

Precari-Nati

**The Awkward Question
of Times**

'Time is an invention by men who cannot love'
(Invariance)

1. A brief outline of the notion of working time reduction

The pressure to reduce working time has been central in the class struggle for more than a century. The first collective action of the proletariat at a national level was the English workers' struggle against the capitalists' attempt to extend working time beyond the workers' physical possibilities and to make children work in factories. On this terrain the workers' initiatives and the restructuring of capital have been inextricably entangled in a fierce struggle.

In the advanced capitalist countries, the introduction of the 8-hour working day, i.e. the reduction of legal working time, as well as the introduction of collective agreements and the first forms of welfare assistance, are inextricably linked to the corporative integration of union organizations, which happened in the period between the two world wars, and which was functional to the development of the various national economies.

The development of 'flexible' production and related organizational techniques (just-in-time production, zero-stock etc.), with the consequent labour mobility linked to a relative extension of the distribution and correlated with legal changes allowing for more flexible work contracts, makes the 35 hour week an objective which, managed by the bosses and the unions, can easily serve 'flexibility' - a real 'social myth' of this dying century. We are living in an historical moment where the development of the productive forces imposes an osmosis of working and living time (the continuous search for work dictated by the boom and bust of the market). The same working time is characterized by the alternation of activities offered in terms of hope (waiting lists, re-training, etc.) and proper work activity where it becomes impossible to calculate the costs, time and energy of the worker.

On the other hand, we must recognize the workers' aspirations for further working time reductions. Our view is that workers never struggle for a demand 'because it is right', but because they have the strength to obtain it, even if only by imposing it on reformist structures (at the moment there are various struggles aimed at reducing work pace - currently in some factories in the industrial region of Emilia there are struggles over work pace, in

which the unions have been obliged to follow the spontaneous response of the workers, even to extent of supporting the strikes. See the 'vertenza' of the Terim in Modena, where more than 250 workers went on strike for several weeks). Similarly, there is no such thing as 'anti-reformist objectives in themselves' since their realization is always within the capitalist productive structure - a workers' struggle becomes anti-reformist only when it breaks away effectively from union and party control. As a consequence, we believe, rather than focusing on general political campaigns for working time reduction, it is more important to work on a smaller scale, linking the phenomenon of work refusal to local struggles for a redistribution of work pace, working time and shifts inside the production process. Thus, rather than focus on strikes and big battles (when there are any), we concentrate on the incessant manifestations of micro-conflict, which, even if they contain many contradictions, nevertheless are presently the only visible terrain for the working class struggle against capital and the main terrain in which we are actively involved. (Obviously, we do not see our concern with this micro-conflict as opposed to an interest in strikes and mass struggles....) At the present time, the point at which a natural refusal of work by the individual becomes an articulate direct class organization which breaks from the

capitalist organization of work is difficult to identify. However, we will trace some meaningful connections among some of the current conflicts: union negotiations on work pace, the resistance to the new forms of working time and the continuous shift, which led to the '6 x 6' (i.e., people working six hours a day for six days; in the Bologna district, there is the example of Ducati, the metal and mechanical factory), workers phoning sick on Saturdays and Sundays, and the bloody-mindedness of the new workers provided by temping agencies.

2. A comparison between negotiated working times and actual ones in industry (end of the '60s to the '90s)

In Italy there has been a systematic divergence between negotiated times and actual ones. The aim of this section is to explain the reasons for such a divergence and the role of the different components of actual working time in determining it.[1] Actual working time equals negotiated time, plus overtime, minus absence from work, minus the Cassa integrazione Guadagni (CIG).[2]The addition of these components, calculated per capita, gives the average actual working time.

Our research excluded part-time employment, because it is very small in the big companies.

