked in the canteen since the end of 2002, she is the mother of Daniel Ferras who died in the factory in July 2000. Mario and Eugenio are mechanics, both have been in the factory for eleven years now. Both adjust machines in the press-shop. They were not involved in the organising process before the occupation and were rather caught by surprise by the conflict. Ricardo "Fredy", has been at Zanon seven years, had previously been a production worker and has now a job in the department where sieves for the glazing are manufactured and special tiles are produced by hand. He has used the computer in his department for putting together an exact chronology of the struggle, using press articles. Rolando has been in the plant for twenty one years, he is a production worker without a union or any other official position. Natalio "Chicho" used to be a production worker and now works in the laboratory where the glazing is mixed and new tile models are developed. Daniel started working in the plant in 1981, he is a mechanic for maintenance, he takes part in meetings with coordinators and is a unionist without having an official position. Julian has been employed at Zanon for seven years, he used to work at the glazing-line and was elected as a coordinator for his department after the occupation. Carlos "Manotas" is a former foreman who chose the side of the workers during the conflict and was elected as the main coordinator of the plant. Eduardo was active in the youth organisation of the MTD, the movement of the unemployed workers. He started working at Zanon in mid-2002 together with the first group of MTD people who were integrated into the plant after its occupation. Raul came to Zanon in 1993 as a production worker, having had to work in the most uncomfortable environment right under the window of the managements office and next to the office of the management friendly union. He belonged to the first group of Zanon workers who started to organise themselves and took over the workers' commission. He is now the chairman of the SOECN, the ceramic workers union of Neuquén

Alix; Cologne, Germany; November 2003

Zanon – A factory in the hand of the workers

It takes fifteen hours by bus from Buenos Aires, through the endless plains of the Argentinian pampa. The last part of the travel to Neuquén, the northern part of Patagonia, leads through the vast apple tree plantations in the valley of the Rio Negro, followed by desert like plains and mountain ranges. At the bus station a comrade from Zanon welcomes me, easy to spot in a brown boiler suit with the union logo. Another eight kilometres by bus towards Centenario, the factory is situated by the highway, next to another tile factory, a few other companies, a prison and a small settlement at the foot of a hill. That is it. A huge billboard announces that Zanon is in the hands of the workers.

In the small office building in the yard of the factory the Zanon workers installed their department for "press and public relations". There is a constant coming and going between computers and telephones, drums and other demonstration utensils, piles of

posters and newspapers. In a corner people drink mate and discuss, two comrades write a declaration on the occupation of the small brick factory, Ceramica del Valle, which they plan to support the next day by blocking the highway. Right from the beginning the Zanon workers made the conflict about their factory public. Since the first strike in March 2001, when they marched through all districts of Centenario and Neuquén in order to collect food, they took to the streets again and again, made their project known and linked up with other movements. Due to the factory's high degree of automation they can afford to free up several workers for political activities and public relations.

The workers take one group of astonished visitors after another on a tour through the extensive and ultra-modern factory. Most of them like doing this, sharing their detailed knowledge of the production process, displaying a certain pride of ownership and an enthusiasm for the political project. Cepillo, who shows me around, had previously worked at the mills. Back then he only knew the work in this particular department. By being active in the workers' commission he gained an overview of the production process and after occupation was elected as the coordinator. Together with another comrade he now coordinates the entire production process: "though I did not even take A-levels". I will hear this sentence quite a few times in the following weeks. [Editors' comments below are *in italics* - libcom]

Daniel: Only now, due to this conflict, have I really got to know the factory. Previous to the occupation when I left my department an engineer would come up to me and ask me what I was doing there. If you did not have a good explanation you even might have got a warning. Today I run around in the entire factory and get to know everyone. During twenty years of working here I had not seen how they work at the atomisators and mills over there. Today I can go to the comrades over there and ask them how things work. But I ask as if I had just started working here. Only now can you capture the whole dimension of the place where you had worked.

Zanon manufactures glazed tiles for floors and walls and other ceramic goods at a high technological level. The factory opened in 1980. The line for ceramic goods which is the most modern of the twelve production lines, was only set up in 1993 and extended in 1997. The starting point of the production process are the huge mills where the earth is ground down. From there the clay is processed through a system of pipes, sieves, pools, drying installations and air pipes and ends up in silos, which supply the press-shop with material. From the press-shop the raw tiles are transferred to another drying installation, from there they pass atomised stations via various production lines. At the stations the glazing is applied, patterns are printed and the backside is covered with stuff that prevents the tiles from sticking in the ovens. From the lines the tiles are transferred to frames which automatically move around the shop on tracks and which serve both as means of transport and temporary means of storage. They are transported to the ovens and finally end up in the quality control and packaging department. The tiles are automatically taken off the frames, put on a conveyor belt and pass various machines which test their durability and correct size. Up to this point the whole production process mainly consisted of controlling, maintenance, adjustments and re-filling. In the quality control and packaging department there are some permanent manual jobs. Here is where

the few women of the factory work. They sit at the control conveyor belt and classify the passing tiles, marking them with bright-colour pens, categorising them as first, second or third class quality. The marks are read by a machine and according to their quality the tiles are automatically stacked and packaged, the model name, quality category and control number is stamped on. On one line the cartons have to be taken off by hand, on the other lines they have a robot to do that. Compared to the hectic atmosphere in the office building in the factory things seem relaxed. During this first visit the plant even seems deserted given that due to lack of raw material only one line is in use. But also during the following days the calm attitude at work is conspicuous, the atmosphere is pleasant, friendly, people help each other.

Rolando: Now no-one pressures you, this is one of the fundamental changes that took place. Before the occupation things were bad. The bosses sat on your head, the foremen were at your back. The more you worked, the more they wanted you to work.

Eugenio: You had to meet the production target, the quality norms AND you were supposed to work safely. They made us work long hours. After an eight-hour day we had to stay longer, they forced us to.

Mario: They were always following you around. When you had been out of their sight for more than half an hour they started searching for you. They could not stand seeing us standing around.

The comrades installed areas in the corners of the shop where they sit and drink mate. Previously this was strictly forbidden. In the shade of the trees on the factory premises people discuss about problems of the production, politics and, of course, football. They asked the former company gardener if he wanted to return to his old job, now he takes care of the lawn, the trees and receives the new standard wage. Everyone at Zanon gets 800 Pesos (about 270 US-Dollars) – the production workers, the workers in the laboratory, the people on paid leave, the union secretary, the women in the kitchen, the comrades of the unemployed organisation MTD, who meanwhile work in the factory, the doorman and even the lawyer.

In October 2001 the workers occupied the factory. In March 2002 the comrades started producing under 'workers control' with 270 people (262 men, 8 women). In the meantime they were able to extend the staff to 320 comrades. The 'factory prison' was turned into an experimenting collective for workers self-management and direct democracy.

Delia: When we were on strike and had our strike tent in front of the gate I went there with my daughter one night. We drank mate and talked: that would be a dream if we would get the whole thing producing again. And why do we not just enter and get the press-shop and the mills and the lines running again? It was a dream. We all had doubts whether we should do it.

We do not need bosses in order to produce

In October 2001 the Zanon workers occupied their factory – after yet another period of unpaid wages and after more and more things indicated a possible factory closure. In the

labour tribunal they achieved an unusual verdict: The employer is sentenced for illegal lock-out and 40 per cent of the stock is handed over to the workers as compensation for unpaid wages. In January 2002 Zanon management presented a plan to re-start production with 62 staff. The factory occupiers refused this plan. Up to this point they survived on donations and by selling material from the stock. At the end of February they decided to take up production under self-management. Of the former 370 workers 270 join the project. The technicians, the engineers, and administration employees on the whole did not take part. Only two former foremen were on the side of the workers.

Manotas: I was one of the 82 foremen. In 1999 there were already protests concerning workers rights and health and safety. That happened together with the first combative workers' commission in this factory. As foremen we were not able to take part in these struggles, they would have kicked us out just like that. Then problems occurred concerning unpaid wages. Every now and then they gave us 100 Pesos, the exact time of payment was never clear, you never knew when you would get your next wage. I got fed up with this and started to talk to other foremen about it. First they agreed on taking action, but they said that we should do it as foremen, that we could not do it together with the other workers. But later on they came down a peg or two and nothing happened. After work I started to talk to some people from the workers' commission. It was not possible to do that in the shop. If they saw that you were talking with people from the workers' commission they would have given you the sack on the spot. In 2000 I joined the union. They dragged me in front of the management because of that. There I said that I was not involved. I had no legal security but the comrades of the union knew that I was a member. The problems continued over months, no pay on pay day. In March 2001 I had had it, I had ten months of unpaid wages. There was an assembly about the unpaid wages and I asked if I could come along. That created some fuss in the factory because it was quite a difficult thing that a foreman wanted to be with the comrades. I told them that I agreed with their demands and that I wanted to join the struggle. I also said that I was alone, that there was no-one besides me. Then another foreman joined and we were then two out of 82 who joined the struggle.

To get the production lines running was no big deal for the workers. No-one missed the foremen. The opposite was true.

Fredy: The most important thing is that we make the plans now. If previously us workers had a proposal and wanted to change the production process – not on a whim, but because we who did the job also knew best about it – then a foreman or director would come and say “No, not in this way”. Everything had to be done the way they wanted it to. Today we do things we always had wanted to, but there was no way, because the boss did not let us. The boss and all the foremen who acted according to his command. Today things are based on mutual help. Yesterday I had a little problem with the material, so I went to the line where I had worked in former days and asked the comrades what was the matter. I told them what I knew from my experience working there and they said “Good idea, we could try it that way”. They took it on. Then another comrade came and said “Why not change it at the other machine at the same time?”. Previously it was different. You only saw the folder with the control slips for the production. The foreman,

an engineer, was always skimming it and signing, without controlling anything. At one point a lot of valuable raw material was spoiled because of a wrong letter. The control slip said 15 kg instead of 15g – and we are talking about pigments here. The comrades knew that it was wrong. If you are on the job every day then you will know what 15g and 15 kg are. But we had ironed out their mistakes for too many times already. “So you want us to put a 15 kg sack in there then, aye, here we go...”. They tried to retrace things afterwards and found the signature of the engineer under the 15 kg...

