

**“He who sows poverty shall reap anger!”** declared a banner of the unemployed movement which swept through France during the winter of 1997-98. The Paris Stock Exchange had announced record growth that year, yet national statistics revealed four million under-employed people, with 12 million living in extreme insecurity and poverty. Coming three years after the widespread strikes of 1995, which brought to light the effects of neoliberalism on French society, the unemployed movement signalled a break in the traditional party and union-dominated forms of political action in France.

Beginning as a series of small local actions demanding emergency benefits in Marseille, the movement spread with extraordinary speed to cover 26 towns. They occupied unemployment offices and electricity companies, they expropriated supermarket food, blocked roads and railway lines. The wide range of protests across France had a huge political impact. For the first time a movement of the unemployed caused a government to take national measures (an emergency fund for the unemployed, among others).

Although parts of the movement were tightly stage-managed by official unemployment groups, much of it relied on small, self-organized collectives taking local actions and initiatives without central coordination. Refusing a life that demanded dependence on the crumbs of state welfare, people imagined a world with a radically different concept of work. “We have the time, you have the money,” they shouted as they took over motorway toll-booths, opened the barriers, handed out flyers, and collected ‘toll’ money from passing motorists to fund their campaign, sometimes at the rate of \$1,800 per hour.

In Paris they organized their actions with a daily assembly in the occupied hall of a university, and in order to eat they helped themselves to lunch at corporate cafeterias, distributing their leaflets and increasing their network of support. Many of the networks developed during these intense months became strands of the anticapitalist movement.

## **We Have the Time, You Have the Money: the French unemployed get busy**

by **Chômeurs Heureux**

**Monday in the sun: the story of a stroll through Paris,  
Friday 6 February 1998**

Isn't it great to meet a few dozen smiling faces again this Friday? Armed with a serious desire for a good laugh, we're going to make a bit of history today, tell it, build it, write about it too. And we're determined to make it mean something.

It's noontime, so we invite ourselves to lunch with the elite, at the School of Higher Studies in the Social Sciences, right in the middle of a ritzy neighbourhood... The cafeteria workers give us a warm welcome: “Don't forget to take some dessert! And have some of the pork, it's really good!” The Appeal of the Jobless is passed round, it's our ticket for a first-class meal. It gets read or skimmed by the intellectuals we sit down to eat with, scattered here and there. Of course some of them feel threatened by the arrival of this crowd of strangers. But others pay friendly attention, like the two women research directors who unmask us right away: “With smiles like that you can't be from here!” You're right. And next comes a free-wheeling conversation about jobs becoming a myth for three million people, about the utopia of a world without money, without work, about dreams

halfway between reality and fantasy, about the colossal time that's at our fingertips thanks to the lack of work, time enough to give those dreams materiality. Those women's eyes fairly flamed with enthusiasm as they heard the call of activities that set them dreaming.

They said, "Did you know that we're the ones keeping this cafeteria out of the red, which means we're the ones paying for your lunch today? But it's our pleasure. It's an awful lot better than greasing the wallet of the last manager we had here, the one who took off with the till. And now we can put faces to the jobless people and casual workers. The media tells us you're a bunch of retards looking for affection. Well, we're not going to believe that anymore!" And before you know it, they're thanking us for the visit.

At the cafeteria some clever guy requests 45 coffees for the participants of a conference on labour and reification. We sip our stimulant with pleasure, and our good mood becomes insolent when one girl suggests we take it out on the repossession men. Who has never cursed those vultures? This would be the high point of the day. The action is set for 3.00 pm, at the ground floor of a building where one of

those legal killjoys is due to stop in. On the way we nab some over-ripe remains from a street market at closing time, yesterday's tripe and last week's tomatoes, some dodgy sardines and a few pounds of flour for good measure.

So we're there waiting for Mr Bourge with the attaché case, who shows up right on time and freshly shaven, the kind of face you can't mistake among ten thousand. And one, two, three, it's open season on the repossession man, with rotten food flying in all directions: a sardine on the shoulder is all the rage, a few rotten bananas land like huge spitwads, and his glasses dangle as he tries to protect his precious bag, looking for an exit. Despite the vain flight of the guy who's always there when you don't need him, still every one of us makes good on our aim each time, and splatters him with insults too, but not the slightest blow. A few passers by watch, laughing, while he lets his eyes overflow with question marks and whimpers now and then, "But what did I do? What did I do?"