Beginning of the '70s

At the beginning of the '70s, actual working hours coincided with the negotiated ones, or were even shorter (e.g. 40 weekly hours instead of 44). This can be explained by two factors: the increase in absenteeism (which, before 1969, the year of the 'Hot Autumn', was at the same level as in the mid '80s). The other factor was a decrease in overtime, which at the end of the '60s and beginning of the '70s was again at the same levels as in the second half of the '80s. Both absenteeism and the decrease in overtime were symptoms of a high level of social unrest at that time, which was formalized in a network of 'autonomous class behaviour', that is the capacity of acting independently of parties and unions. We have to stress, however, that these struggles were a response to the restructuring. Often, they were also unable to link great moments of direct class organization between large productive districts and to connect themselves with the multiform network of struggles in the small and medium companies.

The lowest that actual working time reached was in 1975. This coincided with the minimum level of overtime, the maximum level of absenteeism and the first relative maximum of CIG - and of course with a large reduction in negotiated working time.

In order to illustrate that period better, we can briefly analyse the case of Petrolchimico in Maghera, well-known in the whole of Italy for its fierce social battles and autonomous forms of struggle and organizations. By a real reversal of the balance of power, Maghera workers gained a reduction in working time which was conceded informally by the bosses and not legally recognized. In practice, workers were allowed to go home after cleaning the machines. The time for cleaning the machines was agreed to be one hour, while it was actually ten minutes. The local bosses knew perfectly well that they would lose part of the time, but the balance of power was such that they had to concede an actual working time reduction in this form. This situation contained elements of both strength and weakness for the workers. It contained an element of strength: because it manifested the workers' capacity to overcome the legal union constraints and to impose their own pace on the bosses, by a pure class confrontation. But it also contained an element of weakness considering that the

bosses could not make their 'concession' legal without beginning an overt war with Confindustria (the bosses' union). As we have already stressed above, there was a great difference between the social conflict in the large and small companies (the relative enlargement of the latter, or outsourcing in the case the former).

Another factor worth noting in this period is the increase of phenomena such as the double job - which, understood without any illusions, makes this period more contradictory. It is clear that there were particular layers of very militant workers, distanced from others with conservative attitudes and interests - and the autonomous organizations thrived in those layers. But the conditions were not favourable for any unitary self-organization of the most militant layers of the working class. The hypervoluntaristic attempts to centralise these autonomous manifestations were in vane, and sometimes reactionary, denying the presuppositions of workers' autonomy, in order to return to a simpler and avant-gardistic leninist scheme: 'the party orders, the class executes'.

Coming back to this section's subject, between 1972 and 1975 there was a reduction of negotiated working time of about 100 hours, while the overtime, which in the two years 1972 and 1973 was around 70 hours per year, was

less than 45 hours during the whole second half of the '70s.

From 1975 to the '80s

From 1976 to 1984, negotiated working hours remained substantially unchanged, while there were some limited oscillations in actual working hours. There was an oscillation in absenteeism: its relative minimum in 1978 corresponded to the relative maximum in actual working time. On the other hand, a new peak of absenteeism in 1979 corresponded with a new minimum of actual working time. The oscillations of actual working time were also influenced by inversely corresponding but limited fluctuations of the CIG. This also happened between 1979 and 1984, coinciding with the economic cycle and massive processes of rationalization.

Coming to specific cases, we see that between 1979 and 1983 absences from work per capita changed from an average of about 290 hours per year to 150. However, actual working hours stayed at the same medium or low levels as in the previous period, between 1500 and 1550 hours per year. This can be explained, as we saw above, by the introduction of the CIG, which in this period nearly tripled from about 40 hours to almost 140 per year. The highest contribution from the CIG in the whole period

under consideration, however, was in 1984, when it reached a level that it was never to repeat, even during the recession of the beginning of the '90s, at least for industry as a whole.

From 1983 to 1990, actual working hours grew massively, reaching a maximum in the period 1986-89. Actual working hours decreased during the following years, despite the fact that in the same period contractual time had gradually decreased due to the achievement of further time reductions in terms of hours of paid days off allowed per year, which we know would not mean an actual time reduction.

The rise of actual working times corresponded to a decrease of the CIG per capita, from a maximum level in 1984 to the lowest in 1989. It also corresponded to the parallel rise in overtime, which reached a maximum that same year. Both these phenomena were due to the recovery from the consequences of restructuring and of the 'intensive' rationalization that was carried out at the beginning of the '80s; and also to a new upturn in the economy in the period 1985-1990.