Julian: When we re-started production everyone knew what their job was. But we also had to learn a lot of new things which we had not done before. There you could see the creativity of the ceramic workers. We have shown that we are creative enough to take on all different tasks in order to develop new production models and models of tiles. That was a significant change. We became better through it. Not in a competitive sense, but in the sense that we worked for everyone and we tried to give the best for everyone. We have developed hidden capabilities which previous, if at all, we only showed in our families. This creativity is suppressed if a boss gives you orders all the time, demands more and more, but gives nothing back. Then you keep to yourself and think: “I will not give him more”. In this period all the creativity blossomed, the pleasure to do things and learn new things. Because we had to learn loads. First of all we had to learn to structure ourselves. We had to learn that we can not bounce about like pin-balls. We could not all run around in the factory without knowing what had to be done. We learnt to do everything. First you started to do what you already knew. But then we wanted to learn other things, doing administrative work, organising the sales. When the company previously had asked you to do that you had said: “Nope, I do my job, the rest is your business. I am already oppressed enough, I will not take on more responsibility, only to be slammed by you even worse afterwards”. But this creativity emerged, we learnt a lot.

After the workers had taken up production without any hierarchical functions they decided some months later to elect coordinators in each department.

Fredy: This was a fundamental step that we took. The coordinators provide us with information and founded on that we run the production. After a meeting of all coordinators they come to us five guys afterwards and they would say: “Folks, we have to stop production now because we are lacking a pigment. What is the score, can we continue tomorrow with the other model”? Each coordinator checks that back in his department and tells the coordinator assembly next day. There are also production workers taking part in the assembly, everyone who wants to can take part.

Manotas: Each and everyone knew their work and was able to perform his task. But it was not organised. How were we supposed to move around in the factory, how were we supposed to organise things in order to avoid that although everyone is doing a good job, all efforts are in vain at the end. In July last year it became clear that we had to organise ourselves better. On a assembly we decided that we had to elect coordinators for each department. The factory is divided into different departments – pulverisation, press shop, oven, quality control, sales. Because everyone only knew about the work in their own department, we said: on each production line there are for example twelve comrades

working, they should elect a coordinator. The same in the pulverisation, at the ovens, in the sales department. Us coordinators met twice a week and the change was palpable very soon. The production ran much better. We were able to plan better. I became plant coordinator, the assembly decided. That is a huge responsibility, which requires some hours extra, but I do it with pride.

Julian: I am coordinator for the press-shop and the glazing process. I was elected in a democratic procedure by the comrades and I am still one of them. Before, that was different. Once someone started to climb the ladder, they would have looked down on you.

More difficult than the work at the production line were the areas of the specialists to which previously the workers had no access at all: the administration with the purchasing and sales department, the print-shop and the laboratory.

Chicho: In the laboratory we were facing the problem that the technicians who had worked for Zanon had left. We contacted some comrades who had worked in the laboratory and some of them were up for joining again. Because I knew them I started to work with them in the laboratory. Before that I had worked in the production. We are still learning. Meanwhile we managed to get the basic knowledge, but every day new problems pop up. We learn bit by bit.

Eduardo: I have never worked in a lab before. I loaded and unloaded. I stuffed fridge parts into mills for recycling. I delivered post. But now that I am here and able to think about which product numbers to mix, I work creatively...

Daniel: Hardly any of us had previously worked in the organisation of the company. We are all production workers. This is a difficult task for us. But we held meetings and talked about it, and we had support from people from outside who knew about the matter. Various accountants and admin guys came and supported our struggle. We learned from those people and we organised ourselves.

For the purchase of raw material they are supported by the Mapuche. The Mapuche had contacted them before because the employer Zanon had extracted the clay in their area without paying for it. After the occupation the Mapuche offered the comrades delivery of raw material and cooperation. The comrades thanked them with the new tile model "Mapuche". They also produced a model "Obrero" (worker), which is robust and cheap. Today the Zanon tiles are sold under a different name: FASINPAT. This name reveals an indication of where the tiles have been produced: in a factory without bosses, a FABRICA SIN PATron. The tiles are sold at the factory gate. Because they do not have a legal status they are not allowed to sell anything on account and therefore they cannot supply wholesalers. The human rights organisation "Mothers of the Plaza del Mayo" helps out by offering their organisation for the dealing with bureaucracy.

Rolando: Who knows how many sacks of money Zanon made off our backs. Even with the few machines which run at the moment we make our income. If we got the whole plant into full gear we would make loads of money. We could have 1,000 workers here

and all would have a good income. Because a lot of money comes in, we have seen that. At Zanon twenty trucks came and went every day. He only sold to wholesalers. Twenty trucks each day, they started loading them at six in the morning and at ten in the night they were still being loaded. A lot of stuff was exported, as well. And today we make a living by selling them by the pack.

The illegal status creates a lot of bureaucratic problems as well as a high level of insecurity: the threat of eviction. On the other hand there are advantages for the comrades: they took over the expensive machinery, which is estimated to be worth 120 Million US-Dollars, but they do not have to pay interest for it. They were able to avoid this capitalist constraint of accumulation. For the comrades a legalization which would re-establish the profits of Zanon in any form would result in an enormous increase of work pressure. They proved that it is possible to run a highly complicated production process without bosses, based on a direct democratic structure of coordinators and assemblies. An increased pressure to intensify work (for the market and profit) would certainly embody the danger of re-enforcing the old hierarchies. The future of this production without bosses in a capitalist world is everything but certain.

Fredy: In case these guys (Zanon) want to come back then we all want to work here again, everyone of the old crew, exactly the same people. When they accept this then we can discuss it. We will have to give in at certain points, but the fundamental thing is that we can all work here again. But the employer would not like it, because he would never reach his goal again, to rule over the people, to pay them like he wants to and to kick them out as he pleases. Today we have a totally different say in this factory.

“that we got to know each other...”

...was the most common answer to the question of what has changed after the occupation.

Daniel: I belonged to this particular shop and we were not allowed to go anywhere else. Everything was divided into different departments, we had to wear working clothes in different colours so that they could identify us.

Julian: You were not able to have a calm five minutes chat with a comrade. They did not want us to get to know each other. Not knowing your comrades leads to individualism. They did not allow us to come closer to each other.

Fredy: What changed through the struggle: We are united and we know each other better. Before you clocked in and went to your department. You only knew the comrades of your department. Maybe by chance if you had to get something from a different department you met someone else. Today you go to an assembly and sometimes you stand next to this guy, sometimes next to another. We go somewhere in a group and thereby get to know each other. You get to know the comrades and you agree that we have to proceed with this struggle...

The first thing they did after the occupation was to rip out the partition walls between the departments. Unknown work colleagues became comrades and the hated factory a place

where you enjoyed being. The walk from the workplace to the gate sometimes takes several hours – because on the way there are many comrades with urgent things to be talked about, you might end up in another round of mate or in the laboratory, because someone brought meat along and they re-use the Bunsen burner for a barbecue. But often also problems with the production require that the comrades stay in the factory for longer hours.

After the occupation they kept the old shift model (early-late-night) on the shop-floor. The night-shift is necessary because the ovens can not be switched off. Only few people work night-shift. Early and late shift rotate, the early shift works Saturdays, as well. The special departments, maintenance people and coordinators work from 8 am to 4/5 pm, but actually often stay longer.

Daniel: Back then I used to do my eight hours and then left. That was monotonous, only an obligation in order to bring an income back home. Today it is difficult given the situation we are in. During the meetings we often talk about the fact that some comrades are at their limit. For me it is different, I get motivated. Sometimes comrades tell me “Look, how late it is already, and you are still here”. But I like it. If there is a problem and I can solve it today then I finish it today, even if I have to be here for 15 or 16 hours. Other comrades leave after 8 hours. They say that they cannot stand the long hours any more. So we are all different, we think differently, we have our peculiarities.

New Horizons

Before the struggle over the factory the Zanon workers had been “normal workers”, they talked about football, only very few were interested in politics. Today the factory is a space for discussions. Words like class struggle or revolution are used without sounding as if they come from outer space. Structures of direct democracy and frequent assemblies resulted in a situation where politics is not a thing of few cadres, but of everyone. The horizon widened. New contacts to people from outside the factory were made. Visitors from other towns and other countries came to the province of Neuquén and the workers of Zanon travel around.

Daniel: A delegation will go to Rosario in order to take part in the meeting. The unionist always say that other comrades who might not go to meetings frequently should go too, so that they can also gain new experiences. They should go out and see how the struggle is perceived from the outside. Otherwise we run the risk of isolating ourselves without being aware of how things are seen from the outside. A lot of comrades who travelled to other regions talked about their experience after coming back: We never thought that so many people were interested in us, that we are seen as idols, because we are practically making a revolution here.

In 2002, Chicho and Mariano, the lawyer, travelled together to Italy, London and Paris.

Chicho: The travel to Italy was a big thing. Everyday in a different town without understanding a single word. It was difficult to find your way around. During the meetings we talked about the history of our struggle, the take over of the union, about other factories, about the regional coordination, the Coordinadora del Alto Valle. About the

cooperation with Brukmann and the meetings of the occupied factories. We discussed the question: why workers control and not cooperative? We had our talk, then discussion started, they asked questions about the situation in Argentina, how long we can continue with the struggle. All kind of questions. We got to know people from all kind of backgrounds, some meetings were organised by the FIOM (big metal union), others by the COBAS (rank-and-file union), by the social centres, all kinds of groups. After half of the people we met whilst travelling already knew who we were and what we were talking about, so the discussions became more and more interesting, both the contributions and the questions. Information was exchanged, our tour was announced in the media, more and more people came and the meetings changed.

Then we visited FIAT in Sicily. The meetings changed direction, they became international. I would not have thought that it would happen, but it did when we met the guys from FIAT. At that point they were on a big strike. They did not occupy the factory, but they were on strike. It was not a struggle of 270 workers, but of thousands, which makes a slight difference! A slight difference in terms of numbers of workers involved, but not in what they did. The strike was about the crisis which FIAT claimed to be in, the struggle at Zanon was also triggered by an alleged crisis. In that sense there was no difference. We took part in one of their assemblies. Some radio and television station reported that. They asked us if FIAT could be occupied, as well. So there was a discussion about whether they could do at FIAT what we have done at Zanon. About what we would advise the FIAT comrades to do. We said: we can tell you about our experience and our message is unity. If they want to continue the struggle they have to do it together, though the bosses will try to divide them – this is our main message. We were in Italy for 30 days. Every day a meeting, sometimes two, even on Sundays. That was crazy. We talked to a lot of groups which are in favour of what we are doing and which also see the possibility of coordinating and organising themselves without the big unions and such apparatus.

