

Precarity and n/european Identity: an interview with Alex Foti (Chainworkers)

This interview took place in July 2004 at the Mill Squat in Amsterdam, during the period it was liberated from the destiny of selling 'traditional' Dutch paraphernalia to tourists. Merijn Oudenampsen and Gavin Sullivan from the Greenpepper magazine spoke with Milano-based organiser Alex Foti - formerly of the Italian flexwork syndicate ChainWorkers (www.chainworkers.org) - about precarity, european labour conflict, and the spread of new syndicalist modes of subvertised collective action across Neuropa. Alex Foti is guest written editor for the upcoming Precarity issue of the Greenpepper Magazine and will be part of the PrecarityPingPong! launch and critical debate during the London ESF at Middlex University, White Hart Lane Campus, Tottenham on 15 October 2004 between 3:00 – 5:00 pm. See www.greenpeppermagazine.org for details.

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GreenPepper: Alex, can you introduce yourself, and the Chainworkers?

Alex Foti: I am a union and media activist from Milan, Italy and have been part of the ChainWorkers CreW since it's inception in 1999 - 2000. Most noteworthy, we are associated with the MayDay parade - which this year reached its fourth edition, bringing around 100,000 temp workers, partimers freelancers and other types of non-standard workers onto the streets in a joyful (but angry) expression of dissent around sub-standard conditions of work and living. This year the MayDay parade took the form of a major picket line throughout the shopping arteries of Milan. In fact, within the city limits of Milan, no major chain store or retail outfit was open for trading – either because they had become scared by the campaign we had developed in the months prior to MayDay, or because of the flying pickets that 2000-3000 people did in the morning prior to the start of the MayDay parade. This year, the parade was a EuroMayDay parade because it was done together with sisters and brothers in Barcelona, and organised in assemblies that took place throughout Milan, Barcelona, Rome, and (most crucially) Paris - with the participation of the Intermittents: the temp stagehands and part-time actors that recently blocked the Cannes film festival.

GP: You have been organising around the theme of precarity. Yet here in the Netherlands we do not really know of this concept. The idea of precarious labour – ie, dangerous working conditions - is somewhat popularly circulated, but the idea of precarity in itself and the precariousness of life has not yet reached northern Europe. Could you explain what is meant by the term precarity?

AF: In the radical left nowadays there are two major interpretations of the concept. One is existential precarity. That is, that life is precarious in times of global war. Either you are a body subject to bombs and military conflict or you are a prisoner whose habeas corpus is violated in Abu Ghraib or some other Western prison. Wherever there is total domination there is existential precarity.

Precarity is also, however, the condition of being unable to predict one's fate or having some degree of predictability on which to build social relations and feelings of affection. The diffusion of intermittent work and the attacks on the welfare state have resulted in a widespread increase of existential precarity across Europe - affecting increasing numbers of the population even in the wealthy countries like Holland. A clear example of this precarization is witnessed by the incredible rise in the use of psycho-pharmaceuticals and anti-depressants. Work hours have increased all over the territories - in Europe, the USA and Japan. What is noteworthy is that in Europe, working times have increased. Working on Sunday, Saturday, ungodly hours and night shifts - which previously only involved a small percentage of the workforce - has now expanded and increased. This is precarity: being unable to plan one's time, being a worker on call where your life and time is determined by external forces. And, of course, if you have a sub-standard contract you do not have a full social citizenship. That is what Mayday is all about: claiming social rights for an emergent subject that is crucial to neoliberal production. Neoliberal production is postindustrial - it's service, information, and knowledge-based and we want to get into that. This is at the heart of the accumulation process that is taking place today in Europe and in all advanced capitalist countries. So wherever there are neoliberal chains of production in the five continents, there is going to be precarity - peripheral in terms of rights, but central in terms of the financial web of the creative value produced.