Free transport on the subway is not a demand, but a reality. Few of us pay anyway. The difference here is taking it together: the first holds the door for the others and all

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Governor Benjamin Cayetano is shouted down by protesters while telling University of Hawaii faculty members and students that the state administration had no choice but to slash the school's budget.

>> **October 31** >> Riots break out in Bryansk, Russia, as car workers demand payment for over five months' back wages. Coal miners and other workers have organized strikes and demonstrations also demanding

back pay. The Russian government has accumulated massive debts to hundreds of enterprises in attempting to adhere to a budget arranged with the IMF last spring.

>> **November-December** >> In protest against the French government's liberalization of labour laws in an unpopular effort to reform the welfare system, five million union members and students go on strike, demanding that telecommunications and all other

services not be privatized, and that more funding be allocated to overcrowded state universities. Hundreds of thousands take to the streets. The transport strike results in a 350 mile traffic jam in Paris. Strikes spread to Belgium and Luxembourg. The French government eventually backs down.

>> **November 10** >> Protests against Shell erupt around the world as the Nigerian government executes nine

the better if strangers take advantage. It's enough to drive the ticket-men crazy! At Météo-France [the national weather bureau] the door-keeper didn't take much notice of these nondescripts, nonetheless quite out of place, as we went through one by one. Only later did he start to get surprised. In any case he was wiser to stay at his post, because numbers were on our side. But so are laughter, dreams, and intervention in public life. We met an insider and asked him where to find a photocopier and a fax. He hesitated, then asked us how we got in. It's an almost ritual question: "Through the door, how else?" We let him go along his way. Office doors open up, the employees smiling. Our tracts give them a laugh and make things easier. A director or some official forbids the employees from letting us use the fax, but civil disobedience has always been an effective weapon. And so the weather bureaus of the Paris region would receive our appeal to the natural elements. In another office, nobody goes against orders, but they let us use the equipment with a few indispensable tips. And Agence France Presse (AFP) receives our weather report too.

Here again, we created a momentary break in the routine, brought an unexpected breath of fresh air, in a place where such things are ceaselessly predicted and detected in advance. The AFP didn't transmit our rainbow, too bad! It would have warmed up the atmosphere and cut right through the Parisian smog.

In this late afternoon we start feeling the pangs. It's time for a sportsman's drink. Let's go do the shopping at the local supermarket! No more paranoia about the security in

the store. You don't have to be aggressive, it's just a matter of numbers and willpower. Half of it gets eaten without any discussion. We split the rest out in the street together, with whoever might want to stop and cut a steak around an improvised stand.

On this Friday 6 February, our 'Monday in the Sun' stroll was rich in meetings, amazed looks, knowing smiles, and shared laughter.

The city is not just a barracks where bureaucrats tap on their computers, cops settle violations of the law, and judges cut to the quick by doling out years in prison, while the prolors groan. We live in this city, what the fuck! Let's not leave it in the hands of imposters and vultures.

PARIS IS AN IMMENSE PLAYGROUND!!!

# Jussieu, an Extraordinary Assembly

For three weeks now there has been an assembly every day at Jussieu. Born of the jobless people's movement, it's the home base and meeting place of this struggle, addressed to all those who see themselves in its mirror... How did it come to be, what has it begun to build, with what resources, and in what spirit?

On Saturday 17 January 1998 several hundred people gathered round the banner, "We Want A Shitty Job For Peanuts". The irony of a few joyous masochists struck a chord. People came together around a shared dissatisfaction, as much with the boredom and routine of demos as with the often miserably demands (because we minimize ourselves when we ask for 'social minimums'). There were the young and the not-so-young, workers and people without a job. Many of the individuals and small groups had participated in the occupations of the preceding weeks, notably of the *Ecole Normale Supérieure on rue d'Ulm*. The idea arose of keeping in

touch, of taking what we had in common a little further. For that we'd need a place. Since the police blocked off any occupation that night, a *rendez-vous* was set for Monday evening in an amphitheatre of Jussieu University. It wasn't our first pick, and far from the nicest place we could imagine, but the police occupation of Paris didn't leave us much choice.

For a very long time, 'general assembly' has suggested an impossible encounter, deafening and suffocating all at once. Our assembly has been able to go beyond certain shortfalls. It's often a pleasure, because people actually listen to each other. It's only general because everyone is invited to participate; it's not a meeting of delegates. For the moment we're responsible to no-one but ourselves, that is, to the people who participate in creating this collective intelligence.