Delia, one of the few women at Zanon, attended together with the SOECN union secretary Alejandro Lopez, the World Social Forum meeting in Porte Alegre at the beginning of 2003.

Delia: The comrades actually elected me as their representative to go to the world social forum! The most important thing was not the trip itself, but that the comrades elected me. The first surprise was that they proposed me for the ballot. If it had been any other woman, I would have been as happy, because we are only few. This is a big step forward. At the assembly they said that there was a trip coming up and that someone should accompany comrade Alejandro Lopez. Six men and a woman were suggested. Then it was decided that not two union officials should go, but one unionist and one comrade from the rank-and-file. A comrade asked: “why not a woman”? “Yes, why not”, they said, then he suggested me.

My horizon widened enormously. I come from a family where politics is not talked about. Today every injustice gets on my nerves. Previously I kept silent, today I would like to do even more against it.

Brukmann and Zanon: Projects of Trotskyist parties?

If you deal with movements in Argentina you will not be able to avoid the numerous Trotskyist avant-garde groups. Traditionally Trotskyism has a strong position within the Argentinian left, therefore you will meet people from Trotskyist backgrounds wherever something moves. Within the social movements the organised comrades are often more articulate and therefore they catch more attention than those who just started to take first steps in political movements. From a superficial point of view the movement then seems to be the project of a party.

In Argentina all Trotskyist parties try to make their parties benefit from the social movements and workers struggles, doing a lot of damage in the process. Spaces of debates like the Interbarrial, the weekly meeting of the various local assemblies, which took place in a park in Buenos Aires every Sunday since the uprising, were destroyed by the competition between the different political parties. Most of the participants ceased to attend the assembly, because the behaviour of the political cadre put them off.

There is always polemic against Brukmann and Zanon claiming that the occupations are the creation of the party cadres of the Trotskyist PTS. It is correct and not a secret that Raul Godoy is a member of the PTS and some other comrades from Zanon are as well. In Buenos Aires two Brukmann workers were non-party member candidates on the list of the PTS and another party during the provincial elections in September 2003. But it is an absurd idea that a handful of party cadres can oblige 300 workers to follow their political line.

The influence of organised comrades is perceivable in the slogan “Nationalisation under Workers Control”, and present in some of the discussions about workers power and revolution within the factory. You do not have to share the view of Trotskyist parties on the creation of socialist states – but that is not what it is about. The important thing is that these questions are actually discussed: how should a different society should look and how do we get there? Do we need a party for the revolution, do we want a workers’ government or is it rather about counter power created by our own structures. Class struggle or multitude?

At Zanon, discussions which normally take place in academic jargon in exclusive circles, happen next to the running production and they are based on concrete questions: what about the strategy of the unemployed organisations and how can the struggle at Zanon proceed. Also old terms are subject to re-questioning in collective debates.

“Nationalisation under workers control” and “workers government” are on one hand the usual repertoire of Trotskyist notions of transition. On the other hand, these terms get a new meaning within an occupied factory. “We have shown that we can run the production without bosses, so we will also be able to run the country. We neither need politicians, nor bosses”.

For a lot of comrades the slogan “Nationalisation under workers control” basically means: “We do not want to buy the means of production, we do not want to become owners. The state should place them at our disposal”. A factory, where no-one dared to raise their

voice became a space of debates. This space was not created by a party, no matter how many parties try to pride themselves on this glory. The workers themselves conquered this space. Like Raul said in one interview: "If we create a space for democracy then the comrades themselves will decide how things should proceed". And they do this, if necessary against the position of their organised comrades. During the provincial elections in Neuquén in march 2003 all lefty parties had the Zanon workers mentioned in their leaflets.

The Zanon workers were offered to nominate candidates amongst themselves for election. During an assembly the Zanon workers decided to refuse that. For this election the PTS called for a boycott (out of tactical reasons, not because of a general refusal). The PTS fly-posted an election boycott poster in Neuquén, showing a Zanon worker and an unemployed of the MTD, the famous shirts and logos. The poster created a lot of outrage in the factory. The workers decided against listing a candidate, but they did not call for boycott, as the poster suggested.

This question became a subject during a special assembly during change of shift in the yard, during which the workers made clear to their comrades from the PTS that they will not let themselves be used for party interests, by no-one. When critics of avant-gardists concepts denounce the factory occupations as "avant-garde projects" then they stick to the game of the want-to-be-avant-garde: they only concentrate on the alleged leaders. This booklet is meant to shift the focus in order to see the processes amongst the workers themselves, to see what happens on the rank-and-file level.

From workers aristocracy to workers avant-garde – The Zanon workers and the unemployed

Formerly the Zanon workers belonged to a well paid workers elite. A lot of them live in their own houses which have been built as part of a social housing scheme. Whoever had employment was able to get such a house, paying a low monthly rate. In the factory car park heavy motorcycles and still numerous cars are testimonies of the past wealth. Today a lot of people are not able to pay the monthly rents for their houses any more – so far there have not been any evictions – and no-one can afford to fill up their cars. Before their bosses started to threaten bankruptcy the Zanon workers felt secure and part of the middle-class.

Eugenio: When the factory was still producing in top gear the Zanon workers were fine. You never had a problem to get a credit. You were well respected, as a worker of Zanon. Then came the slump...

Daniel: Back then of course we saw conflicts all around us, but we worked at Zanon. We did not have any money problems, but we complained about those who had. I often cursed: "I have to get to work and you guys block the road". My only worry was not getting to work. I did not ask why these things happened, why they blocked the roads.

Rosa: Previous to this conflict I never did anything political. The opposite is true: when the unemployed blocked the roads I said that they should start looking for a job and stop

creating this mess. When things went bad for us I realised that we have to support each other.

Delia: They had to touch the wallet of the middle class. When they see a road block today they understand, because now they are effected by crisis, as well. Unfortunately it first had to happen to us before we realised. Previously we had bank accounts and credit cards. If you then have to roam around and to start begging for food, that was tough for us. I had seen myself as middle-class or at least I wanted to get there. I sent my daughter to a private school and paid for that. I did not have any big luxury, but I wanted a good education for my daughter. I was not interested in struggling for better education. I paid for it.

Rosa: At the beginning it was difficult to take to the streets, somehow embarrassing, it felt funny. But finally it was about our rights, our dignity. At the beginning we were only a few who wanted to pick up the struggle. I thought that the right moment had come, but I was alone in my department. The old union guys who you never saw in the factory, they did nothing.

In October 2001 the workers of Zanon occupy the factory and the unemployed organise themselves as MTD Neuquén

Eduardo: The conflict started on the 1st of October and on the 4th the MTD was founded. Previously the unemployed organisation was called Unemployed Commission of the Barrio San Lorenzo. The whole thing spread to other barrios and named itself MTD, movement of unemployed workers. At that time the Zanon comrades organised street blockades in the town centre, later they blocked the bridge which connects Neuquén with Cipolletti. The MTD thought that this workers' struggle is important because we do not want to have more people unemployed, we want jobs. They fought for the jobs and if they had lost they would have lost their jobs too. Then they would also have joined the MTD. We went to the occupied bridge and supported them. There were discussions about it, because some people in the MTD said: why should we support them, they have their jobs and their wages. And comrades here in the factory said: why should we support the unemployed, they jobless. At the beginning they looked down on us. But when we blocked a road, they came and when they occupied a road, we came to help. This is how we got to know each other.

Raul: The extension of the struggle beyond the factory was difficult. It did not come naturally to demonstrate together with teachers or to see an unemployed person as your comrade. Here inside the factory we fought a long battle in order to get to this point. At the beginning the assembly decided against us – like it happened recently again. All our proposals were refused, but when the problem became a practical one, the whole thing of extending the struggle gained a foundation. Then things changed and went in the direction of extending the struggle. The fact that the workers do not want to have anything to do with the unemployed is due to the politics of the government and the union bureaucracy. Most of the unions look down on the unemployed. They do not perceive them as part of the working class. It really helped that here in Neuquén a really

independent unemployed organisation came to life and that it is a very progressive one. Because among the unemployed too it is not easy for the comrades to find people who want to support the struggle of factory workers. Unfortunately there are only few who want this. Most of them lead rather corporate struggles, each group for its own demands.

Daniel: At the beginning a lot of people refused the MTD, because it was an organisation of very violent people. After the first common actions this was the subject of a lot of debates in the assemblies: that we do not want to have that kind of ally. The people from the union said that they will ensure the non-violent character of future actions. They told the guys of the MTD that if they want to get support, they have to follow the line of the workers. They accepted that and did not make stipulations.

Today the Zanon workers and the MTD form a strategic unity. Nowadays it is a common picture to see the workers overalls with the union button next to the shirts with the MTD logo: on demonstration, blockades, or regional or national coordinating meetings, which are meant as a starting point for new independent workers movement.

Eduardo: A very beautiful demonstration was the one when when the comrades from Zanon decided to occupy the bridge again and we came for support. The comrades were already on the bridge and we arrived with our demonstration, with our white shirts with the MTD logo, which we always wear on protests. We sang the song which has now almost become an anthem: "Come here, come here, you will find a friend. As unemployed and employed together we will always win the fight". Both groups were singing this song and when both demonstrations met, people jumping and embracing each other – that was beautiful. Merging white and brown shirts, singing and embracing each other. That was really beautiful. I think that was the moment were we really found unity. The concrete synthesis of this situation was that the unemployed came here into the factory.

Since the occupation more than fifty unemployed have been integrated into the staff of the factory. The workers of Zanon agreed on a standard wage of 800 Pesos. If the production yields more, the money is not spent on wage increases but on increasing the numbers of the work-force. In Argentina today 800 Pesos is a comparatively good wage, but still very little to live on. Therefore some comrades think that a wage increase should take precedence over too much solidarity. But so far no-one brought the issue up during assembly, which is why the old decision is still valid.