We have been concentrating on two types of workers: Chainworkers (being workers in malls, shopping centres, hypermarkets, and in the myriad of jobs of logistics and selling in the metropolis) and what we call Brainworkers (cognitive labourers; programmers; freelancers who possess individual value on the labour market but do not yet have a collective force or a subjectivity with social rights - that is, they might make above-standard wages but if they lose their job they are thrown into poverty). Chainworkers, on the other hand, are always on the verge of social exclusion. They are collectively unorganised, but they could organise. What we've been working on is establishing solidarity. That is where media activism comes into play - by supporting strikes, picket lines, sabotage, boycotts on the part of taylorised proletariansed service workers, and at the same time agitating university researchers, teachers, workers in the

information industries and advanced service sectors.

GP: The main idea of precarity, then, is this interminable lack of security. Is precarity then simply defined negatively - as a situation marked by the absence of 'jobs for life' ?

AF: Exactly. While existential precarity is what attracts interest in the issue - because it is lived on the bodies and minds of everybody - we think precarity has more to do with a position in the labour market. It is a post-class discourse, if you like. Previously in this society we were used to blue-collars and white-collars so to speak. Now what we see is a transition to a more unstable social configuration based on service and knowledge labour. In old classist terms, this class exists *ex se* but not yet *per se*. That is, it has a clear role in social production, but it doesn't yet have representation of its collective needs - needs of social aggregation, access to standards of sociability, housing, access to knowledge, open source forms of organising, union rights and bargaining rights all around the table. What we have seen is that creative workers do not perceive themselves as workers anymore. The reversal of the new economy exposed the myth that talented people would be protected forever from market fluctuations.

This is what we have to focus on: to fight against exclusion and inequality and bring in a new radical subjectivity and identity in creative productive distribution processes in which social relations and transborder exchanges are absolutely vital. Especially in terms of the polity on which we want to base our social claims and agitation. We think in Europe today, at the juncture of a global crisis of neoliberalism, there is space for radically organising Eurowide. Euromayday is a first step in this process. The migrant struggles are another example of a struggle that is articulating itself on a wider scale. The basic human rights are being written right now and we want basic rights for temps, part timers and migrant labourers to be included on the European continent.

GP: The classical labour movement also agitates around similar issues: full employment, worker's rights, social services, social exclusion, and temporary work. What distinguishes your political agenda (or the radical activity around precarity) from that of the classics?

AF: Full employment is already here. Everybody is working 100% of the time - either when they work or when they consume, and display signs, body signs, visual signs, choices. The fact that you wear a particular sneaker or that you write a composition, an email, or mime that becomes an ad. And of course, during the daytime you produce for wage labour. Your data is capital for market research. Your biometric data is capital for biotech firms. We are 100% of the time part

of the [re]production of capital. In this sense, full employment has already been negatively overcome. I mean, what we need to do is to find ways of social representation that are different from the social democrats and the union parties. Because if Seattle really marks a transition to a new kind of politics - a participatory politics, a biopolitics if you like, in which the old distinction between political work, union work and cultural work is dissolved - then that world is over.

I think that the future lies in developing forms of self-management of conflicts federating themselves across borders and across wider political spaces - from the regional to the transcontinental. As in, a way of expressing political and social claims independently - in the political forms of working with existing radical parties and existing radical unions and associations - yet as an autonomous force. Radical organisations are too stale and backward looking to see what the social mobilisations are that society is asking from us. In France, Spain, and Germany we see massive amounts of people protesting against welfare cuts and European monetarism (the total right wing European construction made by banking concerns that is keeping social spending low and interest rates high).

All of this activity needs a new form of organisation. I personally think that Anarcho-Green is our output and destination. I think that now that the cold war is officially over on the European continent, we can merge Libertarian, anti-Racist, and Transgender social activism together to create new radical identities that can bring Eastern European and Western brothers and sisters into a new political project capable of opposing fascist Bushism. I mean, this is the task at hand and social conflict is spiralling. Others possibilities are, of course, the peace movement, the open source information movement, the alternative global fair-exchange movement etc. But we need to pose ourselves the question of power and the institutional interface. This is vital at this stage.

GP: One of the things that I noticed in the manifestos that were circulating throughout EuroMayDay this year were new words that we do not know in Northern Europe - like flexicurity. Could you explain what you mean by flexicurity and how that word is activated alongside precarity.

