Letter from France

(Reader’s Note: We received the following letter from our comrade in France, Brunel, who for many months has been in the thick of a very interesting struggle of public employees in F., a Paris suburb. As background for the foreign reader, he begins with a short narrative of that struggle.)

Brief Contextual Summary

The city government of F. oversees a Paris suburb of 50,000 inhabitants and employs about 1500 people. It is controlled by the left (the French Communist Party, Socialist Party, the Greens and the Left Party). In the first three weeks of 2010, a local social movement of municipal employees formed a struggle committee, made up of more than 60 people, which took direct charge of defending the interests of city employees, outside the unions. Driven by the activism of a small group of city workers, themselves advocates of proletarian autonomy, the committee demanded a meaningful and egalitarian wage increase, working conditions based on solidarity among colleagues, the unconditional defense of public services, and an increased control of tasks by the workers themselves. For good measure, the committee unequivocally condemned management ideology, advocating instead the refusal of the criterion of profitability and more generally of the imperatives of valorizing the capital brought in from the private sector. Supported by management, the unions used all their power to put an end to this agitation with a one-day general strike, which took place on June 22, 2010. Since then, with threats of repression, calumny and disinformation, the unions succeeded in provisionally dispersing the workers’ anger into hastily-called negotiations with city management. These negotiations resulted in nothing but a complicit silence between the union reps and management during the following eight months. The struggle committee, which continued its underground activity, decided to act again in the run-up to the cantonal elections of March 2011, thus provoking the hasty reopening of the negotiations, which management and its union sycophants would have preferred to quietly lay to rest with no result. These negotiations ended in the decision to give three-fourths of municipal employees a raise of 100 euros a month over three years, falling quite short of the 300 euros demanded at the peak of the movement. The committee continues to exist in clandestine form and will again be able to make itself heard when the time comes. The old mole continues to burrow…

Dear Insurgent Notes,

In France, the crisis of public finances and especially of the decentralized local budgets reemerged in the wake of the meltdown of October 2008. It was then that the media pretended to discover that a large number of local governments were drowning in a morass of “toxic” debts. For the moment, the difficulties arising from this have been papered over, but nothing has really been resolved. Financial constraints are reducing the room for maneuver of cities, departments and regions. The direct consequence has been a reduction in the activities of the public sector, as well as cuts in staff. This has
necessitated a series of laws making the work force even more precarious and calling into question the very status of public employees established in the great social compromises after World War II. Not surprisingly, since the beginning of the year, we have been seeing different local struggles by public employees opening up. These struggles have moved into a space opened up by the supine role of the trade unions at the national level, as evident in the low level of mobilization by such workers when strikes are called nationally.

In F., the struggle continues, even if we have to quickly find new ways to intervene, because an important threshold has just been crossed. Last March, the municipal authorities opened emergency negotiations, after eight months of silence, when confronted with the threat posed by our petition denouncing the “omerta” (vow of silence) practiced by the entrenched unions, and which we submitted right in the midst of local (cantonal) elections. The upshot was an average pay increase of 100 euros for three-quarters of city workers over a three-year period. That fell short of our demands, but by handing out some crumbs, the authorities won themselves a few months of social peace. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the local bosses attempted to toss off these financial concessions in discriminatory and arbitrary forms of remuneration. They proposed that certain employees in services judged to be “strategic” would get an immediate increase of 150 euros. Moreover, an “attendance bonus” (granted only if the employee does not miss more than 15 days of work per year) would condition part of the salary. In response, the massive and instantaneous protest movement by workers of the entire local government quickly checkmated these reactionary provocations, not without some grotesque attempts at intimidation. Dozens of employees raised the clear threat of rolling strikes by the rank-and-file, and moreover without the unions. A very interesting new scenario was in the works. The precipitous withdrawal of the proposed measures succeeded in calming down most people. But all these recent events allowed us to identity more clearly that group of our colleagues who, while a minority, are ready to intensify the conflict along openly anti-union lines. With a certain number of these enragés, we have been able to have discussions on subjects which could not be broached before: the condemnation of business-as-usual party politics (no small thing in a left-wing town), an out-of-hand rejection of the unions, on struggle as the sole way to improve our condition, and the rejection of the servile mentality afflicting a section of the personnel, tied as they are to the paternalism of the local powers that be. The onset of the summer holidays has put us on standby. But we are quite sure that the local context, not to mention the global conjuncture, will present new occasions to hit back again in a few months.

Our Group

I will continue to write about this struggle as it evolves. But my time is quite taken up by laying the political and organizational basis for a new political group, so I’ll take the occasion to tell you, in summary fashion, about our motives, our goals and the current stage of our project.