Fredy: When the issue came up that we need support of more people and that unemployed people should get jobs here, a lot of people disagreed. Particularly for the older workers this was problematic. They had never experienced anything like this. Until the importance of it all was explained quite clearly at an assembly. This is how people understood why first of all it would be good for us to get this support and that it would also be a political success: that Zanon workers under self-management hire unemployed while the government is doing nothing.

Raul: Of course there were discussions about the issue. But we did not really talk in detail about the question if we should raise the wage a little so that we meet the level of

the market basket (basic level of necessities), which is slightly higher than our wage. The most important question for everyone is the question of what will happen to the whole factory. The factory runs at only ten per cent of its capacity at the moment. If we manage to run it at 100 per cent we will make a real profit. And that is the concept: that this profit is not meant for an individual project, but for the good of all.

“It all started with us developing things very slowly here in the factory”.

The occupation and the self-organised production at Zanon has a long prelude. Given that under the control of the management and the old union it was impossible to talk openly with each other inside the plant, people had to organise themselves outside. A small group started to organise football matches on Sundays, in order to meet other comrades and talk. These football matches went on for one year. Each department had a team and each team a delegate. In this way they were able to keep in touch with all departments. This form of organising resulted in the establishment of an oppositional list of candidates which surprisingly was able to take over the works council (Comision Interna) in 1998 and enforced the right to hold assemblies inside the factory.

Raul: Initially we met comrades outside the factory, to drink beer and play football. This is how it started. Then things changed outside. The working class started to react. In Neuquén the first countrywide unemployed uprisings kicked off in 1996, in Cutral Co, only few kilometres away from here.

These uprisings had an impact even in our factory, where everything was under tight control of the management. Things were discussed, opinions differed: from the usual opinion that this unrest was bad, that these people were lazy and only wanted money from the government without having to work; to the position that they were part of the working class and that their struggle is ours as well. At that time the old union bureaucracy was still in charge, there was no action, not even a declaration.

So it was a combination of two things: firstly that we took the first steps, secondly that the situation inside the factory started to change. While we were still a small group we started to take part in demonstrations of the teachers, of the public sector workers and the unemployed. At the beginning we were only two, three or five people. Two guys carrying a banner and no one marched behind it. But we said: here we are. We told people in the factory about it and talked about it with the comrades. Within the factory we took the space to at least hold our assemblies here. It was tough work to achieve that. The management threatened us, there were legal charges. The assemblies were prohibited, they were only allowed in the union office outside the factory and after working-time. Legally this was controversial. All we achieved we mainly achieved because we broke the rules. It was a long struggle to enforce the assemblies.

We first started to use the halfhour lunch-break in the canteen in order to talk to people. Each shift had half an hour, and we used this time. People did not have breaks together, while some were eating the others supervised the machines. Once we were more established we demanded common breaks. That was a blow to the company and they sued us over it. The enforcement of a common break was our first achievement. In

hindsight it does not sound like much, but it was an enormous success. After that we had assemblies of one hour or as long as we needed for our agenda. These assemblies were then already part of the struggle.

The workers started to resist the harassments and dismissals, which were common at Zanon. The management were creating pressure by using temporary contracts. But while trying to fight against this pressure, they discovered a legal clause saying that a copy of the terminated contract has to be sent to the union. Given that this did not happen they declared the termination of the work contracts as illegal and demand a permanent contract for the comrades, which they pushed through after a walk out. The first strike took place in July 2000 after the 22 year-old Daniel Ferras died in the factory after a heart attack, because the first-aid infrastructure had been scrapped. After nine days of strike the comrades made sure that the medical service was put back into place.

Rosa: The trigger of the struggle was Daniels death. How can it be that such a company has not got the money for medical service!? Once you called in sick they sent a doctor to your home in order to check if you were really ill. They were able to spend money on that! There had been accidents before Daniel's death. A comrade fell onto the mills and was hurled against the wall. He ended up paralysed.

Ana: When the thing happened to my son they stopped production. Daniel was my son. He died because of the lack medical aid. At that time about 600 people worked here, I think. The doctor only stayed for two hours and the guy responsible for the first aid did not know what to do. There was no oxygen apparatus. Then they called an ambulance, because they needed this apparatus. When the ambulance arrived from Neuquén, it was already too late.

Daniel's mother Ana has been part of the Zanon staff since the end of 2002. She works together with two other female comrades in the kitchen where they make sandwiches and cakes for the early and late shift and cook lunch for the day shift, selling it at cost price.

Ana: Previously I worked in the halls, where fruits are processed. I worked in a packaging company for 26 years. That was seasonal work. You only worked there for four or five months, during harvest time. The company was shut down ten or eleven years ago, simply overnight. I had worked there for 26 seasons. All people who had worked there became unemployed. Recently it got harder to find a job. Once you are over 40 you are seen as being too old and no one will employ you. When they offered me this job, I was very happy. I always supported the guys from the factory. When they were here, I popped by. When they organised the demonstration from the factory to Centenario, I went with them. When they did things, I was with them and they kept in touch with me. They also visited me and asked how I was and if I needed anything. I am grateful for this, because they never stopped visiting me.

"You are the impetus which made us become the force which we are today" is written underneath the pictures of Daniel, which can be found on several walls in the factory. His death put the struggle against the murderous working conditions on the agenda. The

dark side of the relatively high wages at Zanon was, apart from the prison like atmosphere, an unbearable work stress and frequent accidents.

Raul: We started working here on four consecutive work contracts, each limited to six months. If you refused overtime you got the sack. If you had an accident or if you got sick, you got the sack as well. The factory was founded during the dictatorship and a despotic regime ruled inside. Any group which had anything to do with politics simply had no chance. A police-like company friendly union was in control. But seen from the outside it was a privilege to work in this factory. The first six months on the job were the worst of my entire working life, and I started working aged eleven. First of all I was shocked by the atomised machines, due to their deafening noise, which you had to scream over in order to communicate. The hellish work pace lead to accidents every other day, mainly hand injuries. And if you did have an accident it was always your own fault. They brought you in the office and finished you off. If you reacted to that in any way, you got the sack. They made us work double-shifts, sixteen hours, from six in the morning to ten in the night. For six months I practically had no day off. In every way this time of my life was miserable. In the factory your own colleagues made you work harder, because they were keen on the productivity bonus. Your very own colleagues told you: "the production runs poorly because this guy is not working well". That was an extreme pressure. I guess the underground work in the factory was the most revolutionary thing I ever did.

Fredy: The company was on the upturn, they sold loads. They paid us overtime, but they made a lot of money on our backs. Then they wanted to reduce the working hours and get rid off the time where we just sat and did nothing. They wanted to introduce a new working system, the flexible production. If I had nothing to do up there I was supposed to come down here and prepare the glazing. Or help a comrade. Or push a broom around. After they achieved that they allowed themselves to make people redundant. Because they did not want to pay overtime any more they started to increase the work intensity to the max. This is when the clashes between the management and workers started.

Julian: Daniels death resulted in us becoming ever more united. Today there are hardly any accidents any more This is due to the situation and the way we work. If you work under pressure there are a lot of accidents. Under our control the number of accidents has decreased by 99 per cent. Sometimes accidents occur, but no serious ones. Previously people got sprains, hand injuries. All due to the pressure. It was constantly on your mind that you have to meet the required work load, that otherwise they will give you a warning, that they can sack you.

After the strike which followed Daniel's death the management opened the bankruptcy proceedings. It wanted to get rid of the rebellious work-force. The wages were frequently not paid on time and the workers did not receive the full amount. The comrades did not believe the employers were moaning about crisis and bankruptcy. They could see how many boxes of tiles were leaving the factory. They demanded that the company's balance was made public. After several short strikes the "34-days strike" claiming unpaid wages started in March 2001. The workers pitched a strike tent in front of the factory and survived on food donations.

Rolando: In Argentina's past there was no situation like the one we experience today. We took the streets, blocked it and went around with a can collecting money in order to have something to eat. We went into the barrios and the people there helped us out a lot. We drove in the van, from house to house, and asked people for food which we then shared amongst the comrades. We distributed leaflets in the streets and collected money. I had never been a unionist or anything like it. I have always been a normal worker, but I thought that these activities were right, so I joined them.

Manotas: The conflict which lasted 34 days was the first one I took part in. For me it was the hardest of all. It was really cold, a lot of wind and rain. We had no food and no money. During an assembly we decided to form commissions amongst ourselves. I was in the commission which walked through the barrios, through all barrios of Neuquén. Others made the conflict known in the whole country. Our task was to exchange leaflets for food, to explain the problem to the people and to appeal to their solidarity. Everyday we came back with a car load of food. Every comrade could at least take a bag of food back home, because there was no money. We established a strike fund, but only small change went into it. It was a difficult situation.

The workers adopted methods of the piqueteros, of the unemployed. They blocked roads and closed the critical access points of Neuquén, which is enclosed by two rivers. They blocked the bridge leading to the neighbouring province Rio Negro.

Manotas: Daily we went into town centre and blocked roads. In the part of town were the banks where, we blocked all streets. Our aim was to move the government to take care of the workers, because the government did nothing. One day we decided to block the bridge of Neuquén. That was the biggest challenge we could come up with. We all went and blocked the bridge at eight o'clock in the morning. At seven in the evening they sent us a message that a meeting with the labour commission would take place and that the company wanted to negotiate. At eleven at night the company and the provincial government, which of course was on the side of the company, announced that the outstanding wages would be paid. We achieved what we had fought for and were proud of it. We celebrated it till three o'clock in the morning in front of the strike tent.

Then we went back to work. In June and July the company again started to talk about how bad the sales performance of the company was. We knew that the company sold 500,000 m² each month and that it made millions of US-Dollar returns. But they insisted on having no money. We had decided during an assembly that we would immediately go on strike if wages were not paid on pay day. And that was what happened, on the 1st of October there was no money. We stopped production and thought: last time it took 34 days, this time may be two months. We repeated the same actions like during the 34-days strike. Collecting food, making the conflict known, some guys drove to Buenos Aires. A lot of organisations supported us. Comrades like you who were interested in the struggle and made it known helped us a lot.

