

Dispersed Fordism and a New Organisation of Labour

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The following is a translation of a text from the June '91 edition of the Spanish magazine Etcetera based loosely around the Spanish truck drivers' strike of October 1990. It could equally apply to the French truckers' strike of July '92. The occasion doesn't matter too much as basically the text deals with the re-organising of production in the 80s. How a highly efficient managerial offensive is equally highly vulnerable to a sectorally limited action which due to the new totalitarian invasion of capital cannot have much visionary edge but could prove to be one of the decisively destructive components of the new upsurge from below we are beginning to see all around the world. (not from translators:BM Blob).

DISPERSED FORDISM AND A NEW ORGANISATION OF LABOUR.

TOWARDS A NEW TYPE OF STRUGGLE.

From the 10th to the 20th October 1990 the road haulage industry in Spain, which according to sources in the Confederation of Spanish Industry carries 75% of goods in transit became the scene of some of the most violent conflicts in recent years because of a strike call by the self employed unions.

Basically the strike could be cited as a typical conflict of interest between large and small haulage firms. That is, a confrontation between the large firms who control the majority of the long distance transport market and small proprietors (owning from one to five lorries). As a conflict of interest between two fractions of capital the platform of demands by the unions calling the strike which according to the press represented upto 15% of the sector — it led to a series of requests relating to the defence of an operational niche within the profitable transport market. This required the intervention of the government against “illegal” lorry drivers for example, and other aspects relating to the fixing of rates, inspection, pensions etc. In other words from the point of view of the forces at work, the lorry drivers’ strike does not justify the interest granted to it in these pages. As has become habitual in the latest conflicts in Spain, the strike unfolded within a strict corporatist sphere, although it was capable of generating a very tense atmosphere (confrontation with the police, attacks on scabs and the blocking of entrances and exits on the main roads and motorways). But its real significance was not to be found here. As the media recognised in its haste to discredit the strike, only a minority of lorry drivers obeyed the strike call and that not in all areas. Nevertheless one must recognise the extraordinary impact of the strike action. Within a few days of drivers having drawn their lorries across motorways and mounted pickets the disruption to supplies to the large towns became evident, to the point where shelves were emptied in supermarkets (Bilbao, Catalunya) and some products became scarce (fish amongst them) in the Madrid and Barcelona markets. But the consequences to the industrial sector were of much greater magnitude. Although the Confederation of Spanish Industry and the larger bosses organisations tended to exaggerate the losses (they mentioned figures which oscillated between 50,000 million pesetas and 200.000) the fact is the threat of total closure hung over the industrial belts of the principal regions (Madrid, Zarragoza, Barcelona, Guipuzcoa). By way of example — General Motors closed down, Firestone, Nissan and Seat halted their assembly lines as did Citroen. many other firms suffered interruptions to the productive process like Fasa, Renault, Michelin Ford (who commandeered a fleet of 25 aircraft to fly in components from their factories in the U.K. and Germany), the chemical industry in Tarragona and an endless number of smaller industries. The Irun frontier town was blockaded by lorries.

THE VULNERABILITY OF THE PRODUCTIVE PROCESS IN DISPERSED FORDISM.

In spite of the spectacular character of some incidents, given prominence by the mass media in their campaign to discredit the strikers and spread alarm amongst the population -people hurried to stock-up as if a war was imminent- the lorry drivers' strike took on a telling dimension that exceeded the limits the strike had formally set itself.

And this significant challenge not only referred to the enormous economic/social repercussions from what was in any case no more than a minority action, but because it brought out the deep structural weaknesses of the productive process arising from capitalist restructuring in the 80s' and the objective limits of modern techniques of organisation and control of the labour force.

The cycle of capitalist restructuring which characterised the past decade had as its aim a double strategy, the result of which has been what is called the dispersed factory or dispersed fordism. It was for industrial strategy a question in the first instance of overcoming workers' resistance (and the pressures exerted on the terrain of production itself) by dispersing the great mass of workers which had formed around the productive centres which had appeared after World War I (and above with the rise of the car industry and consumer goods).

