

COALITION OF LABOUR II

THE WORKERS' VOICES

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LOUISON SUBERBIE

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE 1

ROBERTO MOREA

**1. THE CASE OF THE ACCIAI SPECIALI TERNI:
THE VOICES OF FACTORY WORKERS IN ITALY 3**

CECILIA FICCADENTI

**2. THE CASE OF PUBLIC HEALTH CARE IN MADRID:
THE ONGOING CONFLICT 21**

BEATRIZ CASAS GONZÁLEZ

**3. THE CASE OF THE YELLOW VESTS MOVEMENT:
BACK TO MOBILIZATION,
FOUR YEARS AFTER THE BEGINNING 41**

LOUISON SUBERBIE

CONCLUSION 57

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PRESENTATION OF THE PROJECT: COALITION OF LABOUR II

In this new project, we want to explore workers' views and experiences relating to two crucial events of our time: the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. In that sense, the present research is a continuation of our previous project "Coalition of Labour: Workers' Voices in Europe" (CoL).

Back then, we asked about the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic, and the political responses to it, had on the living and working conditions of workers in France, Italy and Germany. Although no longer a focus of media attention, the pandemic and the political reactions to it are likely to still affect workers' lives today. This is especially true for those most impacted by it, namely, the precarised. For this reason, we want to ask again, two years after our first investigation, about the long-lasting unequal effects of the pandemic, which brought big profits for a few, but meant a real crisis and cost many people's lives. The war in Ukraine represents another event with profound and dramatic implications, for the people directly involved in the conflict and elsewhere. Again in this case, we can assume that its present and future effects are and will be unequally distributed.

A further focus of interest in the first part of CoL was workers' attitudes towards current politics and, especially, towards collective action as a potential factor of social transformation. CoL showed that workers' organisation faces important obstacles, like the fragmentation of workforces and the decreasing power of traditional trade unions. However, workers' solidarity and resistance still are possible and remain crucial means of political change.

This is why in this second project we explicitly focus on workers currently or recently engaged in some form of mobilisation, like the Yellow Vests in France (again mobilised, four years after their rise), health workers in Madrid, on indefinite strike since November 2022 in defence of public healthcare, and production workers at a major metalworking company in Italy, organised by the oldest and most representative trade union organisation in that country.

How do workers experience the cumulative effects of both crises (the COVID-pandemic and the war); what mobilisation experiences do they have, and how were these affected by both events? These are the research questions for our present work.

Using focus groups (n=3) and semi-structured interviews (n=5) as a method, we aim to engage in a collective and dynamic conversation with workers (n=23) on these topics, where workers have their say.

From a methodological point of view, the research relies on focus groups including multiple participants, since they are a more participative method than one-on-one interviews. However, they are harder to transcribe, therefore, we plan to audio record these conversations (if all participants agree). The audio will be the basis of our empirical analysis and only used internally. Like in the previous CoL project, participants' personal details shall be anonymised, if they so wish.

PREFACE

This publication is a continuation of the project which we carried out last year, in which we sought to cast light on living and working conditions in Europe. We achieved this by collecting the experiences and direct testimony of those directly concerned, in order to give a platform to those most affected by the issues highlighted in this publication. For this purpose, we created "focus groups", i.e., collective, or individual interviews of homogeneous groups, studying different areas of work and the specific realities thereof in more detail.

The pandemic and the crisis resulting from the war in Ukraine have made their mark on the past few years. The digital transition accompanies the climate crisis also in the world of work, and in recent decades it has had a particular influence on working life. As we have recently witnessed — and can expect to continue to see — these conditions represent a common trend in all European countries.

The situations that we have taken into consideration in this research project are differentiated by type of work and by geographical location.

In Italy, we have focused on an important industrial centre — the Terni steelworks, a symbol of the heavy industry that developed with the country's post-war reconstruction and state industrial planning. Although this industry was once significant, it has since been taken over by privatisation and the relocation that has followed.

In Spain, we have focused on the medical system. Today there is great mobilisation in defence of public health against privatisation and the reduction of services and treatments, processes which have gone hand in hand with a shrinkage of the universal protection system.

In France, the mobilisation against Emmanuel Macron's pension reform — and the impact that the Yellow Vests mobilisations of the past few years had on it — spurred us to try to investigate the transversal effects of changes in the world of work that led to such expressions of revolt.

Our approach was to mount a comparative research study. We carried this out by posing some questions that produced answers that were to some extent comparable, even when posed in different contexts.

In particular, we maintained a constant determination to listen and to share the direct voice of the workers. This is a voice that is almost always unheard and unable to express itself when it comes to making political, economic, and social choices.

We, for our part, believe that those who care about the health of democracy and social justice should listen to these voices and spread their message.

*Roberto Morea
transform! europe*

THE CASE OF THE ACCIAI SPECIALI TERNI:

THE VOICES OF FACTORY WORKERS IN ITALY

Cecilia Ficcadenti

This chapter intends to investigate the living and working conditions of workers employed at a factory, as well as their possible space for actions and mobilisations. The interest in this object of research is twofold. On the one hand, the kind of work and workplace here examined emblematically represents work as it was typically understood in the so-called Trente Glorieuses, i.e., the three decades from the Second World War to the mid-1970s. These years earned this label because of the socio-economic stability achieved through a historical balance between the interests of capital and the interests of labour. The postwar Fordist model of accumulation was based on so-called “embedded liberalism”, an expression signalling how “market processes and entrepreneurial and corporate activities were surrounded by a web of social and political constraints and a regulatory environment that sometimes restrained but in other instances led the way in economic and industrial strategy” (Harvey, 2007: 20).