When Zanón switched off the ovens the workers saw it as a sign of imminent closure of the factory. They started the occupation in October. Due to a court sentence against

Zanon for illegal lock-out the first eviction order was declared invalid. At the end of November Zanon sent letters of dismissal to all 380 workers. On the 30th of November the workers organised a demonstration to the provincial government building and burnt the letters. The building also nearly burnt down. A brutal chase through town kicked off and nineteen workers were arrested. But they had already won the support of the local population. The same afternoon 3,000 people took to the streets, the workers were released on the same day.

In December they started to sell stock which was granted by the court as compensations for the outstanding wages.

Manotas: When we started selling we always asked ourselves how far it would go. We could only sell the stock. People supported us with food, but we did not want to be a burden on them for too long. So in February 2002 we decided during an assembly that we would take up production again and that everyone should get the same wage of 800 Pesos. The vote was unanimous. With some of the money we got from selling the stock we restarted production bit by bit. We began with 20,000 m2. Fortunately today we make more than 100,000 m2 per month. But without neglecting politics. I think that production and politics go hand in hand. You cannot separate the one from the other.

The prelude to this unusual occupation started rather traditionally: with taking over the works council (comision interna) and later on the leadership (comision directiva) of the little union SOECN. During the course of the conflict the former bureaucratic apparatus changed into something different.

Fredy: Today it has become difficult to explain. Now that we have had the conflict you do not notice so much any more what each single committee does. Now we are a kind of core from which each activity initiates. The normal situation would be as follows: The union leadership sits in the union office and deals with all kind of problems of all factories. The works council works in the factory and takes its time in the works councils office. This would be the normal situation. But today we are all one core. Everyone has tasks, the union leadership and the works council, everyone has specific tasks, like making things public, union and other activities.

Eduardo: A comrade was once asked 'are you a left union?' 'No' he said. 'Not left, but we are also not right. We are a revolutionary union!'. He didn't want to describe himself as left wing, because the left, with their bureaucratic behaviour, had contributed to destroying processes like this one. We are against things like that. We have the trust in our capabilities as workers to do things ourselves.

Assemblies, Over and Over Again

The most important means to generalise the conflict within the factory and to make it an issue of everyone were and are the assemblies. Assemblies in the departments, of each shift, assemblies of the coordinators and general assemblies. Every now and then the workers organise discussion days, they reduce production to a minimum and meet in working groups in order to discuss. All decisions concerning production and politics are made within this structure.

Mario: There is still a lot missing, it can still improve. But in general the way we deal with things is good, in the assemblies. Everything is decided rank-and-file, that is the most important issue. The majority makes decisions and according to that things are done.

Manotas: If this struggle has pushed things forward then it is due to the democratic ways it was and is led. The only authority is the assembly, the whole collective of the workers. It is not me in my position as coordinator, it is not Raul Godoy as the general secretary of the union who makes decisions, but the assembly of all workers decides what will be done and what not. The current union leadership has introduced this structure, this has to be acknowledged. Fortunately they were not bureaucrats. We did not have any experience with this structure. The people of the works council who later on took over the union leadership introduced the assemblies as a democratic method of decision-making. This structure is still valid and it is also much easier this way. In the assemblies we all have the right to voice our opinion and to vote – not in a secret ballot like the ruling class do and who after the vote does not want to remember anything. Here nothing gets forgotten. The assembly votes and the majority decides. I have lost votes in the assemblies. You have to stick to the decision, it does not matter if you lose or win, the important thing is that we decided together. This is the way we work. And there are the discussion days. The assemblies are important, but sometimes fluid communication cannot be achieved. During the discussion days we 270 people divide ourselves up into five groups. We debated all issues, like at the meeting of the coordinators: both politics and production. This helped us all to create consciousness. Because here in Argentina we have a major cultural problem, they killed our roots in the military dictatorship in the 70s.

SOECN – Union of Workers and Employees of the Ceramic Industry in Neuquén

In Argentina there are two main Peronist union umbrella organisations (CGT and CGT-d), they are bureaucratic organisations, true to the state and run by corrupt officials. The third umbrella organisation CTA was formed as an alternative ten years ago and has its main strongholds in the public sector. Its formation process was accompanied by combative rhetoric, but nowadays it hardly differs from the other two. The workers only ever call the unions “union bureaucracies” or shorter “the bureaucracy”. The SOECN was one of these Peronist employer-friendly unions. It organised 400 workers from four different factories: the tile producing factory Ceramica Zanon and the neighbouring Ceramica Neuquén, the brick factories Ceramica de Valle, which has also been occupied after long battles by its remaining seven workers in February 2003, and Ceramica Stefani in Cutral Co. Today the SOECN is an independent union. The workers who took over the works council in 1998 now makes up the union leadership. In December 2000 they managed to get the union out of the hands of the bureaucrats. Most of the workers see this fact as an important step in their struggle. The story of the decisive assembly is told again and again: the bureaucrats had set the time and place for the assembly, a Friday at 1 pm in Cutral Co, hoping that this way the Zanon workers would not be able to participate. The workers negotiations with the management to get leave for the day and to make up for the day later on failed. They decided to go anyway. Several buses carried

the Zanon workers 100 km to Cutral Co, were they won the ballot. Some workers did not go to Cutral Co, but in solidarity they didn't go to work either.

The factory occupation gave the union a different role. It is not a workers representing body any more, which negotiates with the employers, but it leads a factory and a political process, together with the new structures of assemblies and coordinators. But even though now "everyone is one core" there are still union officials and works council members. Some of them have not spent a single hour at the machines since the occupation started. Even in an occupied factory such a division of labour bears the risk of bureaucratisation and "officialism's". The criticism against "those up there" does not target the coordinators so much, who still work in the production, but the unionists who use their position in order to not have to work and who hang out in the offices instead. The comrades at Zanon know about the problem. Currently a change of the statutes is being debated within the SOECN. A proposal has been made to reduce the duration of a position to two years.

Julian: The rule is that no one can settle in a position. And there are no secret deals. If something has to be discussed, it is discussed to the end. It happened to me that I went past a group discussing politics and they asked me to join. You can take part in things and then you feel useful. You realise that your opinion is of interest. You can tell how you think things could be improved. This is why the department assemblies are held. The people in the departments are expected to think about how things should be run. For example in the sales department, there was a plan, but people wanted to do it differently. In the departments people talk and come up with things they disagree with, and in the general assembly all these opinions are gathered and we see what is best for all of us. It is not about what would be good for the union or certain people, but for everyone.

Daniel: Every two to three months we have discussion days. In smaller groups comrades find it easier to talk. Small groups are formed in the departments and comrades from the union leadership and coordinators come along and delegates from the respective department guide the discussion. They present things and people come up with their queries, draw conclusions and voice their opinion. All of it is written down. On the general assembly the outcome of all groups are gathered. This is quite democratic. Currently it is that some of the decisions that we made in the general assembly not been put into practice for various reasons. We keep on trying to find democratic ways to implement the decisions. The last discussion day was on the 15th of November. We talked in several meetings that we should have another one soon, probably in March. I acknowledge what the guys from the works council and the union leadership have done. They have done a lot of good things, here in the factory and outside, as well. This is why I joined the coordinators group, this group should be in line with the union. The discussion with the union guys about the fact that we have to organise ourselves better in order to proceed, results in all of us getting better. Some people say "We cannot do it this way", then we say "OK, lets find a different solution". And it works. You must not get stuck in your view of things. A lot of comrades from the union, the delegates or rank-and-file comrades have the same urge to constantly look for new solutions. If something goes wrong, we sit down and talk about how it could be dealt with in a better way.

The assembly of the coordinators previously only dealt with question of the production but was then joined by comrades from the union.

Manotas: We tried to work in an even more organised way. The meeting of the coordinators was good, but very separated from the political questions. We were cut off from that, so the urge arose that the union should also take part in the meeting of the coordinators. Now we meet every Monday at nine O'clock. The starting time is fixed, the end is not, because sometimes certain issues take a lot of time. At the meeting both production and politics are on the agenda: the general situation in the country, the local situation, the question of how we can proceed in the conflict and of what is the score in the production. The coordinators transmit all this to the comrades. Additionally a comrade of each department joins the meeting. This helped us a lot to work in a more organised way. Because we are normal workers. We have to run this factory, which is not an easy thing to do.

Department and shift assemblies are usually called for by coordinators or unionists.

Mario: The guys from the union leadership usually arrive with proposals for the agenda already prepared. They call for an assembly because there are several issues which have to be talked about. But there is always the opportunity to raise your voice, to talk and to ask questions about whatever you like. You have the freedom to not to stick to the agenda and to talk about something else. That happens as well. People got used to it. All kinds of issues are brought up. And the assemblies take as long as required, two, three, four hours, till anyone has any issue left which they want to talk about. Political issues are also dealt with. Some like it, others like it less. I do not like politics. Others do, then the discussions start. Some get involved more, some less. Sometimes you have to end up getting involved without having wanted to.

“Those up there...”

Besides all the enthusiasm for the political project, the main thing which happens in the factory is still work – an annoying necessity which, like anyone else, the comrades of Zanon like to escape from. At Zanon there are still factory guards, bags are controlled and people have to punch in and out – symbols of the factory regime which you would not expect in a self-managed factory. The guards main task is to secure the factory against attacks from the outside. During the initial period of the occupation there have been acts of sabotage like cut drive belts. Not all workers are fond of the politicisation at Zanon. Also in the self-organised factory they only do their job. The time clock was never been abolished in the first place, sensitive areas are still being locked up and the assembly decided to re-introduce bag controls after too many tools and cleaning material disappeared from the occupied factory.

Rosa: Some comrades still do not get it, that it is our factory now and that they harm us all. They think that Zanon will come back one day and that therefore it does not matter.

Daniel: In the long run it will not be necessary to have a coordinator in every department in order to make it work. It is a question of mentality. It is not like in the past any more, when behind each worker a foreman had to make sure that work is done. The

consciousness of “I do my job in order to earn my money” has to cease, instead we should be aware that “We all do our job in order to earn the wage for everyone and we all earn the same”. Some people still do not get this. They do not consider that we are all affected if they do not do their work. He might earn the same, but his comrade has to work double. There are not many people any more who think like in the past. And some are just tired.