In this period the massive aggregation of the labour force around the production lines of the large factory complexes was the basis of the cycle of capital accumulation. This extended into the 70s' and implied the culmination of the scientific organisation of labour put into practise by Ford half a century earlier. It was an organisation which, alongside the massive numbers of workers, revolved around the parcelisation — breakdown of the physical movement of the worker on the production line-and this was the source of many acts of resistance, strikes and sabotages. But the industrial conglomerations also implied the establishment by the workers' of a social and economic force able to exert pressure and who through a successive cycle of struggles (trade union inspired and autonomous) eroded the rate of accumulation in the industrialised countries. At the end of the 70s' the crisis of profitability arrived at a point which made a reorganisation of the labour force inevitable as regards reorganising control of the labour force and intensifying the exploitation of the latter. A recovery in the rate of capital accumulation was then possible. It was the era of social contracts, the politics of austerity and neo-liberal models resulting in undermining the foundation of the "state of well being".

As a consequence, the second strategic orientation of capital in the restructuring achieved in the past decade was apparent in the recomposition of the productive process. In addition to overcoming the resistance of the mass-worker, this was capable of dynamising the cycle of accumulation by relying on the implantation of electronic technology and the new system of industrial communication. This brought into being a double strategy : the territorial disaggregation of productive processes. Increased flexibility was generated by virtue of the requirements of a type of flexible demand which made necessary the production of a limited number of products (factories attempted to achieve a greater market share based on the introduction of design, fashion etc.).

Over the last few years we have witnessed the displacement of the process of assembly and finishing of products towards the capitalist periphery, put together by countries with a price advantage as regards the labour force and labour penalties (Turkey, South Korea, Philippines, Brazil, Mexico). This dispersion on a world scale had its counterparts on the regional plane in the industrialised countries themselves. Thus we have observed the breaking up of the big industrial

complexes into small productive units increasing the incidence of sub-contracting through which the big industrial corporations shifted some stages of production to other firms of a smaller size, which took on the task of allocating services and supplying pieces and components necessary for the final finishing. In this sense the car industry, the real motor of economic growth in capitalist countries upto the 70s', is the prime example.

JIT & ZERO INVENTORY: THE LOGISTICAL CHAIN OF ADDED VALUE

Understandably, in such an industrial landscape, new techniques regarding the organisation of labour and the management of production are a pressing necessity. And this is how there began to proliferate the precepts and watchwords of the new enterprise culture (just-in-time, zero inventory) which sort to cheapen costs, release tied-up capital, total quality control, control of human resources etc.). In fact this designated new enterprise culture was in response to a new stage in the division labour between firms and warrants being called the logistical chain of added value. Take for example, a car — which involves in its manufacture a large number of component factories — which carry out intermediate assembly stages and operate in conditions dictated by the big firm which sells the finished article. For efficient dispersal of production, a perfect co-ordination of the movement between secondary firms and the corporations with whom they maintain subcontracting links is necessary. This means that everything functions according to the principle of JIT. In the words of the Nissan president, the first firm to put it into practice in order to link-up their factories in Japan and Britain, JIT consists in having the necessary components “at the required time, in the required quantity and in the appropriate place”.

It was only one more manifestation of the subordination of small capital (subsidiary firm) to big capital (the firm that fixes the contract price). It is, of course, a strategy for transferring profit from small productive units to big industrial corporations who shift storage costs (zero inventory) in this way and the tying up of capital that the existence of stocks carries with it. At the same time it permits the shifting of the stages of the productive process that yielded less added value to subcontracted firms.

As for the workers, this new industrial order represents a new turn of the screw, intensifying the exploitation of the labour force. The splitting up of the great aggregations of masses of workers is transposed into a relative loss of the capacity to exert pressure, characteristic of the “old workers movement” having as its prime consequence the devalorisation of labour power and the worsening of work conditions. It is the state of affairs we know as lack of security. A reality which took shape in a myriad of examples of (temporary) contracts existing in subsidiary firms which are, in addition, the only firms in the labour market to take on workers, just as they have reduced wages all round and limited the rights and resources of workers' (flexibility).

All this has resulted in a potent hierarchy, the dis-aggregation of the mass-worker class components, a neo-corporatist and trade conscious conduct that counterposes employed to the unemployed, temporary to fixed contracts, advanced sector workers (information technicians) to the marginal sector (operatives, cleaners), the skilled to the unskilled etc.