Our starting point is three-fold: in France, there is almost nothing “to the left of the far
left” (Translator’s Note: The term “far left” in France refers to the (mainly Trotskyist) groups active in the space opened up by the decline of the Communist Party and the Socialist Party, including Lutte Ouvriere (LO), the Ligue Communiste Revolutionnaire (LCR, 4th International Mandelists, or more recently the NPA, the Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste, organized mainly by the LCR). Those formations identifying themselves with the ultra-left and with councilism (I’m not mentioning the “autonomists”, whom I consider to be politically inconsistent) are aging, and distinguish themselves by their absence from the increasingly intense class struggle, a stance which has pushed them, for years, to retreat into the heavenly realms of theory. I’m not dismissing their considerable efforts to theoretically re-ground the communist perspective, a task we consider fundamental. But this attempt should, in our view, prove itself efficacious enough for the idea of proletarian revolution, and the notion of abolishing classes and the state, to re-enter the proletarian imagination (imaginaire). The perspective of the Situationists, hardly in evidence in the contemporary French ultra-left, needs to be reformulated. We can at the very least say that, today, despite the ongoing social ferment, the movement of the masses is running up against its own ideological limitations, limitations resulting from the considerable discredit which the 2nd, 3rd and 4th Internationals have repeatedly heaped on communism over decades. Access to “for itself” consciousness, attained at different times by the revolutionary movements of the past century, today seems blocked by the indestructible wall of the bourgeois world outlook. Overcoming such a formidable obstacle implies a renewed and audacious communicative practice, one which does not hesitate to adopt a polemical tone when called for, nor to occupy social spaces abandoned for ages by revolutionary discourse and practice (the lower strata of the proletariat, culture, language, the immediate process of production). Because, thinking about it a bit, we can more than glimpse a theoretical and practical path opening up before us. The historical moment in which we live is particularly pitiless with the remnants of the ideological barracks of the far left and far right, revealing their objective complicity ever more clearly. Some of the stances of these apparatuses are very revealing. Not only do the leftovers of the Bolsheviks show the greatest discomfort in supporting proletarian movements in the Arab countries, but they overlook any solidarity (one which is in fact quite promising), with the social movements in Asia. At the same time, they insist on occupying minefields such as the anti-Zionist struggle, identity politics, or the old nationalist porridge, through their support for the “alter-imperialist” regimes (regimes also supported by the far right). All this smells of an ideological decomposition which today can only lead to an impasse. These serious handicaps cry out for a new language linked to an authentically revolutionary praxis. Confronted with this fundamental problematic, various themes touched on by Insurgent Notes, as well as the implacable method informing them, have been of capital importance for us.

Our group is named “Action Group for the Recomposition of Proletarian Autonomy” (Groupe d’Action pour la Recomposition de l’Autonomie Proletarienne).

We say “Action” because the political lineage to which we lay claim currently has few active heirs in France. We are inspired by the communist left in the broad sense of the term (Socialism or Barbarism, the KAPD, International Council Correspondance, the IWW) but also by Amadeo Bordiga, I.I. Rubin, Georg Lukacs, Karel Kosik, the
Situationists and operaismo, to quickly mention some key names and movements. And, of course, what we find in Insurgent Notes has provided important clarification. Today our group consists of about fifteen people, coming from different backgrounds: former Trotskyists, (the Lambertists, Lutte Ouvriere, and even ARS COMBAT, a small sect created some time ago), former anarcho-syndicalists (CNT), a former activist from the autonomist movement of the 1970’s, a former activist from the “anti-precarious” struggles of the early 2000’s (the “stop precariousness” networks, support committees), and some individuals who have never belonged to any organization. White-collar workers, public employees, students, and casual workers are all represented. We range from 22 to 48 years of age. We currently have a presence in the Parisian region and in Brittany. We plan to constitute ourselves as a founding nucleus through the networks of our current members over a time period during which various sessions of theoretical education, extending over several months, will consolidate the human and ideological cohesion of the group. Once this work is completed, we will develop a manifesto and an internet site. We already have propaganda material we use in different campaigns on both specific and general subjects (ranging from support for the Arab revolutions to denunciation of the new far right, by way of a critique of commodity alienation and of the management of various big companies). We will then move to a more intensive and wider phase of propaganda, attempting to embrace as closely as possible the front lines of contemporary society, and when it is possible becoming actors on them.

We say "recomposition" because we try to analyze capitalist society with a view of the totality and from the sphere of reproduction (and not merely production, as Insurgent Notes points out). At the same time, “recomposition” points to the term “composition”, a notion taken up in a new way by Italian workerism, with which we identify. We plan to revive the “worker inquiry” (as we already did a bit at the city hall of F.), notably with workers on the Paris subway system (where we have sympathizers).

And we say “Proletarian autonomy” because, although dated, this expression still has meaning for us, since the problematic of freeing ourselves from bourgeois language and forms of control remains posed today. We preferred the term “proletarian” to “worker”, because in a country like France, dominated by unproductive labor, the working class has tendentially given way to the proletariat for the past 40 years.

Brunel