Fredy: It does not happen often, but there have been cases of comrades who did not behave correctly. They leave work early without telling anyone or instead of doing their job they go to other departments. And the problem of lack of respect. May be it is due to all of us being quite tense. There are people who are very tense, who cannot cope and then take it out on other comrades.

Due to the problems with the work discipline the workers decided on a catalogue of sanctions. Whoever comes late often or stays away from work un-excused or does not appear at their workplace after punching in has to expect wage reductions. The catalogue is displayed as a threat in a showcase but so far it has not been put into action. But there have been suspensions because of threatening other comrades.

Cepillo who has been elected as one of the main coordinators for the production tells that he is put into a hierarchical position. He spends a lot of time running through the factory trying to mediate in conflicts and disagreements in order to settle them before they become a big problem and a question of sanctions. At the production lines despite all rank-and-file democracy there is still talk and complaint about 'those up there'.

Mario: Every now and then I have my little problems with those up there, with the union officials. Not with the comrades here in the department and there are also no problems with the coordinators. They are comrades, as well, they work next to you in the department. But the union officials are different, they do a different job. And there are some... but they are fortunately not all, they are only a minority. They proposed themselves that an official who does not work well can simply be recalled by the assembly. But that has not happened yet. Such a case has never been debated at an assembly. In my opinion this has to be debated.

Theoretically everyone has the opportunity to voice all criticisms and proposals in the assembly. But even in an occupied factory, there are some annoyances that people complain about in small circles. Here too, a certain self-confidence is required to raise unpleasant issues in the assemblies.

Fredy: If I have a criticism I can go and explain it, but there is also a difficult side to it. It's not all rosy here, as we often say. If I go and criticise, it could trigger an argument. Yesterday at the meeting we talked about a particular problem and a comrade said to me: “If the problem has already existed for two months, why did you not come earlier, we could have dealt with it a long time ago”. And I tell him: “No, the whole story is quite different”, then the argument starts, because I called a spade a spade. If you talk openly it can trigger arguments. But you cannot shut up either, because then everything might end up messy.

The beginning of the year was relatively calm at Zanon. During the time before the renewed eviction threat in March 2003 there was not much pressure from the outside and relatively few political actions took place. During this period the internal conflicts gained all the more importance. "I am fed up with listening to everybody moaning that the other shift works too little or does not clean things after work", tells Cepillo annoyed after one of his tours through the factory. Again and again this kind of arguments had to be settled in the assemblies.

The dynamic of the occupation, which makes it a progressive political project, is less due to the fact that people work self-managed without bosses, but to the fact that the factory became a focus point of the movement. As soon as the movement loses drive, the annoyances of daily working life catch up with the comrades at Zanon. The self-management of such problems is tiring. Some comrades would rather hand over the whole responsibility again, particularly facing the reality that as a small minority in Argentina they are under constant threat.

Eugenio: If you ask me about the future... I want that everything will sort itself out, that the boss, the owner, comes back and gets things running again. I want that we do not depend on the sales of tiles any more in order to get our wage. That I can hand over these worries. Today we worry double. Previously you only took care of your family, today you have to take care of the company, as well, that it runs and that you can take back something to your family. You have these double worries on your mind.

Mario: It would be good if there was a solution – does not matter if with Zanon, another owner or the government – mainly that we only have to deal with things that we know how to do, with work. That more qualified people than us do the management. Apart from the fact that we managed quite well ourselves.

Eugenio: Yes, but you get tired, as well. It is such a long struggle and we still continue struggling. The wheel turns more slowly. If you had asked me the question when the wheel was turning full gear I would have answered: Bosses, piss off, we manage well here, we earn our wage. But after things developed so slowly here, it is a little bit tiresome.

Mario: They just would not let us produce and sell in peace. There is always someone placing obstacles in our way, be it Zanon or the government. They will never let us simply continue. That is how I see it. Although it would be great if we could continue working like we do work now. But they will not let us. They do not like it, all the changes. If we would have a better unity, if more factories would join the movement, if it all would gain power then things would become possible. But that is not easy, we are only few.

Short after these conversations the next action for possession is remitted against the workers of Zanon. A lot of comrades struggle hard with the constant insecurity. They cannot make long-term plans or financial decisions. The struggle demands big personal efforts: some married couples broke up over it. Nevertheless the comrades at Zanon are convinced that they are doing the right thing and are determined to defend their project.

Delia: None of us will simply accept being sent home. Whoever makes the decision to kick us out should know that we will not go just like that. They will have to get us out, and all the costs...

Fredy: Here are a lot of people willing to defend their work-place. It would be good if we would all be here if something happens. But I hope that it will not happen, otherwise it could have very bad consequences. Many are ready to sacrifice their life in order to defend their project. It is not about the material loss, but about the dignity.

The Zanon workers have already proved that if necessary they are ready to defend their factory with counter-violence. The last time was in October 2002 when former Zanon workers who were active in the old union bureaucracy and who have always been and still are on the side of the owner, attacked the factory together with paid kids from the suburbs, trying to re-conquer it. The workers secured themselves and the factory behind barricades of pallets of tiles and the aggressors were driven away by sling-shots and a sortie of the MTD. After that the slings became a part of the common working clothes for a while. The munition is self-produced: stone pebbles rotated in the earth mills ground down to marbles – the famous white marbles which became a popular souvenir for visitors to the factory. In mid-March 2003 a new sentence concerning Zanon was passed which allows the liquidator the re-appropriation of the factory. The comrades started the mobilisation against the eviction immediately. Three buses full of supporters from Buenos Aires arrived for a day of action on the 29th of March. The supporters are lead by the “Mothers” (Madres de Plaza de Mayo), and their chair woman Hebe Bonafini. She declares that in case of eviction she will be inside the factory herself in order to defend it. The CTA, one of the three bureaucratic union umbrella organisation, announces that it will call for a general strike in the region against the eviction.

After a tour through the factory, a press conference and an open debate, about 1,500 people demonstrate in the town centre of Neuquén. Despite the general support, ranging from unemployed organisations to celebrities, members of parliament and the bishop of Neuquén, the eviction is fixed for the 8th of April. The night before all Zanon workers stayed in the factory. They declared that they are going to defend the factory with their lives. The factory gate was blocked with tile pallets. On the roof workers kept guards behind pallets. Groups with slingshots make their rounds on the factory premises. Despite the cold in Patagonia there were already a lot of supporters present during the night. During the morning the crowd in front of the factory grew to 3,000 people. The teachers and the employees of the public sector are on strike. At one o'clock, when the news came in that the liquidators are on their way to the factory, the drumming and singing ceased. But the company reps came without the police and after a short discussion with the workers and their lawyers they had to go again. Facing the determination of the workers and the wide-ranging support the provincial governor announces that due to the unforeseeable consequences he would not provide police force for the eviction. When it becomes clear that this eviction attempt failed too, the historical day ends with a big celebration. “Zanon writes history”, the headlines of the local newspapers announce the next day and the workers share this view: “I think we are

writing a page in the history book now and I hope that this particular history will have a happy end when we turn the page”, a Zanon worker said during the day.

After this story turned out well the workers wanted more.

“The day today and its events shows us that we reached a turning point of our struggle. After the support we got from the people we are not afraid of a possible eviction any more. We demand the only possible, long-lasting and reliable solution for this conflict: the nationalization of Zanon”. “First we wanted to take over the works council, then the union. After the union we wanted the factory for the workers. Today we want a more just society for all workers and we will not move a single step backwards”

(Raul Godoy and Alejandro Lopez, Zanon worker and chairman of the union SOECN, 8th of April 2003 in front of the factory)

“We want more...”

For a long time the struggle at Zanon has been about more than securing work-places. In this factory a different society is discussed, the comrades fight for it and take first steps in this direction. The aim of production is supposed to be not profit, but useful goods and a better life for everyone. Regularly the Zanon workers donate a part of the production for schools, hospitals, communal kitchens and social projects. This is also a way to thank the solidarity the Zanon workers received. In the initial phase of the struggle even the inmates in the neighbouring prison gave a part of their scarce food rations to the Zanon workers, using a human rights organisation as a transmitter. As a sign of gratitude the prison visitors now have a tiled waiting room.

Manotas: We want to give something back to the people, by donating what we produce. Next week we will make a donation for a school for “children with other capabilities”. They need help and we have a comrade here who has a daughter with similar difficulties. Maybe we can help them out with a tiled floor. But we also want to make sure that other people support them, as well. The government will not give them anything. We also made a donation for the hospital, to give something back after all the solidarity we received from people. For example the solidarity of the nurses and doctors who came here and worked voluntarily. They hitch-hiked to come up here or even came on foot. We will not forget that.

Raul: We understood these fundamental questions as the basis of the struggle, and we understood them at the right moment, when we had to struggle in order to defend the factory. Then we all grasped that we would not be able to do that on our own. It all came from the general solidarity, so we have to offer the factory’s service to the common good. That is why people took the Zanon struggle up as their own struggle.

Everyone here in this factory knows that we cannot achieve anything on our own, that it is a big fight. Some want to go much further, some want to keep the achieved status, others say “this is how far I go”. But everyone knows that it is a thing of the general public and that we have no chance without the general support. Not all have this consciousness, not all think that the unity between unemployed and workers is right, not all think that we

have to topple the government, or that we have to build a workers' government. Of course not all think this way, but to all of us it is clear that we have to defend ourselves together.

The Zanon workers are a tiny minority: the 15,000 to 20,000 workers of occupied companies are only a minority amongst the eight million wage workers in Argentina, and the combative faction of Zanon, Brukmann and a few other companies are only a minority within this movement.

Eduardo: On the first anniversary of the 19th/20th (uprising of December 2001) we were about 100,000 people on the streets. But we are 35 Million altogether! The employed working class are eight million, the unemployed are five million – and then only 100,000 on the Plaza de Mayo. And those 100,000 do not have a unified line. Brukmann, MTD, Zanon, the occupied supermarket Tigre and some barrio assemblies and one of the other parties: we only managed to get 2,000 to 3,000 people on the street. This is all difficult, but one way or the other, we have to keep on trying.