This mechanism ensured high rates of economic and social growth after the end of the Second World War. Thus, structured around the so-called Keynesian state and a Fordist-type economy, the postwar accumulation regime was essentially based on the compromise between labour and capital. The state was the guarantor and the regulatory institution capable of balancing production, consumption, and the social reproduction of the system. The mechanism underlying the model relied on the Fordist organisation of mass production that could be sustained, i.e., whose goods could be purchased, on the basis of mass consumption.

The support ensured by the demand for goods and services came about through the advancement of widespread welfare provision among the working class. The improvement in living conditions was made possible on the one hand by the institutionalisation of collective bargaining, which was oriented towards full employment, and on the other by the insulation of social policy areas from market fluctuations through public intervention and the establishment of a Keynesian welfare state. This latter freed citizenship from social risks and directed consumer demand towards the goods produced by Fordist production. Yet, the crisis of the accumulation regime encountered by capitalism in the 1970s called for strategies of intervention and overcoming the Fordist-type social structure of accumulation. These strategies were, then, institutionally formalised in the neoliberal model. The opportunity for capital to continue its process of valorisation and accumulation was offered by the neoliberal idea of the free market as a regulatory mechanism that implied a progressive financialisation of the economy.

Within this historical and international scenario, this chapter aims to investigate the living and working conditions of workers employed in the factory production process. This has the purpose of identifying both the most problematic traits and the resources for mobilisation through the voice and direct experience of the workers.

The chapter is, therefore, structured as follows. First, Section 2 will present the selected case study, Acciai Speciali Terni. In this section, the history of the factory will be retraced and the most salient moments of the mobilisations that took place will be described. Section 3 describes the research method used — the focus group — and some characteristics of the participants will be indicated, while still guaranteeing their anonymity. Section 4 contains the research data, i.e. the words and voices of the workers, which were organised, during the analysis phase, according to three main themes, i.e. working conditions during the pandemic period; production processes and work organisation; and, finally, the relations with the company and between workers. These aspects will be discussed in paragraph 5, before drawing conclusions in the last section of the chapter.

THE HISTORY OF THE ACCIAI SPECIALI TERNI AND PAST WORKERS' MOBILISATIONS



Terni, 'City of Steel' — Source: Google Earth

The case chosen for this study is the factory of Acciai Speciali Terni (henceforth, AST), a company operating in the steel sector and specialised in the production of stainless steel. Its production site is just next to the city of Terni, in the Umbria region, in the very centre of the country. It was chosen based on the fact that this production site is a pivotal player in Italian industrial history, although it is currently going through a phase of transition and reconversion due to its recent purchase by the Arvedi group. In fact, the steel mills are currently in a situation of under-production, producing only 600,000 tons of cold rolled steel, despite the plant and labour capacity to produce 1,500,000 tons of liquid steel¹. This production capacity rests on a decidedly fragmented factory and work organisation, having contracts with about 130 outsourced companies, as the Secretary General of FIOM-CGIL Terni reported to me.

In addition, the history of the factory, as we shall see, was characterised by a strong trade union culture in which various phases of mobilisations took place. A further reason for the choice of this factory relates to the interest in the work carried out there. It offers the possibility of investigating the transformations and working conditions of a typically Fordist job, right to this day.

To begin to introduce the case of AST, it is imperative to make clear the close relationship it has with the city of Terni, to such an extent that this latter is itself referred to as the 'City of Steel'. Figure 1 above shows the relative sizes of the production plant (on the right side) and the city (on the left).



12-tonne press placed in front of the exit of the railway station of Terni — Source: Google Earth

This dimensional issue helps to understand the strong working-class identity that characterises the AST site. It is almost as if it indicates that the factory belongs to the city, as opposed to the succession of different owners, which will be addressed later in this section. In this sense, an enormous, now disused 12-tonne press (an element of industrial archaeology) is emblematically placed immediately in front of the exit of the railway station (figure 2), like a sign for those arriving by train that they have really arrived in Terni. In fact, the presence of the factory constitutes a clear element of identity and differentiation of the city from less industrialised parts of this region and has contributed to urbanisation process in the territory around the factory (Cristofori 2014).

From its foundation up to the 1960s

The AST was established in 1884 (it was initially called "Società degli Alti Forni e Fonderie di Terni") and from the outset produced steel for the defence sector, helping to meet national demand. During the First World War it produced war materiel, with the conversion of the plants and the tripling of production. In the 1922 the company expanded, changing its name to "Terni Società per l'industria e l'elettricità". In this phase it also joined the mechanical, energy, chemical and mining production market, although steelmaking remained the most

important focus of production. In the 1933 it became part of the state-owned IRI group, the Institute for Industrial Reconstruction. During the Second World War, production resumed at a fast pace due to the high demand caused by the use of steel in the war industry. After the end of the Second World War, the company slowed its production pace and opened up to the production of steel for commercial use. In addition, as part of a Finsider program (which was IRI's Società Finanziaria Siderurgica), it was entrusted with the production of special stainless and magnetic steels (production that required a joint venture with US Steel).