AF: Yes. In fact, in one sense flexicurity means we do not want to go back to a 'job for life' - the system of the previous generation. We accept the flexibility inherent in the computer-based mode of production, but we want to disassociate from the precarity that is implicit in this forced (Faustian) bargain. In the Netherlands, flexicurity is the reality - since in Holland, by law, you cannot discriminate between a part-time worker and a full-time worker in terms of the hourly wage paid. So if we could

extend this principle, which is a minimal social claim, all throughout the EU. The fact that part timers cannot organise themselves because they can be fired is, in fact, wage discrimination (with a union discrimination attached). We could also build onto this claim a demand for a European minimum wage, ten euros per hour, all across the union. These are the staples – the building blocks of a more advanced, solidaristic, less darwinist society - that could become the ‘European model’ as opposed to the neoliberal model or to the Chinese or the nationalist capitalist model. Fuck it! I did not choose precarity for myself as a destiny. But I think that out of that condition, our generation - the post cold war generation - can fight for a socially progressive shift. In Spain it is already happening. In the UK it will happen. In Italy it will happen. A shift that can posit a new radical left. Just as the thirties and the forties were times of social experimentation with radical identities, this is the time to invent new forms of cultural imagery. A new imagery of conflict, a new imagery of picketing, a new imagery of social activism. Of course, the media you develop is essential to this task.

GP: As you mention, the theme and discourse of precarity has become a very important organisational vehicle in Italy, Spain and France - with lots of people on the streets for EuroMayday this year, quite a great deal of material being written and circulated about it, and conferences being organised on the topic. But material conditions in Southern Europe are quite different than those in Northern Europe or the Netherlands ?

AF: Fragmentation and individualisation of service labour is the norm all across advanced capitalist countries - be it Japan, the Netherlands, the UK or Spain. What is different, and specific to Holland, is that the unions were more moderate and in the 1980s struck a bargain to regulate flexibility. Nevertheless, we still see a pressure on the long-term unemployed and a desire to cut benefits all across the board. So I don't at all agree that this is only a Southern European problem.

What is most striking about Southern Europe is that the welfare state there is more backward and traditionally less developed. There is more importance attached to the family and corporatist ways of integration etc. But the tendency toward the reduction of welfare services is universal, and Maastricht is a system designed to keep social spending low. We see that even Germany and France cannot respect these restraints. If we don't act now, we're looking at a future of precarity for all Europeans. Because the idea is to make us a new Asia or a new America - not a new Europe.

OK. I am inviting Dutch brothers and sisters to think about it. Neoliberalism is still very strong. Bolkestein is a neoliberal whose commissioners mission is to make

Europe safe for the US and other global corporations. We are the new workforce produced by neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is managing and governing the construction of Europe. So we are the only credible adversaries and the only guys and girls that can actually block the system of exchange and the flow of information. If young people stop working in Amsterdam, Amsterdam shuts down. No bars can operate; no tourist hotel can operate; no fucking newspaper can be ever produced; no theater play can operate. Amsterdam is a factory shut for business. This is what Amsterdam says to the world, it's image brand and sociability, which occurs through bodies and minds of thousands of young temps, precarious freelancers coming from all over the world. This is what precarity is - it's both a condition of exploitation and an opportunity.

GP: Precarity as a word to describe the existence in advanced capitalist economies of a fragmented workforce seems very useful and it has undoubtedly been used really effectively in the Euromayday events this year – which, as you have said, have seen tens of thousands, or hundreds of thousands of people demonstrating around the theme of precarity. Yet you also mention that there are lots of different types of workers within and under the banner of precarity - extending from unrecognised migrant and feminine labourers towards creative workers working in design and media industries etc.

How useful and effective do you think the concept of precarity can be in linking people together who have vastly different incomes? Precarity seems to be different than blue-collar or white-collar; it seems to be bringing together lots of different types of people from very different social strata. Do you think this is a limitation on how useful the concept might be in creating and organising this new radical subjectivity?