The workers did not take part in the uprising of the 19th/20th, they did not feel part of the movement which toppled the De La Rúa government, like the middle class or the youth. The middle class said “Basta, it is enough” and started a huge mobilisation which toppled De La Rúa. The middle class is the social basis of the Radical Party. The working class is the basis of Peronism and it has not yet broken with Peronism. A stronger movement is necessary to create such kind of rupture. Clashes with the police, finishing off President Duhalde...Recently an old comrade told me during a conversation that in the 70s he had been in a very combative Peronist union. He still sees himself as a Peronist. A few days ago he went to the party office of the Peronists and cursed them for not supporting the Zanon struggle. He called them son of bitches and left. Although he sees himself as a Peronist, he curses the party. A rupture would mean that he would not see himself as a Peronist any more, that we get rid off the stuff that Peronism had put in our heads. The youth does not have this problem, but the working class has.

The comrades of Zanon try to make their actions become a starting point of a broader movement. In Neuquén there is already the regional coordination Coordinadora Regional del Alto Valle, an alliance of occupied companies, unemployed, oppositional workers, social movements, left groups and parties. Similar coordinating initiatives exist on a country-wide level. These are first signs of a growing power which is able to go beyond experimenting with self-management in marginalised areas, and to attack the capital relation.

Eduardo: We see ourselves in a historical process, not only the fact that we do normal jobs under self-management. We are workers of Zanon, we are part of the MTD, to be able to be here, to work here, to go to the demonstrations, to be part of it all, for me that is it... I know that I am part of history in the making. It does not matter if we lose or if we win, we want to make sure that the people who come after us will know: that is what the Zanon workers did. They won the support of the people, they demanded disclosure of the companies balance sheet, they occupied the factory and made it run, they created jobs.

Like the comrade Lopez said on the Plaza de Mayo: We show on a small scale that we can self-manage the factory, why should workers not be able to run the country. These are words of a comrade who is not active in any party.

Raul: We are optimistic because although we are only a small group we have inspired a lot of people, we have been received with respect, we were supported. Our message is not: occupy the factories and make them run like we did, because other people might think that it would be too difficult for them. We propose that we start organising ourselves, that we create a network. We want to put across that things are possible, that we have to start to conquer the space for it. Like the half hour break which we enforced at the beginning: let us start to enforce things like that. Once we create a space for democracy the comrades themselves will say how things should proceed. But we have to start conquering the space for autonomy, for our own decisions. There is a lot of work ahead of us. You have to expand it, it will not happen automatically. The rest is done by the social conditions. It is not that a small group starts and bit by bit it grows and grows. There are spontaneous uprisings where new things are created. We have to be prepared.

Eduardo: After the uprising of the 19th/20th something big happened in Argentina. I was really impressed. I was in Buenos Aires during these two days. Also afterwards, during the big mobilisation which toppled Rodriguez Saa. I think these incidents really changed the consciousness of people, although now the situation is rather calm. Amongst the youth a lot has changed. I am very optimistic for the future. Since the 19th/20th it is not like it was before, when they called us the Generation X, which only watches telly and is only interested in consuming and becoming famous. I was in Buenos Aires, at a meeting of 170 young people, the initiation of the movement No Pasaran. There were youth of left parties, independent youth, a-level students, guys who had just met, who have a rock-band, who came together because they are rebellious. They were politicised. In the heart of the uprising an enormous politicisation took place. They wanted to do something. After the meeting they set off and made leaflets, they went on-line, they wanted to reach out to the youth, to the thousands of youth in the barrios, in the schools in the factories. Now it is the war (in Iraq), which is the really big issue for young people.

We defend the occupied factories, Zanon and Brukman are the avant-garde amongst the occupied companies. If we do not manage to reach the other workers, all this will not have a future. The future lies in the hands of those workers on whose heads the union apparatus is still stamping. But the country is in crisis. Those above cannot govern like in former days. And we down here do not want to continue living like in former days. A new 19th/20th has to come, but on a larger scale. It must not result in yet another Duhalde, but in a workers government. This workers government is not yet on the agenda, as many thought. It was not a revolution. It was a kind of preparation. Something that tells you that something bigger is in the making. I am 28 years old and I am sure that I will witness much bigger movements – apart from the fact that I am already now with Zanon. In the future there will be big upheavals, Latin America is on this path.

Class Struggles in Argentina

Argentina has a long history of workers struggles. At the end of the 19th century

immigrants from Europe brought anarchist and socialist ideas with them and founded the first unions in Latin America at the Rio de la Plata. But Argentina also has a long tradition of dictatorships and state massacres. A particularly Argentinian phenomena is Peronism, named after the military leader Peron, who came to power after a coup in 1943 and was elected three years later. With a mixture of nationalism and clever welfare politics he and his wife Evita became idols of workers and the poor. He managed to integrate the workers movement into the state and to transform the unions into corrupt bureaucratic apparatuses. At the end of the sixties workers rebelled against the union apparatus and the dictator. In 1969 an uprising of workers and students against the dictator Ongania took place in the industrial town of Cordoba. In the following years workers organised wildcat strikes and factory occupations. They enforced assemblies and rank-and-file democracy. Forty per cent of the big industrial companies were still state owned. Therefore the workers struggles immediately got a political dimension. In the streets students and workers fought together, "Neither coup, nor election – Revolution!" , was the slogan of the union at FIAT, which has been taken over by worker activists. Several guerilla groups appeared, amongst others the left-Peronist group Montoneros. Peronism had been criminalised in 1955. Now Peronism was supposed to help the state out of its difficult situation: Peron was brought back from exile. Nearly one million people greeted him at the airport. The right-wing Peronists carried out a massacre amongst the Montoneros, on the pretext that they had planned the assassination of Peron. Peron was re-elected in 1973 and immediately started to criminalise and persecute the left. Peron died in 1974, in March 1976 another military coup took place and the most brutal dictatorship in Latin America began. Between 1976 and 1983 the military made 30,000 people 'disappear'. Most of the victims were workers who were active politically or in unions. The shadows of the dictatorship are still acute in Argentina today, perceptible as widespread fear. Initially the military had the support of the middle class which hoped for a stabilisation of the national situation and an economic upturn. There was hardly any protest against the frequent arrests. "They will have got involved in something", was the general excuse. Under the rule of the military a small circle got really rich, but a broader economic boom did not take off, so the trust in the dictatorship diminished. The military tried to save their image by starting the Falkland-War against Britain in 1982, over the Malwin-Islands. The attempt failed, the resistance of the people grew and in October 1982 the military allowed elections again.

The ensuing civilian presidents continued the neo-liberal course of the military. They privatised the oil company YPF, the telecommunication company and other state-owned enterprises. By the mid-90s unemployment had risen to unprecedented 20 per cent. In 1993, ten years after the end of the dictatorship an uprising took place in Santiago del Estero after wages of public workers had been cut. The birth scenario of the piquetes, the road blockades which give name to the organised unemployed piqueteros, was the upheaval in Cutral Co, in the province Neuquén In 1996 the inhabitants blocked the little town for days, in order to protest against the dismissal of oil workers. After the slump in 1998 the road blockades and local upheavals become more frequent. In December 2001, Argentina sees the Argentinazo, the general uprising. On December 19th and 20th, the fear which had ruled the country since the dictatorship was collectively overcome.

Despite a state of emergency people take the streets en-masse, they topple various governments and start to organise their lives themselves. In assemblies of the barrios (neighbourhoods) they experiment with rank-and-file democracy and they initiate various self-aid projects. Nevertheless the movement does not manage to develop a similar impact as did the workers struggles in the 70s. The situation in the companies stays calm. Since the uprising there have not been bigger strikes yet. The workers are still under the control of the union apparatuses. Today Peronism – the hope that the state or the right man at its top can provide for a better life – still has a strong influence in Argentina. Of course, workers take part in the protests, as neighbours in the assemblies or demonstrators in the streets – but they have not re-discovered their actual power as workers to disrupt production yet. So far this power has not been shown in the core of valorisation, only at its margins. The strongest figures in class struggle in Argentina today are the organised unemployed and the occupied factories.

Cooperatives, Nationalisation and Workers Control – Notes on the dilemma of self-management in capitalism

Over half of Argentina's industrial capacity lays idle. In this dramatic crisis a lot of workers decide to occupy their companies and to continue production under self-management. The occupations are projects of survival in a defensive situation. But they raise questions which go beyond the immediate aim of sustaining ones own workplace. More than 10,000 workers in Argentina today question private property practically and they have to enforce themselves against the power of the state, sometimes violently. They have the experience that they are able to organise production themselves. In a company without bosses nothing is taken for granted any more, nothing has to be accepted as given. There are no foremen any more, workers change working times and work organisation according to their needs and they decide what and how things are produced in assemblies. The aim of production is not profit any more, but an income for as many people as possible, the production of sensible things under bearable conditions. Sounds like a little bit of communism already.

But self-managed companies like islands in the ocean of capitalist crisis are contradictory projects, which easily can get stuck and become self-management of misery. The mere fact that a few thousand workers work on their own account in derelict factories does not necessarily have general consequences. The capitalist magazine *The Economist* (9th of November 2002) worries a bit about the "erosion of private property rights", but is generally optimistic: "This movement does not threaten capitalist enterprises" – because the re-opening of factories under workers control would not only help the workers, but also the employers, because it would save machinery from decay and vandalism. The *Economist*-journalist did not come to this conclusion themselves, they quote two representatives of the MNER, the national movement of self-managed companies. The MNER organises about 8,000 workers who work in about eighty self-managed cooperatives. Most of the occupied companies opted for forming cooperatives, thereby being able to at least avoid eviction and forced sale. A precondition for this legalisation is that workers take over the debts of the former owner. Consequently the pressure on the workers to produce productively and according to the markets needs is high. So far no

cooperative has failed completely, but a lot of them can only pay low wages and see themselves forced to make cuts in social benefits and working conditions, or even to dismiss workers. In some cooperatives the wage is hardly enough to make a living. The occupiers are able to suspend capitalist command within the company, but they cannot control the market. On the market they are forced to compete with other companies which they can only undercut by increasing their own exploitation. There are numerous examples throughout history of the tendency of cooperatives to increase work intensity and to reproduce capitalist structures, reacting to the pressure of the general social relations. Facing the large numbers and tenacity of the occupations, the state introduced new decrees for expropriation in the city of Buenos Aires and the surrounding region. According to this decree companies can be “expropriated” and handed over to the cooperatives. These new expropriation decrees have two sides to them. The private property, which the workers have put into question by the occupation, is finally re-installed, because the machinery and buildings are handed over for a limited period (generally for two years, in some cases for longer). Meanwhile the state guarantees the owner a rent. After the termination of the period the workers are supposed to have the right to buy the company first. At this stage the company remains under supervision of a judge and a trustee, who take care of the interest of the creditor. In contrast to the owners, the workers do not get subsidies. By putting in their work they are supposed to turn the scrap metal, which lays idle in the factories, into capital. If they manage to do this, they have the right to buy it (thereby the creditor would re-appropriate their work). During the two years period they are not owners, but they carry the whole risk and they do not have any rights or wage claims which they previously had as workers.