From the labour point of view, AST's history was, from the very beginning, characterised by a strong degree of conflict and high capacity for organisation and mobilisation. The most important strikes, date back to 1905, close to the time of the firm's foundation. Also known as the 'Serrata', this action consisted in the closure of the plant for 95 days, in opposition to a regulation adopted by the owners and not agreed with the workers. A second moment of particular importance was the dismissal in 1952-1953 of two thousand workers. This led to three days of agitation and rioting across the city, not only by the workers but also by the residents of Terni. There are multiple reasons for this capacity for conflict. Firstly, there is the social and identitarian fabric of Terni's population. For example, widespread solidarity and

¹ *Umbria Domani* [28/01/2023]

reciprocity, with the involvement of women and families in the strike of 1905, was able to give strength to the workers' mobilisations. These factors helped to increase the weight of workers' bargaining power and create a culture of community belonging. A second issue relates more closely to the historical moment which we are addressing in this section. More precisely, we can trace the resources and political forces that fed the conflict between labour and capital to the anti-fascist liberation, anarchist, and communist movements, as well as the direct and active role of the trade unions and the Communist Party.

From the 1970s to the 1990s: the privatisation process

The economic boom period in the 1960s in Italy, which saw the number of workers employed in the Terni steel factory increase by 2,000, lasted until the mid-1970s. At the beginning of that decade, the increased productivity and the trade union activity at AST were characterised by "a generally low level of conflict, which through a reformist trade union movement contributed not only to improving working conditions and health and safety measures, but also to developing industrial plans that guaranteed the factory a strategic role in the national territory" (Saltalippi, 2022, p. 72). In middle of this decade, there began a period of crisis characterised by company indebtedness and worker redundancies.

The privatisation process of the Acciaierie thus started in the early 1980s with the creation, in 1984, of the holding company Terni Acciai Speciali S.p.A and the concomitant dissolution of Finsider, which was transformed into ILVA, of which TAS became part. Later, in 1994, it was bought by Krupp together with the Italian companies Falck, Agarini and Riva (in 2001, with the merger and the birth of ThyssenKrupp, the multinational became the sole owner, acquiring all the shares). The privatisation of the steel factory was not a development which the workers suffered passively. On the contrary, although they did not eventually succeed in blocking the sale, they went directly to Rome to occupy Finsider's headquarters as part of a broader protest against the government's abolition of the automatic cost of living adjustment clause, known as "scala mobile".

The trade unions and the Communist Party strenuously opposed its abolition, even forcing a referendum on the question, but their opposition was unsuccessful, marking the beginning of the decline in the strength of the movement and the Communist Party (Portelli 1985). In addition to the onset of the weakening of the large mass parties, as Saltalippi (2022) clearly reconstructs, workers' mobilisation in this historical moment was also affected by low levels of conflict due to the expansion of employment in the third sector and the increase, therefore, of employment rate in the advanced services sector.

The first twenty years of the new millennium

The early 2000s were characterised by renewed waves of conflict. Indeed, in 2004 ThyssenKrupp decided to adopt a precise strategy: that is, the conversion of the Terni plant to a mono-production site, leaving only stainless-steel production to the steelworks and discontinuing magnetic steel production. This entailed the closure of an entire department with the immediate loss of hundreds of jobs. The union dispute (which itself hit the headlines under the name 'Magnetic') was a very hard battle, a tug-of-war. The intensity of the opposition between workers and ThyssenKrupp can be exemplified by the fact that the German multinational did not stop the divestment process even faced with the Italian government's requests to suspend it and facilitate negotiations with the unions.

The workers, alongside the citizens of Terni, mobilised and strongly opposed any possibility of mediation, taking a position clearly opposed to the plant's closure. Most characteristic of these mobilisations were the fact that the clash also radicalised among 'young' workers, and that the terrain of the dispute was polarised on a discursive plane of conflict that saw Italy's economic and strategic interests pitted against Germany's. Thus the mobilisation succeeded in hardening the position of the political and social forces opposed to the closure of the magnetic steel plant (Carniani 2009).

Between 2012 and 2013, a change of ownership took place, as ThyssenKrupp sold the Terni site to the Finnish group Outokumpu. This transaction, however, was reversed by the European Union because with the acquisition of the Terni plant, Outokumpu did not comply with antitrust regulations, having achieved a dominant position in the stainless-steel market. The Terni site was thus bought back by ThyssenKrupp. On the heels of these events, 2014 saw a further high point of the workers' struggle and assertion of their rights. ThyssenKrupp's CEO announced an industrial plan that included a €100 million cut in investments and the laying off around 500 workers, whose contracts would expire within a few months.

The dispute that generated this company outlook ended with an agreement that provided for a severance package for the workers made redundant. The mobilisation lasted for months and, as in the early 2000s, the entire city fought against the company's decisions. It culminated in October 2014 in a general strike called by the major Italian trade unions — CGIL, CISL, UIL and UGL.

Although the mobilisation was as participatory, tough, and determined as that of 2004, it is possible to point out some differences in the way the problem was framed. In fact, in this latter instance, the mobilisation revolved around a basic consideration, na-

mely that the corporate counterpart to be faced was an actor that acts and is regulated by the unstable and changing mechanisms of the financial market. This generated awareness among workers about the precariousness of their jobs at the firm (Saltalippi, 2022).

The factory today: the Arvedi Group

Taking a further step in AST's history we arrive at 2022, with the takeover by the Italian group Arvedi, named after the founding family, which still heads the company, becoming the largest Italian steel group. This transition represents a complex and delicate moment with respect to the future of the Terni plant and its workers. Arvedi, with the takeover, announced an investment of €1 billion for the Terni site alone, for decarbonisation and the use of greener energy sources with a view to sustainability and ecological transition within the framework of the PNRR [National Recovery and Resilience Plan]. Arvedi's relations with both local and national institutions are characterised by cooperation between the parties.

