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Mayday had become like a funeral

Interview with Alex Foti

Mark Malone & James Redmond

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carious workers need a better deal. The centre left party will put on its material.

So, in terms of discourse we have opened a debate. Going to chainworkers, which is no longer my organisation, They've focussed on grassroots organising with local successes but not pushing the pendulum in the other direction by reversing the course of stuff.

It's like the problem of the anti-globalisation movement, they hate any kind of organisation. And so, you don't want to be a union, you don't want to be a party, but since you are an organisation, neither nor, you are not effective, in the end you end up pressuring the reformist left, the parliamentary left, the mainstream unions, the radical unions, it doesn't matter to do something. So it works in that way. You create public opinion, that creates a sentiment for improving legislation, subsidies, conditions, and stuff.

It's like the ideology of the left is not so popular, but it is still relevant in many ways for the lives of people. So rather start from a description of social reality and outline radical forms of organising and communication can get you far. That is our experience. The fact that a word like precarity, a latin word gets appropriated in English, that doesn't happen every often means that there is a wide spread condition starting from France, Italy and Spain and then to the rest of Northern Europe.

Of the popularity? Well, it was played out to be popular in this sense, the parade brings to mind the gay parade, the love parade, these hedonistic libertarian ways of partying too, that was popular with the young generation across Europe, with young ravers and club goers. So the format works. I don't know if I can be pragmatic about it. So it is popular in that way.

This way of organising is now being replicated in other European countries. For instance in Belgium they have Public Precaire which is an anonymous collective identity that organises all the people that do the census, the interviewers. In Berlin and Hamburg the workers that work at cultural festivals, that are paid pretty shit, they use the carnivalesque invention to organise over certain issues. That's how I see...

MM: *Do you find that the processes of organising the Mayday's themselves, they lead through that networking process they lead to more stable forms of working together with smaller groups of precarious workers and beyond to larger networks?*

After 2005 there has been a retrenchment into local networking where as before it seemed like a national network would emerge of a syndicate of precarious temps. Now its mostly done at the regional level, so I don't know, if you don't think big things don't happen big.

NATIONAL NETWORKS

JR: *So the attempts at a national network or a syndicate didn't come into fruition, does that not suggest that the model doesn't provide a stable base for organising workers or that people come into contact with the movement when they are in need of something? Or are you finding that precarious workers maybe carry a class counter culture from work place to work place or do they just pass through with transience?*

In 2001 we were among the few ones saying precarity is the emerging European social question. And years afterwards, we were right in our prediction, in the sense that the social debate in Italy and in Europe is about this. There is a new green paper on social security and labour flexibility that tries to address, of course from the bosses side, these problems. The electoral campaigns in Italy have already twice been played on this pre-

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But what was cool, what really made it popular was the prayer card, with the prayer on the back. One guy wrote a prayer and it became really popular. For the drawing, one of the things that prompted me to start chain workers was Ad-busters, it had an issue with the art by Chris Wood. This guy, he specialises in portraying fastfood workers in holy positions and stuff. The mysticism and the mystification of modern consumption!

So it all came together and I think more than 100,000 praying cards were handed out and to this day if the equivalent of the Irish Times in Italy wants to talk about precarious workers, say a new law discriminates against them, you are sure that San Precario will appear. It's the logo!

MAKING CONTACT WITH WORKERS

MM: To follow that on, in the actual nuts and bolts of making direct contact with small groups of precarious workers, obviously the form of communication helped but what other processes did you move from ideas to actually start to organise in those spaces?

Okay, usually it is done this way, a few workers of a certain industry like the retail sector or call centres come to us either during demos or to San Precario days or points and signal a situation of insatiability, alarm or lay offs. So somethings got to be done, typically they've gone to main stream unions and have had no satisfactory replies. So a slow process of self organisation begins at which you start having them at meetings, little handing out of flyers and stuff, organising little wild cat strikes at the start or end of the day seizing existing situations of unease to organise in the workplaces. And sometimes to run in the work place delegate elections.

But it was a bit of a snow ball, I mean Mayday was the glue on to which a lot of stuff was attached. Without it a lot of people would not have come to us.

fluenced by Negri and libertarian influences but other people are more communist in orientation, some are straight forward anarchists, some are there because it is a radically democratic thing to do and they don't attach any importance beyond that, it's syndicalist if you wish.

It's not the 90's, the late 00's require a new way of fighting capitalist governance. So in the larger context, May Day is part of this, finding new ways of fighting capitalism that are sophisticated and have the ideological forms and communicative forms that don't belong to the 20th century. As Marx said, the dead weight of past generations can some times exert on living ones.

THE DESIGN PHILOSOPHY

JR: *Just one more question on that design philosophy, you know San Precario? It reminds me of Mistero Buffo by Dario Fo. How much thought and effort was placed into your design concepts?*

Well, we needed a date for like a general strike in which we were mobilising with militant unions and precarious workers, and there was like this idea of having a strike at the end of the month at a given day, so like we should call it a day, the day of San Precario. In the assembly we thought it was kind of weird. So we said, if we really want this saint we should create a day for it once a year. Like every saint. So I proposed it be the 29th of February, you know the leap year, intermittent labour, intermittent saint – once every four years San Precario appears!