Attempting to remedy the compact resistance of the mass-worker, the new organisational and managerial formula for the socialised production of commodities has given a different dimension to the contradictions inherent in the social relations between capital and labour. The dissemina-

tion of production substantially increases the vulnerability of the process. In fact, in order for the new organisational techniques to no longer function as theoretical models but in productive practice, it is necessary to eliminate the possibility of any delay, eventuality or unforeseen situation that could shutdown the continual flow of commodities and components as defined by JIT (as much in the process of production proper as in the realisation or marketing). It becomes necessary that “all” connecting links in the process are adequate to the end preset by the decision making center. The least error at any one point in the logistical chain whether voluntary (sabotage) or voluntary has a progressive effect on the whole and leads inevitably to the collapse of the process (in the productive and distributive sphere and of even both) This was born out in the strike in Fords U.K. the Spanish lorry drivers strike which we began the text with and the French lorry drivers in 1992.¹

Seen as a social relation, capital is not a force exterior to us. It is only so formally, that is in the social forms of domination which it clothes itself with. From here there comes about the insoluble contradiction between the affirmation of the forms of formal domination (financial/technological decision making centres) that require the physical suppression of the potential for conflict that labour power brings with it and the necessity of incorporating and intensifying the exploitation of labour power as the means of guaranteeing the continuation of the process of the extended accumulation of capital.

THE OBJECTIVE LIMIT OF CAPITAL IS SUPPRESSED SUBJECTIVITY UNDER THE FORM OF LABOUR POWER.

Whether in the classical ford type organisation or in the actual expression of dispersed fordism, the reality is that the contradiction between capital and labour continues to appear and change, each time more fundamentally. The real limits (objectives) of the growth of the accumulation of capital is located in labour power, or, to put it in another way, in suppressed human existence as labour power. Without exception the automisation of industrial plant puts its dependency vis a vis living labour power in greater relief. And this is true not only in respect to the knowledge integrated into technology, but also as regards the functions of control, supervision, maintenance and related services — that go from the most advanced sector to cleaning functions — the most devalorised labour. Without whose coordinated intervention automisation is not possible.

THE MANAGEMENT OF HUMAN RESOURCES & THE IDEOLOGY OF THE FIRM

However abstract the former observations might appear, they are corroborated daily in the conduct of firms. From Japan to the U.S. and Europe one of the main preoccupations of the big

¹extract from text: <quote> In this way the formally subjective vulnerability resulting from the aggregation of the mass worker in the factory, whose intervention could put the productive process in jeopardy, has been resolved by dispersed Fordism by means of the transformation of formally subjective vulnerability into the formally objective, functional vulnerability of the new productive organisation. If our individual tragedy is to be labour power, precisely because we recognise ourselves as a constituent part of capital — that is of the social relation consisting in the transaction of the exchange value of our labour power — of the forms of social domination founded on the basis of capitalist production it moves by tending to negate (suppression of living labour) the real source of valorisation which is living labour, capable of valorising technology. </quote> Suggest this paragraph taken out of text to avoid people switching off!

multi-national firms is “the management of human resources”. That is the management of electronic technology requires a complimentary strategy that entails the generating of a consensus amongst the different levels of the functional hierarchy of labour. This seeks to evade any translation into a class identity, as was the case with the mass-worker. This renders possible a certain “enterprise culture” in which each worker takes on (interiorizes) the objectives fixed by the financial/technological decision making centre (the hegemonic industrial corporations). With the constellation of firms that form around the dispersed process of production, the taylorist authoritarian formulas are juxtaposed to the formulas of the new culture. this pretends to implicate the workers in the attainment of the objectives fixed by management. For example, the competition agreement proposed by the Minister Solchaga goes in this direction by proposing that negotiations concerning wage increases are a function of productivity indexes.

The growing importance insecurity plays amongst sections of working people indicates a limitation to class consensus. Industrial strategy arising from this tends towards a differential treatment for each worker according to their relative importance in the logistical chain. This determines a rigid, functional and wage hierarchy within the firm. In fact the new organisational techniques of the labour process relies on the necessity of obtaining an explicitly assumed consensus by everyone belonging to the productive and distributive chain. Now, the pace of the business cycle and the level of technical and historical development of the exploitation of the workforce which has led to the dispersed organisation of the productive process, makes the promotion of consensus the cornerstone of social submission.

JIT, quality control are watchwords emanating from the most aggressive Japanese multinationals. Not only are they in the forefront in terms of technology but also in ideology. Until now we have been used to equating capitalist growth with protestant morality. But protestantism, the cult of reason matured in the Enlightenment maintains a separation between individual liberty and actual submission to the new order typified by the organisational process of work. This separation is parallel to the invention of individuality in the western democratic system. The totalitarian domination of capital extends in a dual direction: qualitative — over the individual and his/her physical capacities; and quantitative — over social expression in its entirety. This is becoming more and more totalitarian.