Absenteeism diminished drastically and the related contractual reductions of working time per year did not have any practical effect after 1985. These reduction had

been conquered in the form of paid permitted days off of about 70 hours per year per capita.

During the '80s, in Italy there was a sharp fall in absenteeism and strikes, along with a change of mood inside the factories (paralleled by police repression and by redundancies for the most militant elements). The fading of social conflict and the relative pressure on employment due to that first great restructuring and recession has to be linked to the end of the *scala mobile* and also to the huge phase of industrial restructuring of this period, due to a new international cycle of microelectronic innovations. Outsourcing, as well as the expulsion from the great companies had created a nebula of subjects which, in such a climate of atomization and growing social insecurity made it harder to perceive a 'proletarian experience'. Workers found themselves in conflictual competition with each other. This dissolved the old links of solidarity such that the universe of relations that had been inherent to the 'collective struggle' of the industrial labour force was rendered into a desert. The loss of a workers' perspective connected to the dismembering of the industrial cathedrals led to a 'midnight of the theoretical-practical century'.

In this same period, there was also a reduction in the numbers employed caused by a cycle of investments and innovations together with an economic recession[3] This happened in connection with a strong rise in interest rates and a rapid increase in obsolescence due to the new pace of technical progress. This situation created a trend towards a fuller utilization of the machines, with a consequent prolonging of working time, which was obtained by increasing overtime, and clamping down on absenteeism backed by new agreements. The confederative unions maintained their strength, while it was more and more difficult to find a basis for durable autonomous organizations. In fact autonomous behaviour was mostly undefined and it was impossible to give a form to the rare manifestations of conflict.

The '90s

The recession at the beginning of the '90s (industrial production in 1993 with respect to 1990 was down by 5.5%) coincided with a reduction in actual working hours, due to the rise of the CIG and the decrease in overtime. In this period, the central factor was not absenteeism but the CIG. In 1993, in the bigger companies, the CIG reached its historical maximum (143 hours per year per capita). This was not true for industry as a whole, where the CIG was less important than other long-term

alternatives, such as the *mobilità lunga* or early retirement. However, there was an extension of the pace of production rather than of productive times (the 'just-in-time' methods were introduced at this time).

In 1994, for the first time in Italy, the unemployed population ceased to consist mainly of young people seeking work for the first time. This characteristic, which up until then had been considered structural in Italy, had allowed the state to unload the cost of unemployment onto the family.

One of the reasons for adult unemployment was surely that, while during the previous crisis unemployment was partly hidden in the long term CIG (in which the worker still retained an often fictitious status of an employee), after the introduction of the new institution called *indennità di mobilità* the same number of people were now formally unemployed. Some of them were included in the *mobilità lunga* which is used as a bridge to the early retirement. Another reason was the rise of the actual number of unemployed, as a result of the crisis that had hit the small and medium sized companies. The continual introduction of new norms favouring short-term contracts for new employees and a reduction in permanent jobs (which meant early retirement for many) also contributed to this situation. Hours now vary

according to the ultra-flexible needs of the new models of production planning.

It is interesting to notice that, in the big companies, the historical maximum in the CIG does not correspond to a minimum of overtime at all. This latter stayed, in 1993, at rather high levels (the same as in 1987, a very different year from the point of view of the economic cycle). The productive system then seemed to work with more overtime and more CIG, which is the ideal situation for 'just-in-time' production. The relative initiatives of unions and bosses on working time will favour this model.

A few conclusions

As we saw above, the CIG has an important influence on the dynamics of actual working hours, according to the data obtained by research on the big companies carried out by ISTAT.

In the '70s, when the CIG was still at medium-low levels (under 50 hours per year per capita on average), actual working time was changing in accordance with the (net) CIG; that is, when the CIG rose, actual working hours decreased.

Since 1979 there has been a divergence: while the CIG grew until 1988, between 1979 and 1984 there was a fall in absenteeism, due to fears of redundancy, and in the period 1984-88 overtime increased - thus the increase of CIG did not change actual hours worked.

