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# Marx and Makhno Meet McDonald's

By Loren Goldner

What does 'precarious' struggle look like in practice? Loren Goldner gives this account of casualised workers in Paris who, combining union and extra-union, legal and illegal tactics, recently won several strikes and honourably lost another

Over the last several years, a revolving network of militants in Paris, France, have developed a strategy and tactics for winning strikes by marginal, low-paid, outsourced and immigrant workers against international chains, in situations where the strikers are often ignored by unions to which they nominally belong, or are actually obstructed by them.

While some of these methods benefit from aspects of French labour law that are more favourable to strikers than one finds in the backward U.S. of A, the overall strategy can certainly find its uses in other countries.

The group, which calls itself simply Collectif de Solidarite (Solidarity Collective) slowly emerged as a network from the ferment and upswing in struggle following the 1995 near-general strike in France over pension 'reform'. Their composition ranges from casualised workers to people with steady jobs, people who want to fight and who see no perspective for doing so within a traditional union framework. Experience taught them that initially isolated strikes of marginal workers employed by big chains, in the worst possible conditions, can win if they are turned into city-wide actions by militants from 'outside' the workplace (but hardly 'outside' the increasingly downsized and outsourced work force), and (equally important), militants who are not members of vanguard groups coming mainly to fish in troubled waters for their own recruitment. The strategy could not be farther from the timid 'corporate campaigns' as developed by the likes of Ray Rogers, politely asking stockholders to sympathise with workers, but instead involve direct action to shut down businesses with a mixture of legal and 'extra-legal' (in the grey area between legality and illegality) tactics. The network also makes use, where and when it can, of better-known methods of creating embarrassing publicity for well-known corporate logos.

The current wave of activity took off in 2002 in a victory for a McDonald's strike in the heart of Paris. Five employees were arbitrarily fired, accused of stealing from the cash register. A strike of 115 days ensued, with regular support actions from other McDonald's and fast food restaurants around Paris. In this strike, one organiser from the restaurant department of the largest French union, the C.G.T. (Confederation Generale du Travail), sensing an opportunity for some publicity, did help the strikers (who were members of the C.G.T.), against the indifference or hostility of the rest of the union.

But the actions of the Solidarity Collective were indispensable in keeping up picket lines, turning away customers and explaining the strike to them, and occasionally shutting down other McDonald's locations around Paris. After nearly four months, McDonald's management caved, rehired the fired workers, and granted other concessions.

The committee then turned its attention to a struggle that became its greatest success to date, the 10-month strike of African immigrant maids at ACCOR, the third-ranking multinational hotel chain.

The Senegalese and Malian women involved were often barely literate, spoke little or no French, had never been informed of what rights they had under French labour law, and were subjected to killing piece rates based on the number of rooms cleaned. Further, their jobs were outsourced to a cleaning company, Arcade, with completely arbitrary scheduling based on the amount of work available from

week to week. Most of the women developed work-related physical conditions after a couple of years on the job, which were not recognised as workplace injuries. They did belong to the small alternative union SUD (Solidarity-Unity-Democracy), but even this union mainly walked away from the strike early on.

In spite of these obstacles, the Solidarity Collective was able to keep the strike alive with unceasing 'pin-prick' tactics, disrupting hotel lobbies with leafleting twice a week, explaining the strike to hotel guests and putting pressure on customers and other hotel employees to support the strike; these and other highly visible interventions placed ACCOR and Arcade management on the defensive. Their main object was a (successful) attempt to disrupt the smooth impersonal functioning of the hotels and to expose the outrageous conditions of the maids to public view. As in the McDonald's strike, the Solidarity Collective provided the decisive forces that on occasion kept the strike alive even when most of the strikers were demoralised and close to giving up, while always being careful not to substitute themselves for the strikers. Benefit concerts made the strike more widely known and raised money. After 10 months, management again caved, most importantly on the crucial issue of piece rates, the pressures of which were significantly reduced. Further concessions were made in the introduction of regular scheduling, rehiring of fired strikers, and a payment of 35% of wages for the time struck. The only concession made by the strikers was an agreement not to make the contract public, so that it could not be used as a guideline in other situations. This did not, however, prevent the terms of the settlement from becoming widely known in the militant milieu. On the other hand, ACCOR was able to play on the secrecy of the agreement to make its application as difficult as possible, leaving enforcement in the dubious hands of the very union (SUD) that involved itself in the strike only at the end, to claim credit for the victory to which it had contributed next to nothing.