In fact, the programmatic agreement between Arvedi AST and the relevant ministries is based on the sharing of governance with the sub-national levels. It envisages a series of facilities, interventions and financing to support Arvedi's proposed investment in the company, i.e., an important part of the country's economic fabric and production sector. The implementation mechanisms for the agreement could be facilitated by the European temporary crisis framework arranged to deal with the economic emergency caused by the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. However, the group appears to have rather less interest in relations with the trade unions. In fact, what is becoming evident is the scant involvement of social partners throughout the first year of Arvedi's management.

This means a lack of communication on the future and on the company's intentions with respect to production units and the maintenance (or not) of employment levels. In fact, the business plan has not been shared yet by Arvedi. During a recent meeting (end of February 2023), requested by the social partners, in the presence also of the President of the Region, the Regional Councillor for Economic Development and the Mayor of Terni, it was agreed that industrial plan would be shared at a later date with the trade union representatives. This issue (as will be seen in the following sections, this is a key issue for AST workers) can be seen in the numerous statements made by local and regional trade union representatives, such as in the joint notes of CGIL, CISL and UIL and FIM, FIOM and UILM commenting on the meeting between the Ministry of the Environment and Energy Sustainability and AST management on 19 January 2023²³

“

The trade unions, while condemning both the method of the meeting and the lack of involvement of the parties, reiterated the need for a collective effort, which must take place through constant dialogue, given the important investments for AST and the entire territory”

“The trade unions emphasised that they would have preferred to know both the appropriate instruments and resources, with particular reference to those of the PNRR (...)”

“As trade unions, we would like to point out that the local and regional institutions have never had a discussion on the industrial prospects of our territory. While we recognise that it was not obligatory to bring us in for technical talks we have always reiterated that it would have been useful for expediency's sake

“We urge the local and regional authorities on this front as well [on environmental and sustainability issues, A.N.] to find out what infrastructural, material and immaterial interventions are being put in place both using the resources of the PNRR and those of the European funds to make the Terni site and the companies in the area more competitive

Thus, this case study shows that there are processes affecting the phenomenon here in question, i.e. the workers' conditions, which are still in the making and not yet fully given. The next section will outline the method of investigation and the characteristics of the encounter with the workers.

² *Terni in Rete* [23/02/2023]

³ *Tuttoggi* [23/01/2023]

II. METHOD

In order to explore the elements of interest to this report, i.e., the living and working conditions of workers, it was decided to conduct a focus group. This technique, which involves a collective discussion between participants, allowed certain issues to emerge thanks to the dialogue between workers, stimulated and encouraged by the researcher through particular questions.



Initial of the worker's name	Jobs/Department
A.	COMMERCIAL EMPLOYEE
M.	FINISHING CENTRE WORKER
C.	MAINTENANCE ACTIVITY AT THE COLD PLANT
L.	EMPLOYED IN ONE OF AST'S CONTRACTORS
AL.	STEEL SMELTING ACTIVITY

The focus group was held on 27 October 2022 at the CGIL (Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro) headquarters in Terni. In fact, for the focus group to take place, it was essential to make use of the contribution of the oldest and most representative trade union organisation in Italy⁴, which supported both the organisation of the meeting and recognised the sense and value of this research.

The focus group lasted approximately 1 hour and 50 minutes and was attended by workers, four labourers (one of whom was employed by a contracting company) and one trade worker. Details on the participants, whose identity is, of course, anonymised, are given in table 1 shown in the previous page.

This focus group had one great strength, namely the fact that the participants all knew each other. This aspect is important because it allowed there to be a relaxed, convivial, and informal atmosphere right from the start and, therefore, there was mutual trust among the participants.

This allowed the focus group, as an instrument of research, to somehow lose its appearance as an unnatural element with respect to the context. On the contrary, the fact that workers already knew each other fuelled this research technique's capacity to generate dialogue and engagement and thus to focus on the issues at the centre of the empirical investigation.

One aspect that is worth emphasising is the possibility, in further developments of these lines of research, of also extending the investigation to workers in AST's ancillary industries; this would help to further enrich the landscape of the work that revolves around Terni's steelworks.

This allowed the focus group, as an instrument of research, to somehow lose its appearance as an unnatural element with respect to the context. On the contrary, the fact that workers already knew each other fuelled this research technique's capacity to generate dialogue and engagement and thus to focus on the issues at the centre of the empirical investigation.

⁴ In particular, my thanks go to Alessandro Rampiconi, secretary general of FIOM-CGIL Terni, to Danilo Monelli, and to Roberto Morea for putting me in contact with them.



THE WORKERS' VOICES AND EXPERIENCES

This section will report on the work-related issues that are felt to be most relevant and urgent by AST's workers, and which emerged during the focus group. They have been thematised with respect to the following issues, with one section devoted to each: working conditions during the emergence of the first wave of COVID-19; production processes and work organisation; and finally, relations with the company and between workers themselves.

Working conditions during the emergence of the first wave of COVID-19

Starting from living and working conditions during the emergency management of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is clear that the atmosphere in the company in those months was particularly tense. In fact, AST workers staged a 48-hour strike in March 2020, right at the beginning of the pandemic emergency in Italy, which — to say the least — took on dramatic proportions. They took strike action to demand the adoption of health safety protocols throughout the entire plant. The company ultimately adopted such measures following the workers' mobilisation, making this the first Italian company certified for protocols to halt the spread of coronavirus⁵.

The climate and the atmosphere of those days were marked by strong fears about the health risks of going into the factory:



We were the last to have the 15-day closure because we had to do these phantom Ateco codes...we were forced in the middle of the pandemic...I mean we didn't know what it was yet... it was March 2020 [voice-over: we went on strike, N.A.] yes but we had to go back in to do the processing of these Ateco codes, which were the ones that were used to make medical things, I don't know steel to produce scalpels, these things here. (M.)