The MNER demanded a trust fund to be set up and a change to the bankruptcy laws, in order to give these legal processes of expropriation an institutionalised framework. The MNER is supported by groups within the church, by fractions within the stateist union bureaucracy, by Peronists and centre-left parties. Given the character of these forces the suspicion that the main aim of their support is to prevent the movement from leaving the boundaries of legality, does not seem out of the blue. Their suggestion to the workers of the occupied companies is to legalise their status as cooperatives and to aim for “realistic solutions”.

Raul: The MNER is a mixture of unions, of deals with the government and a lot of sacrifice – from the side of the workers not from those in leadership. As more companies got occupied the government started a policy which was meant to curb this tendency. Suddenly a whole apparatus was unleashed from above comprising of judges, members of parliament, civil servants and lawyers. They try to handle the question of the occupied companies in the same way as they try to domesticate the workers movement using the union bureaucracy, or the piqueteros by negotiating with some of them and creating a piquetero-bureaucracy. They try to create a bureaucracy which is willing to negotiate and is distant from the workers. The MNER more or less fulfils this function. At the beginning when the MNER's character was not that clear, we suggested common meetings. But they did not want to join up with rebels who created chaos. They rather rely on the legal path. Although they talk a lot about struggle, their actual practise looks different. Most of

the companies have been occupied out of an emergency situation. There was no previous plan to do it. In most of the cases no organised people or comrades with a clear vision were involved. They acted spontaneously, out of necessity and anger. The next day they did not know what to do, for example if they are supposed to hand in a claim to the department of employment. Often the first reaction of workers in such a situation is to go to a lawyer. And if there is a lawyer with a visiting card who tells them that he would be there for them if any problem turns up... They provide a whole apparatus who very much takes care of all issues. Nevertheless there are a lot of comrades who belong to the MNER, but who individually or as a group take part in our meetings. They do not leave the MNER, but they are aware of the fact that we have to lead the struggle together. Cooperative or not, we are all dependent on the market. You have to face the competitors, you have to lower wages, cut costs, you become a competitor of the other workers. This is why we demand nationalisation, not because we think that the state is something nice. This is a state of the employers, a capitalist state, a repressive apparatus against workers and people, but we say that it should guarantee the basic conditions for production so that we can continue working and organise ourselves – exactly in order to destroy this state and create a different one.

Zanon and some other occupied companies demand “nationalisation under workers control” instead of building cooperatives. They neither want to become employers nor employees of the state. They demand from the state the provision of a general set-up: the state is supposed to finally expropriate building, machines and patents without the workers having to pay compensation, to hand the company over to the workers in order to enable them to produce socially sensible goods under self-management. They do not want to buy the means of production. The state is supposed to provide them and otherwise keep out of it given that the workers themselves know how to handle the production. The propagated production of “goods for the common interest” is more than a moral demand. If the state would guarantee the purchase of products for public projects the pressure of market competition would at least be lessened. Under the pressure of the general situation the workers of the textile factory Brukmann finally decided to form the “Cooperative of the 18th of December”, named after the date of the occupation, one day before the general uprising. Over Easter 2003 they were evicted. Since then the factory in the barrio Once, right in the centre of Buenos Aires, has been fenced off with metal barriers and put under constant police surveillance. The attempt to re-occupy the factory ended up in street fights. After this failed attempt the workers installed a strike tent on the street in front of the factory. They stayed there during the whole Argentinian winter and protested in various forms for the hand-over of the factory. At the same time they were engaged in a legal process against Brukmann, aiming at expropriation. The expropriation was tied to two preconditions: the workers had to form a cooperative and the company Brukmann had to be declared bankrupt. Both things happened and on the 30th of October 2003 the town parliament of Buenos Aires decided to expropriate Brukmann. After the workers of Brukmann had refused this kind of legalisation for a long time and proposed more radical projects, it is on one hand quite a huge concession that one of the most famous exponents of factories “under workers control” now has finally become a

cooperative. On the other hand it is a big success that after such a long time the workers managed to go back into the highly symbolic factory in the town centre of the capital. They did not let themselves be pushed into the outskirts and they can continue their project together. Without their tenacious actions this would not have been possible, but they would not have been able to continue sitting in the strike tent for an indefinite period of time, living on donations. Some kind of solutions had to be found and there was enormous rejoicing after the decision of the parliament, although the comrades surely know that this is no "solution". The legal form which the individual company takes is surely less important for the future of the movement than the question of its potential to spread. Will the self-managed companies remain isolated, will they remain islands or will they form part of a wider (international) movement which is able to question private property and the relations of production fundamentally? The question whether the occupied factories will at some time enter the history books as a nice episode or whether they will actually be the starting point of something new, does not solely depend on the developments in Argentina. In any case, the workers have already won something: the experience which they make during the occupation cannot be taken away from them and we can learn a lot from them.

Julian: I think the most important thing that we have demonstrated is the fact that it is possible. They have always discriminated against us. They have always said that a worker is not able to do anything else but work. We have proven that we can handle anything ourselves once we work together. It all started with the struggle for our jobs, for a dignified way to work instead of miserable social benefits. And this should be clear to other workers: that the struggle against the loss of jobs does not have to be a meaningless and insignificant struggle. This message is independent from the question of how the struggle at Zanon will end. The struggle could have various outcomes: maybe the owner will return, maybe he will sell the factory, a lot of things might happen. But our aim is clear: we want to offer the factory to the service for the common interest, we want to produce in a way which improves life for everyone. Sometimes I imagine how it would be if there were a lot of Zanons, in this country and anywhere else. That would be a completely different reality, we would all think about everyone, no matter if we are ten streets away from each other, ten kilometres or ten thousand kilometres...

Timeline

1980 Opening of the ceramics factory, Zanon in Neuquén.

1983 End of the military dictatorship in Argentina.

1993 Advanced technology introduced in Zanon with the new porcelain line.

1996 Uprising in Cutral Co, Neuquén province, against the Privatisation of the oil company YPF.

Beginning of the piquetes, the street blockades as a form of action of the unemployed.

October 1998 at Zanon the opposition list candidate Marrón took over the works council (Comisión Interna).

July 2000 The death of Zanon worker Daniel Ferrás due to missing medical equipment in the factory. The 'nine day strike' enforced the reintroduction of the medical services.

December 2000 The opposition list took over the leadership (Comisión Directiva) of the union SOECN.

January 2001 Six day strike over unpaid wages

March 2001 In response to the complaints of financial crisis by Zanon, the workers demanded the open publication of the accounts sheets.

April / May 2001 The 34 day strike over outstanding wages, after the company and provincial government's commitment to pay the overdue wages.

June – September 2001 wages outstanding, work stoppages, state substitution of overdue wages.

September 2001 Zanon begins to shut down sections of the factory.

October 2001 Occupation of the factory. The self organisation of production is stopped by the blockage of the gas supply.

November 2001 Judgement against Zanon management over the earlier lockout. The workers get stored produce as compensation for unpaid wages.

28 November 2001 Zanon sends dismissal notices to the entire workforce.

30 November 2001 Demonstration to the government, with heavy confrontations and arrests. The release of the arrested workers after a further demonstration on the same day.

December 2001 Tile sales begin at the factory gates.

19 December 2001 The Zanon workers donate tiles for the local hospital in Centenario. The tiles were laid by the unemployed workers of the MTD.

19 and 20 December 2001 Uprising in Argentina

January 2002 The proposal by Zanon to reopen the factory with a workforce of only 62 workers and with a cut in wages was refused by the workers.

27 February 2002 The workers assembly decides to take over the production with an equal wage of 800 pesos for everyone. They divide themselves into three shifts and form commotions for press, publicity, sales, buying, legal, security, production, planning and work security.

March 2002 The production starts again under workers control. The Mapuche offer the Zanon workers the clay from their land as raw material.

April 2002 First meeting with the occupied Brukmann factory in Buenos Aires. First edition of the common workers' newspaper 'Nuestra Lucha' (Our Struggle).

May 2002 First eviction attempt. The court permits the bankruptcy commission the seizure of the factory. The workers do not let them in.

June 2002 After a new Obrero (worker) line of tiles the Zanon workers bring out the Mapuche series, four models which they have developed in cooperation with the Mapuche community have called Mapuche-struggle Kalfukura, Meripan, Lexfaru and Puran.

26 June 2002 The Avellaneda massacre: After a blockade of a bridge in Buenos Aires by unemployed organisations the police shot two piqueteros Maximiliano Kosteki and Darío Santillán at the Avellaneda train station.

August 2002 Twenty members of the unemployed organisation, MTD Neuquén begin working at Zanon. Two eviction attempts. First meeting of the Coordinadora Regional of the Alto Valle.

September 2002 Second meeting with the occupied factories of Brukmann

October 2002 Third eviction attempt by the former company union with help from hired youths. Application for expropriation and nationalisation by Zanon.

February 2003 Thirty new workplaces in the occupied factory.

March 2003 New eviction threats via a new legal judgement. Days of action in the factory and in Neuquén, with the support of a caravan from Buenos Aires with the 'Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo'. Third meeting with the occupied factory in Rosario.

8 April 2003 The fourth, and up to now last, eviction attempt is resisted.

June 2003 The production has risen to 120 000 m² per month. Which is 15% of the total factory capacity and 50% of the production before the owners left the factory.

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From <http://libcom.org/library/zanon-factory-occupation-interview-with-workers>

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