In the period 1990-93, during a period of serious crisis, there was a rise in actual working hours (net CIG), despite a decline in overtime worked. This shows that in a period of crisis the fear of job losses determines the amount of absenteeism, which also happened in the period 1980-84.

The divergence between actual working hours and contractual working hours is the best example of the legal weakness of any proposal on working hours. The 35 hour week, besides being a tool to favour flexibility, is anyway completely 'metaphysical' from a radical point of view, if it is imposed by law. A decrease in working time can only be achieved by a slow and articulate class response. But the possibilities of intervention and action are spread by the present manifestation of social conflict and not by a virtual manifestation of political-union consensus.

People even prefer perhaps to work longer and get higher pay rather than accepting a decrease in working

time connected with the flexibility of production.

However, an awareness of the problem of the rhythms of life is somewhat present in many underground struggles in which the untamed nature of the working class reveals itself.

Even if for workers pay is still obviously the principal objective, we must notice that there is a new 'response' to the pace of work. For example, there are sabotage techniques on the clocks in the machines which count the pieces produced, planned sickness, work to the rule; these latter mean disadvantages for the firm, because of the bureaucratic nature of work organization.

3. Who demands the 35 hours?

In Italy, the principal promoters of the 35 hour week can be categorized into four groups.

(i) The alternative unions (cobas)

The alternative unions, which mainly developed at the beginning of the 90s, were the first to raise the banner for 35 hours. The whole area of grassroots unionism retains a Keynesian objective -they are nostalgic for the welfare state or seek to reclaim a fairer redistribution of social wealth, and follow a reformist political strategy which aims to defend some guarantees for the workers -

but even this scandalizes the leaders of the CGIL. In this area there are comrades who recognize that reducing working hours will be used by the bosses, and that the alternative unions' proposal about working hours is relatively weak, but they think that it is possible to fight a battle against the bosses with this political campaign in that it may serve to stir the workers up. They do not appreciate the evident 'culturalism' of this proposal. Attempts to develop discussion on an issue such as this, in times of social peace, inevitably turn into a pure and sterile propaganda campaign.

(ii) Communist Refoundation and the Government

The PRC, born from sections of the former PCI and from minor groups of the extreme left, introduced the issue of the 35 hour week in order to unify the Party and as a compromise solution offered in exchange for its collaboration with the centre-left government. A 'right-wing' faction recently split from the PRC - the Partito dei Comunisti Italiani (PcCI) (led by the Breznevian Armando Cossutta); this faction is in favour of the Government and participates in it. This split accelerated that process of compromise. In fact, the PRC can vaunt its deal with the government which 'gave the 35 hour week to the Italian workers'; while the new Party can legitimately

claim they are implementing the 35 hour project and accuse the PRC of childishness and an inability to govern.

(iii) The official unions

The official unions were initially bypassed by Communist Refoundation which played a union role. The Italian official unions, GCIL, CISL, UIL (which, although huge, have more pensioners than active workers in their memberships) have forced the government to redefine an agreement on 'working-time reduction' so that they would appear as centrally involved. Their position coincided with the worries of Confindustria and that they have given the same answers: a halt to the law on 35 hours, redefinition of working times, and negotiations at the level of individual companies, to ensure that the unions together with the bosses to determine decisions concerning productivity levels.

(iv) The bosses

At the beginning, Confindustria fought against any suggestion for working time reductions and denied the usefulness of legislation to enforce it, but it looked more favourably at the possibility of negotiations in individual companies. We must stress that the large and medium-large companies changed their minds dramatically when the government and the unions approved a regulation

for the reduction of working hours, but the bosses of the smallest enterprises were more skeptical about the new working hours legislation, because it would raise the competitiveness of the largest companies in relation to the smallest. Also the introduction of new forms of work under short-term contracts together with the new norms that regulate the average working hours favour both the large and the small companies - the latter because they could legalize their illegal workers. Better and more efficient production will be revealed as an attack against the workers, under the false cover of profit figures and of 'time freedom' for the employees.