So, to protest against Sunday work we picketed and had the first statue of San Precario in a super market in Milan that had just opened. There were artists from all over Lombardy and so that was the day, the 29th of February 2004 that marked the birth of the patron saint of precarious people.

In August of 2008, Italian media activist Alex Foti visited Dublin. In the middle years of this decade, Alex Foti became known across activist circles for involvement in the Euromayday Parades. In a special themed issue of Green Pepper, Foti and the Chain Workers Collective sketched a very attractive understanding of the work discipline of contemporary capitalism. In their understanding, society had found itself in a situation of profound disjuncture with our working pasts – life today was defined by contingent employment rather than the traditional job for life.

Working through Chainworkers, Foti and others developed the Euro Mayday Parade as an opportunity for this sentiment pool to express itself in European cities, along the way they developed a graphical tool set and pioneered a new vision of a combatative class movement that drew huge attention to the question of workers marginalised from the traditional unions.

THE ORIGINS OF EURO MAYDAY

Mark Malone: *Maybe give us a bit of background on Euromayday, where it came from and an idea of how it moved from theory to practice and out onto the streets?*

Alex Foti: Euromayday started out of Chainworkers, a collective that merged labour activism with media activism. They started agitating in the year 2000, inspired by the movement of Seattle and No Logo by Naomi Klein. So we put up a site and we decided to reclaim the original anarcho-syndicalist meaning of Mayday. The meaning it had before World War 1 basically. When it was a day of revolutionary activity and celebration, of anti-capitalist celebration.

So we did this parade in 2001 and we invited the McStrikers and Pizza Hut strikers to Paris to participate. And we ended up with 5,000 people shouting “*tous ensemble contre la precaritie.*” So this rallying cry against precarity, against flexploita-

tion, the persecution and discrimination of young migrants and migrants in general, were at the core of the mobilisation. Of course, being a parade there was a lot of subvertising involved. Then through p2p media, lots of creative icons and communication vehicles and games were produced. These helped popularise the ideas behind it, and helped its popularity.

Every year the most militant labour gang or crew gets the honour of opening the parade. And this year, it was immigrant groups from all over Northern Italy that got that honour and they organised a significant portion of the parade.

IMMIGRANT GROUPS

JR: You mention that you've quite recently come into contact with immigrant groups, I understand there were significant immigration struggles in Italy during the 1990's, what forms of organisation are they using now?

Mostly, it's self organised groups or associations of Italians and migrants that either belong to the left or to the autonomists. And also there are many in the service and agricultural sectors, they are the delegates of the unions, either mainstream or radical unions, but that is not important. This is basically what is organised in Italy in terms of immigrants.

It must be said that the anti-globalisation movement supported the struggles of migrants as they appeared, with the focus being on detention centres. To shut down detention centres and stop deportations and especially, the massacre that takes place in the Mediterranean waters between Sicily and Libya daily for years now. The indifferent Italian authorities sometimes let them sink and drown to get rid of the problem.

In my own evaluation, and I think it is shared widely enough, the movement failed to organise the young immigrants on the ground in the cities. Several of the social centres are of mixed ethnicity and are organising Latin American students, Chinese

to build community you have to build it, from work place to workplace, but in public social spaces within the city that are outside work. You build community outside work or through blogging. Or through spaces where people can meet or sections of the city where the alternatives hang out and informally share information.

That's why I agree with this critique, but since I don't think anything can be done to go back to huge numbers of workers working in the Krups plant or the FIAT factories overnight – my take is to use those places where there is a stronger socialisation of work, like in cleaning services, call centres, super markets and malls – where there is a huge concentration of post-industrial work and use those because they are highly public to disrupt the flows.

But the real trust of this change comes from as you said the peer to peer organising, the hegemony of immaterial labour in theoretical terms. The bet, the political bet is to have the hackers helping the cleaning ladies. I mean I don't know if this is funny or not as a simple aphorism so to speak in, in order to express what we are trying to do, some times it works.

CREATING SPACES FOR SOLIDARITY

JR: *You speak of post-Fordism and touch on ideas such as “the social factory” and what appears in the English speaking world as theoretical academic constructs. But one thing you have succeeded in doing is crystallising these concepts into political and cultural initiatives that have created spaces for solidarity. How did that take place?*

Our relative success was to develop media along the lines of the alternative free press you find in the street, we employed the language of pop and even MTV but transmitted anarchist and autonomist messages. I mean the whole May Day network has a pretty large ideological variety in the sense that I am in-

and so forth was enhanced. So flexi-fight was a way to advocate a new welfare state for the era of labour flexibility.

And so, an effort has been made with other autonomous spaces and unions from other European cities to synthesise a common platform of demands. Of course, the struggle in France in 2006, in which a whole generation of students and young workers managed to block the new law by the French government which would have effectively allowed the employer to pay young people less than other people was an important moment.