With ideology such a quest for total domination is the “end of ideology”. The ideological functionaries that propagate such a total view have ceased to be formally independent of the material interest this represents. Ideology arises in the process of valorisation itself and is concretely expressed in the cult of money (as a generalised sociological manifestation) and in the private accumulation of wealth as the be all and end all of existence. Truly, the imaginary individual is handed over to the principle of money, the cult of value quantified in the possession of things. The ideology of the enterprise culture then constitutes the basis of consensus that expresses the productive process.

Different capitalist blocks go about the promotion of consensus by different methods. In the present retrograde era for capital, the Japanese approach has the ascendancy over the European “state of well being”. The greater part of the technologies of control and organisation of labour come from Japan, in conjunction with its aggressive technological and financial penetration of Europe and the U.S.A.

The technologies of control are integrated in the process of automation. In order to carry out the physical control of the productive sequence this requires that these corresponding techniques of control be interiorised by the employees throughout the productive process. The automation

ideal is to achieve the self-regulation of the process: in the comprehensive sense of human and technological components.

THE NEW CYCLE OF STRUGGLES OF DISPERSED FORDISM.

This desperate search for consensus however encounters its limitations in fulfilling the imperative of optimisation and maximisation of profits. Although it sounds like something from the past, we must recognise that the capitalist mode of production, even with all its electronic paraphernalia as an intrinsically contradictory reality. The growing complexity of the productive process requires the submission by consent of all the links in the productive chain of added value. Thus the cheapening of the costs and the absorption of a continually greater part of added value, leads to the hierarchisation of the subcontracting of services that causes a multiplicity of different interests to appear. In this sense the lorry drivers strike is paradigmatic. The big companies such as the car industry have dispensed with all these stages in the productive process which for technical-organisational or strictly economic reasons are carried out by other subcontract firms. In this way, while centering activity in the logistical chain with greater added value, it exerts a monopolistic dictatorship over tariffs including transport.

Nevertheless this same big factory finds itself in a position of close dependency from the logistical point of view as regards the subcontractors — lorrydrivers or component suppliers being an example. With this there opens a fissure for potential conflict amongst the interests present, which is what caused the October strike to break out...

The conflict of interests between two forms of capital brings out the weaknesses and the potential for conflict existing in the prevailing model of dispersed fordism. In the past few years we have witnessed a multiplicity of intensely localised conflicts in segments of the productive chain and complimentary services. This is more than corporatist: Renfe train drivers, airport controllers, cleaners, buses, hospitals etc... Most of these disputes specifically relate to trade/professional status in the new industrial hierarchy.

Rank and file committees, even if they exist within the framework of traditional union demands, are the expression of the forms of solidarity corresponding to dispersed fordism. In the same way, mass actions were the expressions of the mass worker in classical fordism, with powerful industrial concentrations of the labour force. To criticise its sectoral or narrow character is simply useless. To the atomised organisation of the labour process there corresponds atomised forms of solidarity and resistance. More precisely, the capacity for global control of the process is rooted in the technico-scientific control of each one of the links of the social productive chain. A hierarchy of privilege within the distinct industrial categories is, as a consequence, established on account of their relative importance in the realisation of the process. That is, according to their contribution to the logistical chain of added value.

The dis-aggregation of the forms of sociability and resistance of the mass worker brings in a reality where contemporary proletarian resistance is attuned to the new conditions of exploitation. It is the end of the teleological concept that deduces the objective necessity of communism and of hallowed concepts. These were anchored in the recuperation of previous forms of community which up to now had provided inspiration to the movements opposed to the wages system.

In fact with the implanting of fordism, the perspective of “going beyond” capital was already being abandoned to a new realism of “living in capital”. The absence of a project derives from

an absorption in the immediate. This typifies the new cycle of proletarian struggles and is itself a reflection of the stage of total domination. the absence of any new project by capital itself corresponds to a process of accumulation turning into a zero tendency.

That is, in the reduction to zero of the time of capital rotation which denies in the concrete practice of accumulation its capacity for cyclical generation of administered time. As a result the ideal of progress that constitutes the (bourgeois) project of ascendant capitalism linked to a business cycle, which used to carry a stake — and a risk — in the future, has been transmuted into a business cycle that dedicated to increasing the mass of capital. This instantaneous form does not contemplate any perspective of projection in the future. In reality, the future only remains in the dominant discourse as a residual spectacular category proper to a model of civilisation that is lost in itself.