AF: It's a crucial objection and I want to answer with an example that is unfolding before our eyes which is the intermittent struggle in France initiated almost a year ago. What happened was that there was a reform of the unemployment benefit system that excluded thousands of people from maternity leave and other livelihood necessities, especially during the wintertime when the art and culture festival scene is more dormant. What happened then was that these people started blocking all festival productions across France and decided to sabotage the 8 o'clock TV news, breaking into the studios and reading communiques, eventually forcing the issue onto the whole of the cultural intelligence, a much higher class than the intermittent themselves who were mostly stagehands and part-time workers. We have to remember that for every festival there are a thousand workers setting up the stage and that they are cultural workers too. So we saw that film directors and major actors and actresses joined in solidarity with the

intermittent cause. And as a result, eventually public opinion started to take an interest. From a discussion on their specific system of unemployment benefit, it quickly became a discussion on the system of unemployment benefits itself. And from a specific discussion about a certain cultural sphere, it soon transformed into a national discussion on the place of knowledge and culture in French society and what kind of rights should be allocated to this sector. In Cannes we saw (Jean-Luc) Godard giving their press conference and Micheal Moore solidarising with them. Now the intermittent cause is known to readers from Sydney to Singapore and New York. What we see here is that from a very specific conflict - through networking and criss-crossing social classes and roles in the production process - the elites and the non-elites, exploited migrants and middle class women, all collectively produced a general shift and movement against precarity.

So precarity rallies different people. As Milanese and Mayday people we think that certain young people, women and migrant workers have a special stake here because they are the social categories being most aggressed by precarity. From another point of view, I think that service industry and knowledge industry - technicians, programmers, cashiers and retailers, sellers, cultural operators, truck drivers and pizza delivery boys - are crucially important. These two very polarised categories are statistically the two sectors that seen the highest growth of employment during the last twenty years of neoliberalism.

GP: So, you don't see this as a phase of pan-capitalism, where the breakdown of the welfare states and social rights are withdrawn as long as the economy is in crisis? Don't you think that when the economy booms again, politicians will be able to circulate around more money, and that salaries will rise etc.?

AF: This system is structural. The sociologist Manuel Castells, looking at the last twenty years, saw the precarization of one quarter to one third of the labour force in advanced capitalist countries as a structural feature. It won't go away with an expansion. If anything, the expansion will simply lure a segment of the knowledge class into the bourgeoisie. But as soon as the boom subsides, there are new additions and the pool of precarious workers will enlarge itself. That's what we've already seen. Italy started in the 1980s with ten percent of precarious workers, a million and a half black market workers. Nowadays, we have seven million precarious workers (contingent, freelance and temp) and four million black market workers. That's almost half of the total workforce! And it won't go away. Unless - and this is vital for us - we strike on the workplace, we picket the workplace and we manage to get the money : not from the state but from greedy corporations. This is

really what organising is all about, that is where the money is.

Who benefited from the Dotcom boom? We know: Amro Bank benefited, Nina Brinks benefited, Enron and other guys that were just tricking the accounts. These guys were not making the money; everybody was falsifying the accounts to accumulate financial wealth. Now we see what was behind it all. You see, the problem is, if you keep everybody under the poverty line - as Wal-Mart is doing with it's workers - the system collapses. You have to resort to forge and fraud to keep up the system, to keep up financial wealth because you are not selling. Man, this is really a great recession what we are seeing. So nothing will happen unless we organise. There is no easy way out of this system. This is structural. This is historical. It requires a major social shift otherwise it is going to become Brazil all over the world. Already, Holland is a very unequal country - more so than Sweden and Germany. There are very rich elites commanding major amounts of global income. This is what Mayday is about - beating neo-liberalism on it's feet and on it's territory: global chain stores, global banks, global nodes of finance, global media conglomerates: Murdoch, Berlusconi, Gates.

GP: Many precarious workers are working in areas where there is no self-organising activity. What kind of methods are you using to experiment with organising traditionally unorganised people in these new economic sectors?