Here, one worker refers to the fact that some firms identified by the so-called Ateco code, i.e. the classification of economic activities carried out by ISTAT (the National Institute of Statistics), were decreed "essential" and, therefore continued to be open and kept up production in the spring of 2020, including AST. So, except the administrative and commercial sectors that were able to operate in smartworking mode, the workers — as one participant ironically notes — "here are all blue-collar workers so they unfortunately..." (A.); a colleague laughingly adds "we don't have the luck of smartworking" (M.).

The necessity of the production carried out by a company that helps to produce essential goods such as medical equipment clashed with the workers' general climate of fear and dread:



Clearly not yet knowing the COVID as it was, we went to work with an unbridled fear that we would get this COVID...(...) then the non-stop media and the news were pressing ...the fear was strong... (C.)

The fear of not being sure who one is coming into contact with, or whether one is being careful enough in one's precautionary behaviour, is quite understandable given the general mood of the country in March 2020. Italy found itself facing an unprecedented crisis in which, for months on end, people

waited for the 7 p.m. live TV announcement with the Civil Protection bulletin on the level of contagion, and the numbers of the sick and the dead. There was a feeling of navigating by sight and governing from one day to the next.

Despite this, the workers found the unity and strength to carry out a strike aimed at urgently demanding that the company take safety measures within the factory.



[we did] the strike because the company didn't want to close...but [for us the point] wasn't to close or to remain open...the problem was about safety because things had to run...but at least we do a safety protocol, which didn't exist... we were among the first in Italy...and by doing these two strike days, in the end the company [adopted safety protocols]... (A.)

The workers complain about the laxity shown by the company. Indeed, they believe that company safety protocols should be more restrictive than those stipulated by the government, because every workplace, company, and plant has specificities and related risks that must be addressed at the company and employer level. These are things that a national standard cannot contain at this level of detail:



At the beginning the company turned a deaf ear, then it adjusted with our pressure... [the company wanted to be sure of] being able to earn money on some steel lines... having to pay or otherwise there would be penalties and so on... then it adjusted thanks to our union... we put pressure on them because people were afraid (C.)

Added to this context of national crisis and objective difficulties for AST's workers are the economic consequences that the war in Ukraine has had since February 2022 (and continues to have). This aspect is addressed in the next section.

Production processes and work organisation

The workers are strongly aware of the war's effect in driving speculation on energy prices and thus on AST's production costs — and also on the increase in their own living costs, due to high inflation. They emphasise that the general increase in prices does not have a direct effect on the workers' own wor-

king conditions: "the problem is that, [with these] cascading [effects], it's not that our salaries increa- se..." (A.)

In the case of AST, this change in the geopolitical balance and the consequent alteration of the markets occurs at a particular moment in the history of the steelworks, i.e. at the time of the takeover by the new owner Arvedi. These concurrent events increase the degree of uncertainty among the workers; as one participant points out: "we don't even know what we are doing in November..."⁶ (L.). The reason is explicitly identified as the absence of an industrial plan. For the workers, this would provide a tool to understand their own future within the company:



If there's a business plan [it's better] because it says (...) how the company set its goals in a year... you need it to understand how much steel you have to make so how many people, what kind of steel and investments (AL.)

The workers placed the issue of work organisation at the centre of the discussion:



Certainly, this month's approach... that's where the problem lies... we come from work discharges [decrease in work intensity, N.A.] ... I work the copper they do... [referring to some colleagues N.A.] if they don't do the copper I don't work, we have discharges of even two or three days a week, without any materials, zero at all...

(...) It's already ten days that you [the company, N.A.] tell me 'Look that in November...' I say 'listen... in November, like all the other months, I have to come to work... it doesn't change anything for me'... the problem is them [the company, N.A.] who can't make you stay at home...So I have the calendar all the year round and I work uh! (...) then it's clear that if I'm unloading in October and you massacre me the month after... as if they said 'just rest for the month after...' (...) now it's twenty years that we're all in there and we've understood how the steelworks works (L.)

⁵ *Il Messaggero* [12/05/2020]

⁶ I.e. the month after the focus group took place

The lack of planning for future production is also highlighted by a worker who points out that:

“

At the sales department, the plans, at the order acquisition program it is established that you (...) normally do the acquisition of orders, I don't know...for instance, for the month of November you could arrive at the beginning of September that you could still accept orders for production in the month of November... now we are able to accept orders for November... so they are still filling November, so probably in order to be able to run at full speed you say 'in the meantime we do it' then December...if it is not working like that, I cannot explain it... it means that you have a margin on the plants... if I receive an order of one thousand tonnes, two thousand tonnes [to be produced in one month, A.N.] it means that you have plants that allow you to do so, in the sense that it is not saturated because otherwise you do not do what you have already acquired before and do not risk to be late... you have concentrated everything... (A.)

The issue of planning ahead and organising work rhythms and workloads is closely linked to production methods: “we no longer work [produce, A.N.] just in time” (M.), but “in stock, now [Arvedi, N.A.] produces because later he thinks it costs [prices could rise, A.N.]” (A.) The problem identified by the workers is that:

“

This is speculation in the sense that you make production by stock and not by order 'in anticipation of'... they worked just in time... the last period... it means: you make me an order and I put it into production... like in the car... that is ideal... (M.)