THE UNSTABLE DIS-AGGREGATION

The dis-aggregation of the formal expression of resistance represents in fact the breaking up of the forms of organisation of the ruling productive process. The phenomenological reality of capital is a world wide totalitarian reality. This is carried into effect as extensive domination of the world market and intensive weighing down on potential subjectivity. This is the structural reality corresponding to such dispersed production.

The emergence of such centrifugal forces threaten the whole from within. With the world levelling of cultural diversity there corresponds particular erosion of national or other identities generated by the dictates of capital. Similarly, such global dis-aggregation changes the methods of labour force exploitation in harmony with the totalitarian realisation of the domain of capital. However, a world under the sway of capital is also the actualisation of its totalitarian limits but subject to contradictions that threaten this domain.

The total domination of capital confirms itself as a mere abstract unification of the world around the commodity and money. But the unification around these abstract categories (commodities are value, have a value) imply in fact a break down of thwarted sociability. This is precisely because access to the commodity, and to purchasing power, is ever more stamped by the position each person has within the logistical chain of added value. This is determined by the more or less advantageous position each person can negotiate as a transaction within the social relations we define as capital. Precisely because actual sociability takes place in the concrete circumstances of the immediate (private consumption of things) there is no room for a social project. “Within” the coordinates of commercial forms of sociability only capitalist social relations can exist.

The manifestation of these crises of sociability is made obvious in the centre of capitalism itself. The appearance of the 4th world in the rich countries, gives rise to the theory of the 3 “thatcherite” stages”: the deterioration of living conditions in the metropolis, the extension of pathological forms feeding off capital accumulation such as drug addiction and the homeless in ‘cardboard cities’, those who are surplus to the logistical chain.

THE REPRESSIVE UNIFICATION OF THE WORLD UNDER THE SWAY OF CAPITAL

The unstable equilibrium in which the process of reproduction in the capitalist countries is maintained and its implicit recognition by the dominant technocracy, has engendered the generalised introduction of the systems of industrial blackmail represented by the lack of job security and direct repression when conflict breaks out.

But the insecurity that accompanies dispersed fordism implies a potential limit to consensus. The instability of employment generates disaffection and places difficulties in the way of generating “loyalty to the firm”. The strategy of differential control that privileges and recompenses in a structured form each category of the industrial hierarchy, tends to breed insecurity, especially amongst those who contribute less to the chain of added value following the notions of political economy that are dominant in reality.

Even the present success in terms of techniques of control will reach limitations. These are manifest in the growing need to valorise all the stages of the productive chain in order to maximise the surplus value at each level of the productive chain. Although strategies of divide and rule have prevented a unified solidarity amongst workers this has not prevented strategically significant stoppages such as the cleaning workers in Madrid airport recently.

Insecurity in the labour force reflects the unstable equilibrium and the promotion of consensus is backed up by openly repressive options. The extra recruitment of police, the restriction of so-called democratic rights, the criminalisation of insurgent minorities or exponents of dissent, are all features of modern democracy. With an increased gulf between the Political and social spheres, democratic liberties are reduced to propaganda, masking technocratic control of public life, increasingly totalitarian in application.

Democratic legitimation does not now correspond with the reality of a world based on functional and productive dis-aggregation. A pivotal interest group in the financial or social sector can devastate the process of social reproduction perhaps as a response to disruption elsewhere in the chain.

Such is the concentration of capital, democratic mediation rarely interferes with its autonomous operation. Equally the dispersal of the productive process dictated by the laws of accumulation makes any reference to democracy banal. Democracy merely legitimates, rubber stamps the power of multinationals. In the case of 14D(3), anti-Nato or anti-Gulf War actions they inhabit a ritualised space harking back to the era of the mass worker and are peripheral to the present system. When an organisation threatens the logistical chain — as in the Paris transport conflicts — the propaganda apparatus of the State & mass media mobilises public opinion against the “anti-social” minority.

Experience demonstrates that conflicts are neither cumulative nor are they orientated toward an imaginary goal of emancipation. They boil down to prompt acts of resistance pointing toward a real guerilla social struggle. However, these acts are fundamentally radical because our existence is increasingly defined as a source of valorisation in a world in which capital constitutes itself as an intrinsically conflictual social relation. Outside the space that determines the social relation of capital there are no real options. However, it is a social relation that involves us in conflict. To affirm oneself in conflict and to consciously renounce hope is perhaps the last existential option to those reduced to being labour power with nothing at all to lose not even their illusions.

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