AF: We started trying to merge subvertising (as a way of communication) with traditional forms of anarcho-syndicalism - that is, the picketline, the direct action, from breaking the chainstore glass to blockading the delivery vans that run to the fastfood joints, handing out flyers on the motorways and at every autogrill. We thought that since young workers were taking the brand of the neoliberal rules of work or the 'new flexibility' so to speak, and they have no memory of class struggle, we have to make it attractive. I am speaking about it but I am not the one doing it. You know, its our graphic designers Karen and Zoe - who are behind the EuroMayDay website and the ChainWorkers webzine. So, it is to speak in a lingo which changes across time. I mean, youth language changes, youth aesthetics change, fads and fashions change. To market an idea of radical union activity, to look if it is possible to make radical unionism attractive to the masses. So we built a website, we created merchandising, we have a board game called Precariopoly, the netparade in which anyone could join (which rallied 20 000 people alone - almost as large as the actual MayDay). You know, traditional leftist organisations tend to dismiss this kind communication as beside the point. But today people form their identities through media before reality. So if you have an attractive medium, as we have managed to develop, you have a

powerful tool of organising and activation. Through the website people have started connecting us and little by little we have built a network in Lombardy that became national and then transnational. It is about being focused and unafraid to market oneself to the unconverted. Because it is easy to convince the Anarchists, the Communists, Zapatistas, Situationists etc. The hard part is talking to the people that are suffering with their bodies but they have no way out because they have no cultural system of reference that enables them to rebel against a very repressive system. If you read about Wal-Mart, if you read what Mike Davis has to say about Wal-Mart or even what Business Week has to say about Wal-Mart. It is a system based on prison labour - this is the model of work and production in the department stores and big retail industries.

GP: You were saying before that the idea of organising around the theme of precarity is not to demand the mundane existence of the workers of the 1960s and 1970s. But you are using terms like 'fuga' or 'exodus' to talk about escaping from the whole production system. In what way do you think working around these issues will capacitate people to get out and not be working all their lives, having these shitty jobs?

AF: Being a labour agitator is already a better job... [laughter] but sorry if I am joking. The point is, over the last twenty years there have been many ideas of escaping - for example, Deleuze and Guattari. But what we have seen, and Empire is clear about this, is that there is no external dimension to this system nowadays: it is either war or trade. There is no escape.

Although every individual does not define him/herself according to the job they do. I mean, you are an activist, you are a lover, you are a father, you are a moslem, a jew, a stamp collector. But you are not a worker, as in the 20th century. Yet paradoxically you work a lot more than your dad did. That's the point. You work a lot more than a car assembly operator in the 1960's and the 1970's. All the struggles to have paid vacations, to have the weekend off, to have universal healthcare etc are crumbling. Even in the Netherlands, where there is universal healthcare, if you are an undocumented migrant (and there are thousands) you are not going to have it. If you are a mentally diseased person you are going to end up homeless and you are not going to have health coverage. Exclusion is everywhere.

So you are thinking you're cool in this niche, in your social work identity. But in fact, you are doing a favour to system of neoliberal capitalism because you are not confronting power relations on the job where they matter most. And increasingly, given the absence of public social spaces, what is the last public social space left on earth? The work environment is where people

meet, discuss, share, talk about politics, sex, lives, whatever. So we are talking about access but we are there the whole fucking time talking about something else - being elsewhere, with the internet, with our minds, but we are there. And with your cell phone, you are always a call away from your boss, when you are eating, when you are fucking ... and you have got to go because there is a call. This is precarity.

We have to emancipate ourselves from the fiction that we are not subject to class domination. Because we fucking are! What new forms do class domination take? It is not Lenin, it is not Rosa Luxemburg, it is not Trotsky. It is something else that together we are fighting and discovering through our conflict. This is what I regard as autonomy, another good concept...

by Merijn Oudenampsen and Gavin Sullivan

Interview circulated in the lead up to the launch of the Precarity Issue of Greenpepper Magazine during the European Social Forum, London. The launch features a critical debate between activists from different groups across Europe on/around the theme of precarity.

It will be held on 15 October 2004, 3:00 - 5:00pm, at Middlesex University, White Hart Lane Campus, Tottenham. London N17 8HR (exact room to be confirmed).

For more information see www.greenpeppermagazine.org or email contact@greenpeppermagazine.org
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