The decisive point is the nature of the commodity produced, namely stainless steel, the production of which requires raw materials that are quoted on the financial markets:

“

What costs most of all is nickel which is quoted on the stock exchange, and you originally buy it in dollars and then convert it into euros...so you are subject to fluctuations in the price of the raw material...the exchange rate...the producers then decide...it's like gas... (A.)

With respect to the type of goods they produce, workers emphasise the enormous difference with a product whose production costs do not depend (so closely) on financial market trends. They draw a comparison with the iron produced at the Cremona site also owned by the Arvedi Group. The variability of costs is clearly indicated by one worker:

“

Iron has a value ranging from EUR 100 per ton to more or less EUR 650 per ton... stainless steel can vary from EUR 400/500 per ton to as much as EUR 3000 per ton... (M.)

The volatility of raw material prices for stainless steel is experienced by the focus group participants as a real problem:

“

The first thing they [the company, N.A.] really underestimate is that you run a steel mill like this one that makes stainless steel in same way they run a steel mill that makes iron... you make a bloodbath in this way...(..) if you buy with certain costs thinking that then the prices will go up and then instead the opposite might happen (M.)

The instability of these dynamics, “the discourse of making purchases in such a, shall we say, nervous manner” (A.), is attributed not only to the market's ‘rules of the game’ but also to a different mode of corporate strategy pursued in recent years, which is seen as having little long-term and historical perspective:

“

Why many years ago did we have two types of processing in the steel mill? We had stainless steel and we had magnetic steel. Why? Magnetic steel, which the new owners now want to bring back, has a market that is, more or less, stable... stainless steel goes up and down, up and down... and with one you cover the risks of the other... in a few months with stainless steel you have stratospheric earnings but yet you could also risk losses... I won't say substantial, but losses, nonetheless. Whereas magnetic steel allowed you to be always stable, so you always recouped your costs... something that is no longer there since 2004, when it was taken away from us by Germany [ThyssenKrupp, N.A.] (M.)

Ultimately, the absence of an industrial plan, the increase in raw material prices and the volatility of their prices puts the other element — labour — in a condition where it is difficult to foresee how work will be structured within the plant: “(...) but this creates another type of problem... when is the workforce expected? how much does it have to produce?... it's complicated, I'm a worker, there are managers who study these things” (M.)

The instrument adopted by the company to manage production activity is the Cassa Integrazione Guadagni (CIG)⁷. This social security cushion consists of an economic benefit provided by INPS (National Social Security Institute) to workers during temporary periods in which their pay falls due to a (partial or total) reduction in work activity. The causes may be connected to companies' difficulties on the market or temporary events which are not attributable to either the employer or workers. This instrument allows for jobs to be maintained, as the employment relationship is preserved. Indeed, workers will return to work once the company's moment of difficulty has passed; at the same time, CIG allows the employer to not lose skilled workers and avoids the dispersal of the workforce. With the Russia-Ukraine crisis, the Italian Parliament expanded the cases for which this security cushion can be used, and it now also includes firms' difficulties finding raw materials and energy sources⁸.

So, AST workers “are doing Cassa [CIG, A.N.], not 100 per cent, [but] in rotation... 400 workers” (AL.). When the worker says that this social security mechanism is being used “in rotation”, he refers to its use by rotation between the different departments of production and with respect to the professional statuses that must in any case be guaranteed and present in the factory.

“

(...) for example, we have two team leaders... one of them has to come and the other one can be the cashier... then the second employee... one has to come and the other one can rely on CIG...according to the professional statuses ... they made us manage it as a team... it's enough that five come and the professional [presence] is guaranteed... and then we decide among us who stays at home, who is on CIG... and it's a complicated operation because [it] impacts on the salary (...) (L.)

⁷ D.M. 95442/2016

⁸ MINISTERIAL DECREE 67/2022

“

You lose your bonus money because you stay at home, it directly touches your pay slips... and out of 8 of us, 3 are on CIG... according to professional status, those who don't work according to the specific day” (C.)

Thus, given the professionals that has to be guaranteed in the departments, the workers decide for themselves how to manage the rostering of who can go to work and who must be on CIG. This creates quite a few difficulties, as there are

“

(...) those who take it as an opportunity and say 'well, I'll never come', those who want to come all the time, those who don't need the money but have nothing to do at home and would like to work... it's difficult to manage in this way... and I assure you that even in a close-knit team like mine [it] is a problem because... those who do the accounts in their pockets... those who want to work will (L.)

Discussion of how the CIG is managed brought up the theme of the relations between workers and between workers and the company, which are portrayed as complex if not outright problematic.

“

(...) Eventually these issues all come up... as much as, I repeat, you are forced to do it... as much as you try to justify and all that... (AL.)

These aspects will be addressed in the next section, where we will also describe what the workers themselves consider to be the limits to mobilisation.

Relations with the company and relations between workers

The workers see several difficulties in the way they interact and dialogue with the company. The workers' main demand is related to their safety at work, which there is the possibility of mobilising over:

“

On job security you don't run away, you stop [strike, A.N.] the plant, then everyone there goes crazy, and they may listen to us (C.)

The issue of poor safety is interpreted in connection to the corporate history of AST, which — I will remind the reader — was formerly owned by ThyssenKrupp:

“

(...) because we come from a history in which ThyssenKrupp for a series of reasons, and rightly so... we were fine with it, we'd like it... it looked at safety in an almost maniacal way [said with an almost liberating tone, A.N.]... instead we see that here with the new ownership these reins have been loosened... quite a lot too... they look a little more to production and a little less to safety... so I think we should fight a bit for this... (M.)