4. The metal and mechanical industry agreement - the testing field

We now discuss the agreement with the metal and mechanical workers because we think this is the traditional testing field for the bosses to attack workers' conditions and because this agreement is evaluated and negotiated with the two 'strongest' sections of the workers' movement: the chemical and metal and mechanical workers.

The proposal presented by the confederative unions (CGL, CISL, UIL) for the renewal of the metal and

mechanical workers' agreement, and for the 'reduction of working hours' (in the form proposed by them) is a pretext for a wage reduction and a re-organization of work which would lead to an increase of productivity for the companies through a more intense and rational use of machines and work. Under the pretext of controlling unemployment, they try to apply the paradigm, propagated as an indisputable truth, that unemployment is created by the increase of labour productivity due to technological development; a reduction of working time is then necessary in order to control the 'present' capitalist system's tendency to create unemployment. The weekly hours 'reduction', introduced through laws on overtime, laws on the 35 hours and the various company agreements, (particularly the metal and mechanical workers' agreement), amounts only to the possibility for the bosses to extend and shrink at will the weekly working hours.

In Italy the combination of overtime and of Cassa Integrazione Guadagni (CIG) has been the 'main instrument for planning production'. In fact a combination of the CIG and overtime has been used by the bosses in order to make someone work 'too much' and some others work 'too little'. With the chemical workers' contract and with the new metal and

mechanical workers' contract, this principle remains intact. Rather, new weapons are offered to the bosses while leaving the 150-200 individual hours of maximum overtime unchanged from the previous agreements. On the top of this, the *Banca Ore* is introduced.

The regulation introduced by the law on overtime (law no. 409-98 conversione del DL 335-1998) is even more to the advantage of the bosses. It allows them to impose 250 hours of overtime per year. This corresponds to 5.2 hours per week, which becomes 6.6 hours per week if we consider that the law imposes a limit of 80 hours every three months. Obviously, the weekly hours above are only considered on average - in practice there are no weekly limits. This means that bosses could even ask workers to work longer than 45 hours a week, just by giving notice of it to the inspectorate services of the *Ministero del Lavoro* within 24 hours before the overtime is due to start.

One novelty is the *Banca Ore* (Hour Bank), which allows companies to organize timetables according to the needs of the boss and of the market, and it is included in the metal and mechanical workers' agreement. The *Banca Ore* is a system that calculates the weekly overtime. According to the agreement brokered by the CGIL, CISL,

UIL on behalf of the metal and mechanical workers, 'the workers will have to choose, within the next three-month term, whether they want to be paid for the overtime in terms of money or *rest*'. This allows the companies to reduce their staff, because they will use overtime extensively when the market requires it (imposing faster pace and higher exploitation), and they will be able to ask their workers to stay at home when production needs are less. On this point, we have to note that overtime has been one of the main ways of getting pay rises. Without overtime, pay is normally insufficient and this explains why an increase in overtime is usually accepted without any resistance by the workers, or is even welcomed. If they accept a payment *in terms of rest*, the workers will have an actual pay decrease, because they will not be paid for the overtime. Overtime is today paid at 25%-50% on top of the normal hourly pay. Thus the *Banca Ore*, disguised as a first step towards working time reduction, means that the workers work overtime without being paid for overtime rates.

Agreement by agreement, wages have been reduced more and more. The pay rise allowed for in the unions' proposal is very low - only 80 thousand lire for the 4th level. The proposal also weakens the link between wages and pensions, because now pensions will be evaluated

independently from basic pay. Thus, pay rises will no longer determine eventual pensions entitlements.

Among the company agreements already approved, those which introduce some form of working time reduction are also those which impose the longest shifts and Saturday working, connected with restructuring implemented by the unions together with the bosses. In the province of Bologna, some examples of company agreements which reduce the hours per week and introduce shifts are: the GIRMAC, the COM, the GS and the BEGHELLI, whose timetable is distributed across three shifts with average week time of 31 hours. Instead, in Bonfiglioli, Arco, Elettromeccanica Appennino and Sorvigno there are four shifts each of less than 30 hours weekly working time.