The experience of this strike in turn set the stage for further involvement in a renewed strike at MacDonal'd's in Paris. As soon as management thought they could get away with it, they moved to fire and harass employees involved in the original strike. As a result, the struggle erupted anew in early March 2003.

What follows is a description of a few days' work by the Solidarity Collective in early May 2003. It attempts to convey the culture of direct action that is at the centre of its perspective, in which I was able to participate through a number of months.

Following the traditional march of an estimated 300,000 people in Paris on a not particularly spirited May Day, the Solidarity Collective managed to assemble 100 people for direct action against Frog Pub, a British chain with four restaurants in Paris, where 28 Tamil (Sri Lankan) kitchen employees had been on strike since mid-April. The group invaded the restaurant, confronted the manager and attempted to persuade the customers to leave.

On May 3, 30-40 members of the Solidarity Collective held a meeting in the occupied McDonald's restaurant in the Strasbourg St-Denis area of downtown Paris. We then marched to the nearest Frog restaurant about 10 minutes away. The strike of Tamil workers had begun in reaction against the firing of a Tamil assistant manager but that question was quickly overshadowed by demands over outrageous working and sanitary conditions and numerous violations of labour law. The boss assigned people their vacation time when it suited him; the dishwashers had to work with cold water; there was no extra pay for overtime; people getting off at 1 AM had to be back at 8 AM (whereas legally there are supposed to be at least 11 hours between shifts). The Frog manager had told one Tamil worker: 'I'm pleased with your work. A European wouldn't do it for even an hour.'

The pleasure of participation was heightened because a fair number of the Frog clientele were arrogant yuppies, many of them Brits, as was the manager quoted above, who became apoplectic. On this second intervention, the Solidarity Collective did not fool around. Here a certain 'strike culture' specific to France came into play, one not easily transposable to American conditions. People marched into the pub and immediately one spokesman started shouting through a bullhorn; within minutes the main door was blocked and covered by a 15-foot tape with strike slogans in 10 languages and a detailed leaflet in French and in English.

Then the police showed up and a bizarre ballet began. (One can only imagine the response of the NYPD or the San Francisco TAC Squad in a comparable situation.) They treated the strikers and strike supporters with kid gloves (it was generally assumed they were under orders to do so, in order to avoid episodes creating bad publicity for the right-wing Chirac government, just then gearing up for an attack on public sector workers), huddling with the strike supporters over a legal restraining order saying that pickets could do this, but not that, etc. We could block the main entrance, but not be inside persuading the customers to leave, and so forth. Periodically one of the strikers set off a bullhorn that sounded like a police siren, adding to the generally unravelling atmosphere.

Then we marched to another MacDonald's that was also on strike. It was packed but it was shut down in about five minutes by the same tactics. We were turning people away at the door telling them the place was closed and 90% left immediately. It was particularly interesting to see lots of scruffy 'hip hop' types taking note of the strike.

At 6:30 PM the same day, a second action was undertaken at another Frog location in the very upscale Saint-Germain-des-Pres neighbourhood, on a little side street. For all the complications that later emerged between the strikers and the CNT (Confederation Nationale du Travail), the anarcho-syndicalist union they had joined, it was initially an upper to turn the corner and see the Tamil pickets with their red and black banners CNT banners, somehow symbolic of a real internationalism. Most of the Tamils barely spoke French and at times it was difficult to tell (through the lone interpreter) what they made of all the factional politics swirling around them, not to mention (as it later turned out) their own factional politics (cf. below) Nonetheless, as union members in the anarcho-syndicalist CNT, they were protected by all kinds of labour laws that don't exist or are a dead letter in the U.S.: they couldn't be fired for striking, they couldn't be permanently replaced by scabs (but could be replaced by temps during the strike itself), and if they returned to work they would be protected by their open-ended contract. Nevertheless, public support for the strike was impaired by a widespread overestimation of the efficacy of these laws, and an underestimation of the need for direct action to tip the balance of forces.

The locale was hardly a 'proletarian' scene, with mainly upscale foreign tourists and French bourgeois passing by. The Solidarity Collective managed to get a fair number not to cross the picket line, and some of us were explaining the strike to people in English, French, German and Spanish. With an old shoe box, we started collecting money and raised about 30 euros (\$35) in 2 hours. This is a great crash course in sociology, seeing who responds and who doesn't. It was also interesting because even people who were obviously indifferent or hostile were polite. I imagined similar types in the U.S. telling me they were damn well going to eat where they pleased. That said, it must be pointed out that the specific climate leading up to the imminent showdown over public sector pensions in May-June 2003, definitely increased sympathy for the strike among passers-by and potential patrons.