A second problematic issue identified by the participants is the corporate positioning and style adopted by the owners: “surely the organisation of work is bossy, it is not shared” (A.). In fact, as one participant makes clear, the problem is:

“

“(...) also for something related to rights... when the president, who wants to be called like that... showed up and said ‘I don't like strikes’... eh, I understand... one has to see if everything is

⁹ The serious tone and unspoken subtext are related to an occupational accident that occurred on the night of 6 December 2007 at the ThyssenKrupp plant in Turin. Seven workers died as a result of a spillage of boiling oil that caught fire. The CEO of ThyssenKrupp Acciai Speciali Terni s.p.a. and five other managers were convicted over the accident.

¹⁰ RSU stands for Rappresentanza Sindacale Unitaria (unitary union representation), a trade-union organisation established in every workplace (whether private or public.)

going well, if it isn't going well we have to do something, we need to strike... it's my right to do it, so... I mean... it's not that I'm doing anything that the Constitution tells me not to do, this is something that I think we'll have [a problem with], with the new owners” (M.)

Relations with the new owners are marked by great uncertainty regarding the hiring of contractors:

“

We are in a period of transition as regards the relations with the company, all contracts are disappearing... it's up to them to see how they will interpret these things... but all the workers feel a detachment from the company (AL.)

At the same time, it becomes clearer that employee and employer have very different visions of “work”. Indeed, the workers assert their own unity, regardless of the specific employment relationship and contract:

“

He [Arvedi, A.N.] showed up on the first day, summoned us as the RSU¹⁰, and immediately boasted: ‘in so many years [of activity as employer, A.N.] I have never dismissed anyone’...he boasted about this (C.)

As the worker points out, the failure to dismiss is not a matter of merit but of justice. The worker adds that this reasoning cannot be limited to AST's direct employees but must also include all the employees of the outsourced companies, pointing out that there should be different kinds of treatment:

“

Right now, there are 70 families who don't have a salary because the external companies haven't renewed... so it's not that you don't kick me out because I'm AST and you kick S. [a colleague, A.N.] out... because he works in the company, he's still a person, he's still got a family. Here our supply chain is at risk, maybe half are reabsorbed, and the other half stay at home (C.)

It is worth noting that there are considerable wage inequalities between AST's direct employees and workers outsourced through a contractor: “[doing] the same type of work but with a different shirt means that there is a three-to-four-hundred-euro diffe-

rence [in monthly pay] and, see... not all contracts are contracted in the same way” (AL.)

The front of worker mobilisation, however, is more complex. Again, the low activation is also the result of historical events at the plant:

“

(...) it is also a child of the old disputes... because when you were at home for 45 days... we were on strike 45 days in 2014 and, then, you come back [to work]... you don't solve... 400 people, mind you, were not fired but in exchange for a sort of exit bonus that was nothing but pennies in my opinion... because after all those years of work it's four pennies... you leave and you lose 400 jobs that have not be replaced... people get a bit pissed off... when the dispute was over, the cost of labour had increased by 6 million with the change of management, certainly not for us... divide it up for those who really create wealth! and not for those who send e-mails and hold meetings to solve nothing (M.)

The participants also impute the difficulties in dealing with a strike to a cultural and political divide, which operates on a generational level:

“

(...) it is no longer something for us, it's about ‘me’, the problem is generational, one only thinks of oneself and that is why it is difficult to unionise in the workplace because everyone thinks of themselves and never of the collective... politics...they look for you when they need something... the sense of belonging is something very few people have (...) (L.)

They [the young people, A.N.] would like something... if I go to him [to a trade unionist, A.N.] ... he does me a favour... but what he does to me if it concerns someone else, it's fine, if he does it to me, it's a generational way of thinking. Many years ago, there were old people and they used to talk to me... now the new kids are coming... I was enraptured ... when he [an older and former colleague, A.N.] told me that he had gone to protest against the war in Vietnam I was enchanted (...) (M.)

The generational problem is not a mere contrast between a better past and the current situation in terms of labour rights and the value of work. Rather, the workers identify a specific difference owing to the issue of workers' formation in politics and trade unionism.

“

We [the younger generations, A.N.] didn't fight for anything compared to our parents, we found everything done, before you had an education, respect, a sense of justice... if you had a pen you knew that your father made it for you and it was the best pen... it wasn't a pen, it was your father's sacrifice to make this pen... now the pen is here, this pen is broken, do you know how many there are? (M.)

Yet one worker notes that there is no vast difference in working conditions as compared to previous generations: “I don't know... from the stories I was told by the people who taught us how to work, there were the same problems” (AL.).

In this regard, the difference which the workers mention is the lack of solidarity that is sometimes experienced and perceived:

“

(...) but there's a lack of solidarity because if you stay at home with mum and dad there's no need, they have a family, but there are many who stay at home with mum and dad who are longing for money... and [they say] ‘I want to work too’... unfortunately this is the reality... then there's also that solidarity: you do 2 days [of work], I do 3 days etc... this is also there for charity¹¹ (M.)

The discussion was a reflective engagement on why workers face limits and difficulties in acting and mobilising. This not only brought out how “this problem at the social level in my opinion undermines a lot the coexistence inside the factory, the interpersonal life” (L.), but also highlighted the implications which this has for relations with the company. One worker observes that the workforce's weak position implies greater strength on the employer's side of things: “(...) they wallow in these conditions...they wish it was always like this for them” (M.). Nevertheless, the workers' power to fight for the improvement of their conditions continues to be recognised and claimed: “surely if we, as workers, were more united in recognising the objective matters of justice, the company at some point would have to bend” (A.).