In the early days we saw improvised session leaders emerge. Their role turned out to be worse than freewheeling debate, where everyone addresses everybody else and everyone can answer. The debate doesn't follow a speaking order, but the order of the subjects.

The question of voting came up. We rejected it as an artifice of democratic traditions, inadequate to our needs

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environmental activists, including writer Ken Saro-Wiwa, who were imprisoned on fabricated murder charges. The activists were resisting Shell's environmental destruction of Ogoniland, Nigeria, which has resulted in the loss of agricultural land to oil wells, spillage, pipelines and blowouts. In Ken Saro-Wiwa's closing statement at his trial, he predicts that, "the ecological war that [Shell] has waged in the delta will be called to question, and the

crimes of that war duly punished."

>> **December 4** >> To the accompaniment of bagpipes, 500 Earth First! activists storm the largest stone quarry in England, in Whatley, Somerset, swarming over gates, scaling fences, and erecting a tripod blocking the rail line leading out from the quarry. Sixty-five feet of railway track disappear; the surveillance system falls apart; a two-story crane is pulled to bits; three control

rooms are dismantled; and several digging and conveyor belts break down. At the end of the day, the media reports that \$163,000 of damage occurred, with an additional loss of production of \$325,000.

>> **December 13** >> Students, professors, and university staff in Managua, Nicaragua, rejecting proposed tuition hikes and administrative fees, demand that the government abide by the constitution and

right now: it's a form of decision that often annuls the debates, reducing them to the caricature of 'for' and 'against'. But our position isn't our principle, and some circumstances might lead us to vote. Our number varies from 80 to 400. The proposals for action submitted to the assembly are not necessarily ratified by it: we discuss the spirit, rather than imposing anything, or blocking anyone from acting at their own will. Tracts are written by hand, from repugnance for computers. We gradually shake off the tic of applause, which is the accounting machine of demagoguery.

A style emerges from original actions and the self-critiques that follow: inviting ourselves into cafeterias, transforming the streets of Paris into playgrounds, distributing tracts and rants in public places (schools, businesses, bistros, social services, post offices, metros, markets, restaurants, unemployment offices, etc.), with splash appearances in unexpected spots (*Le Monde*, Météo-France, the Fine Arts school), pie-throwing at social menaces, free generosity lessons for store owners, parties and banquets, passionate debates....

In addition to the possible police consequences, the presence of journalists and other outside eyes seemed contradictory to the assembly's will to maintain control over its means of expression and the meaning of its acts. The defenders of the media-hounds argued our dependency on information. The response was that if we had something essential to say, then no-one but ourselves could say it.

After a tumultuous debate we therefore kicked out

photographers, cameramen, and those doing studies of the jobless people's movement. But we welcome individuals who break with their social functions, including journalists who stop being voyeurs to become sensible again, artists who give up their exhibitionist performances, unionists who cease kow-towing to their bureaucracy. The unionist from one of France's most mainstream unions who came on 27 January to say that we warmed his heart by our presence and our humour means more to us than any professional revolutionary.

We refused to go along with the combined maneuvers of the parties, unions, and associations seeking to confuse the jobless people's movement with the illusion of the 35 hour work-week. About 800 of us got a real kick out of a banner and a tract with the socialist party logo saying "Let's Sacrifice our Lives to the Economy," while we handed out hot wine and drank it too.

On the way back to Jussieu, the provocation of a policewoman and the mistakes of one of us didn't keep 400 people from making it to the assembly. That night, people looking for a fight saw the importance of collective issues, the promise of a greater pleasure than the immediacy of direct conflict. That night we obeyed neither the union lullaby (dignified and peaceful demonstrations) nor the activist outcry (let's hit back!). It's a kind of collective lucidity that knows there's no fixed recipe. Our idea was that it's as important to act as it is to take our time. An intelligent understanding; a kind of suave mixture of old and new friends, between groups that existed previously and individuals discovering the possibility to act. The punks are

not just hoodlums, the debaters are not just big talkers; we began to be something better than all those categories, which were still separate in yesterday's movements. We don't have any choice, we have to organize our agreement.