The Solidarity Collective has developed these tactics in 5-6 strikes of the most exploited immigrant and young French workers in the Paris region and the tactics often work. The collective is made up of a Paris-wide network of militants who see the need to go beyond workplace-organising; the decisive elements in winning such strikes are 30-40 people from outside the workplace who give, or try to give

the strikers the forces they need for all the aspects of waging a strike that gets into trouble, above all through isolation. At the same time it's not 'Leninist' in that no one is there to recruit people to an organisation. The Collective aims to put the strikers in charge of their own struggle in a way that neither a union nor a typical leftist group does. It has as its sole aim the victory of the strike and the deepening of the 'flying picket' network available for the next battle.

What kind of reservations can be articulated about the kind of roving tactics of the strike support group? They obviously don't solve 'all' problems, and the Collective itself recognises that its ability to turn away customers at the door made for the special vulnerability of the locales in which they were successful. The Collective is the first to recognise that far greater numbers would be necessary to stop a plant closing or to paralyze a military machine.

But these tactics do create something like a small-scale version of the Toledo Auto-Lite strike (1934), in which other members of the precarious labour force turn isolated losing strikes of the most downtrodden (immigrant) workers into something that really hurts management, both in the pocketbook and in terms of their reputation. It responds at least partially to the great success of management in atomising resistance at the 'point of production' by having a rapid turnover of teenagers, etc. It turns the management success of the last 20 years on its head; the latter's intent was to create a precarious constantly recycled temporary work force that would never be around long enough to organise at the work place, and here is that same work force showing up 'outside' the work place to shut down business and enforce conditions for some of their number. Today's strikers will be tomorrow's pickets at other sites, or they will be strikers at other sites. Recycling thus cuts both ways by downsizing but also in freeing groups of workers from corporatist attachment to lifetime jobs and making them into potentially roving pickets supporting necessarily roving workers. Further, it solves the problem of union indifference or obstruction; it uses unions where possible for legal protection but circumvents unions when they ignore, or worse, obstruct a strike for some instrumental end of their own. It tells unions to put up or shut up, and when, as in most cases, they do the latter, it uses a mixture of legal and illegal tactics which unions (at least in the U.S.) would never dare attempt. It circumvents the Labour Notes-type strategy of ingratiating oneself with the left wing bureaucrats or of becoming left-wing bureaucrats; the Committee takes the initiative while not waiting for the unions to do so. In a comparable situation in the U.S., a typical union would show up, set up its own skeleton picket line, tell 'outsiders' the matter was none of their business, and honour whatever injunction some judge hands down. Finally, unlike various front organisations set up in the past, Solidarity Collective people are NOT a vanguard group fishing for members in troubled waters; they come as equals in the recycled labour market.

Beginning in May, 2003, the Frog Pub strike began to be transformed by the large public sector strikes that began in March and continued until the end of June. For weeks, Paris saw one (mainly controlled) mass demonstration after another. The main issues (which can only be dealt with in the most summary way here) were the government's (ultimately successful) attempt to increase the work requirement for full retirement benefits for public employees to the 37 years already in effect for the private sector, and to attack teachers with a series of educational 'reforms' aiming at large-scale layoffs of non-academic personnel and the reorganisation of curriculum in accordance with the 'local' job market.

The Frog strikers, many of whom were cooks by profession, hit upon the idea of selling drinks and sandwiches to the passing demonstrators from strategically-located sites along the demo route, combined with the aggressive publicity for the strike and fund-raising which the Solidarity Committee was conducting in every demo already. This tactic netted the strike fund a much-needed boost, and just as importantly made the strike against the 'patrons negriers' (slave-driving bosses) known on a scale unimaginable in its initial phase.

At the same time, it must be said that the series of mass demonstrations, mass meetings and occasional confrontations with the police totally dwarfed the forces of the Solidarity Collective, and created a situation in which the traditional leftist vanguards, above all Lutte Ouvriere, could successfully carry out their systematic takeover and manipulation of the mass assemblies. In spite of numerous independent rank-and-file initiatives, the unions and the leftist groups ultimately were able to do their work of demobilisation well.