Another important moment was the victory of the young students and workers in terms of rent subsidies that was a huge struggle also, and the limitation of the recourse to short term contracts. Which is also a huge European problem, temp contracts with of course no welfare rights, no labour representation and of course, they are fireable at will and so forth.

So, we tried to invent new slogans, new catchy slogans, some times they worked, others were half theorised, we liked the sound of it. You know it was heady times. Everything was happening really fast in 2003 and 2004! Everything exploded!

SOCIAL POWER

JR: A lot of people were paying attention to the precarity debates, especially as a lot of it was seen as giving to the experiences of young people in work who find themselves unable to relate to older traditions of class struggle or unionism. But a critique a lot of people had was that precarious workers don't really exercise any social power, they are not strategically located at the means of production, apart from an inherent peer to peer ability to communicate. For instance, bus workers can bring a city to a halt. How do you respond to those interruptions in the logic...

Like Negri would say, from the factory to the streets. In the sense it is true. Labour is fragmented today, and in order

immigrants and organising with Egyptians and so forth. Italy, like Ireland, has a history of recent immigration, it is not like France or Germany where immigrant communities have been there for ever and ever. It's a phenomenon that's occurred over the last twenty years. But young immigrants, like in France, do not yet have their own voice. Although, the second generation is a special mix, it is huge. It's extremely hard for someone who is an immigrant and is born in Italy to get citizenship which is absurd.

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL CENTRES

JR: You mention the social centre movement plays a role in organising the immigrant communities, and you also mentioned anarcho-syndicalism. In the American tradition of anarcho-syndicalism and the IWW, the meeting hall always played a role in organising what could have been considered precarious workers in the early 20th century. How do social centres in Italy fit into emerging labour strategies?

Yes, with the San Precario points, San Precario being this ironic icon that is meant to embody the pleas, demands and conflicts of the precarious generation. There have been a number of cafes and clubs that attract young workers. In a social venue there would be labour assistance, some lawyers, some unionists to talk to you about your problems. There are internet cafes, maybe a show at the end of the night. So they became a bit like wobbly halls, where you could just check in each week and have a concrete answer to some needs on your job, a problem that you have with your boss or employer, but you can also meet other people and organise pickets, actions, share information and black list employers and spread information on an exploitative situation.

THE UNIONS OF THE BASE.

JR: *During the Genoa protests, COBAS had quite a strong presence in the streets, I haven't really come across much about the Italian unions of the base in recent years. How have the networks you are involved in related to the movements of the base? Are they still strong?*

The two largest are COBAS which descends from the 1977 autonomist tradition, they are strong in the public sector, especially among precarious teachers, temp teachers and then CUB. Which in fact the union with which we did the first Mayday. And since then, we've always worked together. They finance about half of the budget of the Mayday parade and they have provided union assistance in certain labour disputes we've had. But we've had autonomous organisation and also legal assistance. It's an alliance but it's not that we are formally tied in any other way.

In Milan, Mayday had become like the funeral of the working class because manufacturing has completely disappeared, there were dwindling numbers of people attending the traditional Mayday demonstration in the morning. So, with this union we both realised the need to go beyond that. Which is why Mayday occurs in the afternoon and after the third edition it has completely dwarfed the one done by "the unholy trinity".

Basically, The Unholy Trinity is the three mainstream unions, one is reformist and socialist, the second one is Catholic. Like in Ireland, they are in social partnership with the government which has ended up in the fact that Italy now has the lowest wage rate in Europe with Greece. So, really they are not much into the interests of the workers.

So, going back to COBAS. Their interest has been decreasing, they are strong in the social fora because they were there from the start and they are a bit maximalist, the problem is they have no clue how to address the private sector, which is the one you really have to unionise. At least in that respect we've had more

success. They weren't in the first Mayday, but they've started joining it from the second one, so at least in that respect they are part of the network.

THE PARALLEL WITH IWW

JR: *You've left Chainworkers, but at the time you were advocating concepts like flexi-fights, these are notions that seem to cut across the more traditional craft union approach, and there again is that parallel with the IWW approach in the states. Are you conscious of these parallels?*

Definitely so. I've been so inspired by the wobblies, by the sabocat, by Ralph Chapman's song, Joe Hill and so forth. Definitely. The wobbles in the early 20th century America embodied the interests of the industrial working class that was being deskilled, there was the immigrant masses that went into steal plants, the textile plants across north america, where as the moderate unions, the craft unions represented the white working class with skills and so on and so forth.

So fast forward a century after, where we wanted to express the interests of the outsider or the discriminated segments of the work force that are not being represented in the social compromise that takes place between big unions, big business and the state that is typical of Europe.

So the outsiders in our opinion, were the service and the knowledge classes. These were the two that have seen an explosion in terms of numbers and in terms of value added. We saw how flexibility stultified the worker just as much as

Taylorism stultified, but it also brought them into contact with larger numbers that also share the same condition. We saw flexibility as a two way process in which, it's true that your rate of exploitation was increased, but your individual freedom, your freedom to use new digital tools to reflect upon your condition and network with others and organise strikes