It's kind of tough for us to introduce ourselves. We're not a group of mercenaries, or a support committee. We're not the leaders of some stinking splinter faction that only sees the other as a potential member, and addresses them as an object. It's not a question for us of casting a larger net, of mobilizing (like troops are mobilized), but of creating favourable conditions for mutual recognition and encounter. Collective intelligence also arises from the fact that the assembly doesn't only define itself by its enemies, not by a political line, an idea raised above it, but by what it is, that is, the people who compose it, and the steps it takes. So far we've been able to talk about everything, including what for some people is obvious. That's one of the qualities of this assembly: being able to go backwards in order to get further ahead. We dream of multiplying assemblies like ours, to put an end to the feeling of an inevitability at the heart of things.

We're an assembly of *déclassés* who want to transform social structures, to do away with the parasitic side of individual and collective relations, to return to simpler and more direct ties. We're conscious that the strength of a movement depends on its ability to eradicate fears and reinforce individuals. Our actions, games, debates and parties build the confidence needed to put our ideas into practice.

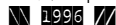
We think it's important to clarify and understand the questions posed by the unemployed people's movement. That means the problem of salaried labour, of the economy that produces it and the money that's associated with it. How to transform this society which eliminates work while maintaining it as the supreme value, into a society founded on human activity, a society that doesn't produce commodities? To answer this central question, to quell the confusion that reigns on this subject – even among us – we want to refine the style and spirit invented by this assembly: the mix of seriousness and play that we have been experimenting with in the demonstration that made us known and visible.

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allocate six per cent of the national budget for university education. Riot police break up demonstrations at the National Assembly with tear gas followed by gunfire. Two students are killed, one loses a leg, and more than 60 are injured.

>> **December 13** >> Members of the Machinists' Union in Seattle, US, celebrate victory with a new contract with Boeing, Inc, which finally capitulated after a strike of

34,500 workers. They picketed 69 days in almost non-stop rainstorms and sacrificed \$6,000 per worker in wages.



>> **January 1** >> During the first hours of 1996, the EZLN announce the formation of the Zapatista Front of National Liberation (FZLN), "a civil and nonviolent organization, independent and democratic, Mexican and national... A political force which does not struggle to

take political power but for a democracy where those who govern, govern by obeying... Our word, our song and our cry, is so that the dead will no longer die. So that they may live we struggle, so that they live we sing."

>> **January 30** >> Continuing their campaign to rid India of mutinational corporations, the KRRS chooses the anniversary of Ghandi's death to dismantle a Kentucky Fried Chicken outlet in Bangalore. Its windows

We'll claim what we've won, but we aren't just going to make demands: that would let those we're addressing believe they can just make up for all that they've taken away. To satisfy our needs we prefer to go looking rather than just ask. It's something we're proud of. We have already found allies, and by coordinating our shared disgust we begin to get beyond it. Three weeks have gone by, banishing boredom and bringing hope back alive. We don't want to stop!  
WE INVITE EVERYONE TO JOIN OUR STROLLING COMMITTEES, OUR GAMES, OUR DEBATES.

Both extracts from *Le Lundi au Soleil: Recueil de textes et de récits du mouvement des chômeurs, novembre 1997 – avril 1998*, Paris: L'insomniaque éditeur, 1998

English translations by Brian Holmes

**When French unemployed activists** got together with Indonesian fisherfolk, Columbian U'wa tribal elders, and South Korean strikers, they were participating in the birth of a unique radical network which was to provide the impetus for many of the summit-disrupting actions which were to hit the headlines over the next few years.

The idea of Peoples' Global Action (PGA) was born at the Second Encuentro (encounter) in Spain. It arose out of the need to create something more tangible than the encuentros, which were ostensibly international talk shops. Aiming to be "a global instrument for communication and coordination" of grassroots groups who believe in taking confrontational direct action, "while building up local alternatives and people power", the PGA was one of the first networks to target the World Trade Organization (WTO) specifically, and capitalism in general.

The WTO, reckless promoter of 'free' trade and corporate rule which, according to its director-general, "is writing the constitution of a single global economy", was to have its second ministerial meeting in Geneva, in May 1998. The founding PGA conference was held a stone's throw away, that February. Over ten chaotic days, activists from a mind-boggling array of cultures and backgrounds drafted a manifesto and hatched plans for the first global day of action against the WTO and G8 summits the following May.

While the PGA does not define itself as an organization, it holds a distinctive organizational philosophy based on decentralization and autonomy. It has no head office, no central funds, no membership, and no representatives – a difficult way of working on a local level, let alone a global one. But despite the disparity, chaos, and confusion that pepper the process, thousands of grassroots organizations from every continent have participated in the global days of action called by the PGA, and it continues to be a catalyzing focus for global action.