The same law on the 35 hours will only impose higher taxes for those companies with more than 15 employees that have not adopted the 35 hours by the year 2001, and provides incentives to companies that will implement it (government and bosses may later decide to prolong the deadline beyond 2001, or not apply this system of incentives-and-taxations to some sectors, or invalidate it altogether.) This is coherent with the trend towards decreasing taxation for businesses and increasing taxation for everybody else.

5. Final remarks

In the present period we identify three key moments for redefining a class behaviour related to the changes in production and agreements.

(i) The shifts, the labour mobility, the emergence of *distretti di lavoro*, spread around all Italy in a complex network and the introduction of a massive legislative body aimed at a systematic reduction of the number of permanent jobs in favour of short term forms of employment, all this makes unionized forms of struggle based on frontal attacks ineffective. The recent mobilization of the metal and mechanical sector around their contract is an example of this. In fact the 'large' minority of workers with short-term contracts has been left outside, completely 'ignored' by the unions, which are unable to understand the problems of this new component.

The forms of action and struggle will become for itself 'invisible' and 'quick'. The challenge today is to create militant workers participation (which should not be a racket or spectacular) that could find effective tools even within their extreme mobility and consistence.

The dynamics of autonomous action are connected, for us, to a complex dialectic of objective causes and subjective will. The expression of a critical point of view - the ability of relating any analysis to the creation of a 'community of intent' which can then be socialized, and, in parallel, the ability to give 'form' and practical 'force' to it, for every worker - faces a lack of structures, even if they are only formally representative. The need for struggle becomes, in this sense, more and more directly a need of self-organization and self-activity.

(ii) Workers, particularly the younger ones who enter production, are hired with short-term contracts, where the guarantees of a career and a presence in the productive area are feeble. There is a change in age profile in workplaces, early retirements are favoured for workers with permanent positions in order to increase the relative number of workers with short-term contracts (the old *working class* is sent to the breaker's yard). This leads to two consequences. One is the extreme disaffection with the job and, considering the lack of guarantees about the future, a greater 'arrogance' among workers. The second consequence is inevitably negative, and it is the Damocles' sword that hangs over short-term workers, in relation to the extension of their contract. (In the case of workers in temping agencies,

workers' behaviour is put on file and the most elementary rights that are normally 'guaranteed' to more permanent workers are pulverized.[4]

(iii) At this moment, especially with the new norms on working time, there is going to be a greater 'perception' of productive peaks, and thus the moments when bosses can be most damaged on the productive level. This can allow workers more opportunities to blackmail their bosses. However, the government and the unions are more interested in regulating conflicts and strikes, and they will make these forms of struggle illegal (outside the unions). If this, from an autonomist point of view, makes workers' actions freer, because they will find themselves, clearly and directly, against the government and union structure, on the other hand it will increase bosses' and government repression against the workers in struggle.

[1] For this comparison we used data taken from official statistics and from documents of the metal and mechanical workers' unions. We will limit ourselves to the big companies, both because we had a large quantity of data, and because this sector is traditionally seen as the 'vanguard' of the social movement.

[2] The CIG is a typical instrument of the Italian Welfare State. In cases considered by the law, e.g. forza maggiore, market crisis and company restructuring, the bosses can agree with the unions on a partial or total period of suspension from work 'on zero working time'. During this period, the worker gets 80% of his previous salary, paid by the CIG and national insurance. This allows the bosses to face temporary reductions in production thanks to an immediate financial recovery. If the suspension is followed by a 'collective redundancy', the CIG becomes an actual 'unemployment benefit', with all the consequences of social quiescence connected with this kind of social policies.

[3] 'Redundancies, the origin of the industrial reserve army, are not caused by the technical factor of the introduction of machines, but are due to insufficient valorisation. Workers are made redundant not because they are replaced by machines, but because at a certain level in capital accumulation profits become too small and so they get too few returns.' (H. Grossman, *La Legge dell'Accumulazione e del Crollo del Sistema Capitalistico*.)

[4] We understand the process of casualization of the work force as a constant fact, specific to the present social phase. However, we are aware of the variants of capitalistic planning with respect to the modification of

the productive network achieved by decentralizing or concentrating production.