Even before the mass movements faded away, however, several factors began to weigh on the Frog pub strike, and, in contrast to the successes of the initial Macdonald's strike and of the African maids against ACCOR and Arcade, set the stage for a defeat, one for which, however, Frog management paid a steep price on several fronts.

The first unfavourable turn of events was an internal crisis of the CNT that directly undermined the Frog strike. Little enough is known outside the union about this internal crisis, which unconsciously turned the strike into a factional football among CNT mini-bureaucrats, except that at its culmination it led to the summary replacement of the head of the CNT's restaurant section. Instead of largely ignoring the strike (as the CGT, with one notable exception, had done with Macdonald's) or walking away and then claiming responsibility for the victory at the end (as SUD had done with the African maids' strike), the CNT initially ran the strike with little attempt to involve the strikers, presenting themselves as 'professionals' who would make short shrift of Frog management in a few weeks.<sup>2</sup> The upshot of this method, when this bravado was revealed for the empty pretension it was, led the strikers to see as their only reliable allies the Solidarity Collective, which latter the CNT was treating as nothing but an organisational rival, projecting their own gate-receipt mentality onto the Collective's intentions. In the final months of the strike, only a handful of CNT militants continued to work seriously with the strikers and the Solidarity Committee.

Taking a similar destructive toll was the discovery, in mid-summer, that 7 of the strikers were members of the nationalist Tamil Tigers. One of the two Frog Pub managers had managed to contact the Tigers, who constitute a sort of shadow government for the 15,000 Tamils living in the Paris region, much as the North African Islamic fundamentalist groups attempt to impose themselves on the North African population in France. Through whatever deal or payoff, the Tamil Tigers not only pulled their own members out of the strike but threatened the life of one of the strikers who refused to give up.

By mid-summer, the public sector and teachers' strikes had largely been defeated, except for the ongoing actions of the intermittents du spectacle<sup>3</sup> that continued sporadically into the fall.

Nonetheless, the work of the remaining 7 strikers and of the Solidarity Collective began to bite, particularly at the largest Frog pub at Bercy, whose clientele had seriously diminished in sympathy with the strike, a situation prevailing well into the fall.

As a result, in spite of the fadeout of the CNT and the 'intervention' of the Tamil Tigers, the Frog managers were still keen to settle. Finally, in October 2003, the remaining strikers accepted a lump sum payment of 5000 euros each in exchange for being laid off (which would qualify them for further unemployment benefits).

This article, in sum, has as its intent making these tactics and these successes and failures known to militants outside France. Nor should it be misunderstood as any kind of triumphalism. As indicated, Collective members are acutely aware of what they can and cannot do with their small numbers, and of the specific vulnerabilities of the types of employers where their tactics have succeeded. Further, in the wake of these struggles, management has returned to the offensive. Only a year after their first defeat, as recounted, Macdonald's attempted another provocation and took a long second strike; the ACCOR hotel chain is harassing the maids who struck, firing one of the most militant and visible militants, and

a new campaign by the Collective is underway. From other quarters of defenders of elements of the status quo, some leftist groups have had the effrontery to accuse the Collective of manipulating the strikers, whereas a refusal of substitutionism has always been one of its distinguishing features.

Transposing these tactics to U.S. conditions will obviously have to take account of the significantly rougher terrain they will confront. But I am aware of no other approach, in confronting the employer offensive now underway for more than three decades that has had anything like the Solidarity Collective's small, but still impressive successes.

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank Nicole The and G. Soriano, whose camaraderie in extended discussions during the events of 2003, made this article possible. It further benefited from a close reading and criticisms by Nicole The. Also cf. Note 2 below.

<sup>2</sup> For readers with a knowledge of French, the article of G. Soriano 'L'expérience des collectifs de solidarité parisiens: une nouvelle étape', in *La Question Sociale* (No. 1, 2004) offers a much more detailed analysis of the Frog strike, and of all the machinations of the CNT. This publication can be contacted at [laquestionsociale@hotmail.com](mailto:laquestionsociale@hotmail.com).

<sup>3</sup> The 'intermittents du spectacle' were culture workers in the arts and media who, until 2003, who eligible for minimally-livable unemployment benefits between jobs. The government's overall attack on public sector pension rights and teachers also eliminated this programme, though the 'intermittents' continued their struggle for months after the other strikes had folded. For an overall analysis of the strike movement of 2003 in France, cf. the *Echanges et Mouvement* pamphlet *Pour une compréhension critique du mouvement du printemps 2003* (September 2004). BP 241, 75866 Paris, Cedex 18, France.

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