In conclusion, the aim of this section has been to report the workers' words on issues concerning working conditions and possibilities for mobilisation. In the next paragraph, therefore, we will discuss what has been described thus far.

¹¹ Here, solidarity is connected to letting workers who need to do so to go to work, instead of leaving them to rely on CIG

IV. DISCUSSION

This section discusses the main issues that emerged in the focus group and that were thematised and described in the previous section. The question guiding this discussion of the data is: “what do AST workers tell us about working conditions? What do they help us understand about the transformations of labour?”.

Two issues seem to emerge from the focus group data. The first relates to the processes of financialisation of the economy and the impact it has on the distribution of power between classes; the second refers to the dynamics of depoliticisation of work, understood as a focus of collective rights. If below these two aspects are addressed and discussed separately, this is only for analytical purposes and for the sake clarity of exposition, since in the direct experience of those who work, in the material processes of capitalist reality, they are intrinsically connected.

The historical origin of the entry of finance into the productive economy can be traced back to the crisis of the accumulation regime which capitalism encountered in the 1970s. Attempts at recovery saw interventions geared towards overcoming the Fordist-type social structure of accumulation, in order to instead hinge on a neoliberal institutional model (Kotz, 2018). Essentially, the political problem was to find new ways and opportunities to valorise capital. The solutions identified on a global scale, and which relate most directly to the argument we intend to pursue, were those of financial market deregulation and labour market deregulation (Palley, 2005). Financialisation thus means “the increasing importance of financial markets, financial motives, financial institutions, and financial elites in the operation of the economy and its governing institutions, both at the national and international level” (Epstein 2005:3). The expansion of financial markets and financial interests increasingly exposes both economic relations and people’s political and social lives to the risk of instability and unpredictability. The “not knowing what I have to do next month” so clearly expressed by one worker during the focus group, is definitely illustrative of the feeling of uncertainty and dependence on matters over which one has little control or decision-making power. The link between financialisation and living conditions — and, therefore, the dramatic consequences that a financially-driven accumulation regime can have on the lives of us all — was clearly seen in 2008 with the subprime crisis in the United States and the subse-

quent fallout in the non-financial sector throughout the rest of the world; and in more recent history with the exponential increase in energy prices due to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, as reported by the direct experience of AST workers.

A system in which profit is obtained through patterns of accumulation in which profits accrue primarily through financial channels rather than through trade and commodity production (Krippner 2005:174) implies a growing social inequality and unequal distribution of power in favour of capital, due to stagnating wages and the polarisation of incomes between workers and shareholders (Stockhammer 2012; Fli-gstein and Shin 2004; Foster 2007). On the labour front, there has been a form of attack through the deregulation of the labour market, which since the 1980s has seen what appears to be an irreversible process of precarisation of labour contracts and a collateral decrease in employment protection (Kotz 2008). The lowering of labour costs thus represents a resource that plays into the weakening of bargaining power on the part of trade unions and workers and, conversely, favours a margin of profitability for productive and financialised enterprises, or enterprises whose production costs depend on financial markets for the purchase of raw materials such as AST. The feeling of precariousness experienced by the workers participating in this study — with respect to the discontinuous intensity of work and the rostering used in CIG management, as well as a loss of wages — is typical of what happens within a financialised global economy. This impossibility of predicting and somehow controlling the processes that affect labour, which take place “in other locations,” namely at the level of finance, and thus escape the possibility of influence by the workers themselves, was already felt during the 2014 mobilisation. It is interesting to note how the uncertainty of one’s employment is independent of its actual contractual form but seems, rather, to be related precisely to the market mechanisms of contemporary capitalism.

The shifting of the places where choices are made, where political and economic decisions are formulated — in short, of the exercise of power — towards locations and with respect to issues which it is complex to influence, refers to another historical process called “depoliticisation”. It consists in a mechanism through which the economic power, interests and values of market actors have succeeded in establishing themselves as a neoliberal paradigm of action. This analytical key, in fact, highlights the shifts and mutability of the exercise of contemporary power between social, economic, and political actors in different policy domains, thus emphasising the dynamics and interests by which courses of action are constructed. Depoliticisation represents a genuine political strategy of governance (Jessop, 2014) that occurs “in the shadow of hierarchy” (Fawcett and Marsh 2014) within a framework of post-democra-

tic modes of governance (Crouch, 2004; Norris, 2011). Implying processes of power arena-shifting, the sphere most obviously affected by a process of depoliticisation is that of the removal of fields of action from the control of representative democratic institutions as sites of decision-making and conflict between alternative positions. In this sense, the processes of privatisation of state-owned enterprises, accompanied by deregulation of financial markets and the labour market, the privatisation of traditionally public sectors, aimed at freeing capital from forms of control and restrictions on the space of circulation, represent the mechanism and resources by which capitalism has succeeded (and still does succeed) in systematically reproducing itself.

What emerged during the focus group seems to refer to two specific subcategories of this process. The first refers to a societal depoliticisation indicating “the transition of issues from the public sphere to the private sphere (...) and the shift towards individualised responses to collective social challenges (...)” (Wood, Flinders 2014: 165). The second one consists in a discursive depoliticisation, namely “(...) the transfer of issues from the private realm to the ‘realm of necessity’ in which (...) language and ideas (...) depoliticise certain issues and through this define them as little more as elements of fate” (ibid). As the participants in the study recounted, there is a kind of individualistic conception of work in which the collective dimension and class interest seems, if not entirely lost, certainly blurred and weakened. That is to say that work seems to have lost the capacity to be the same terrain of political conflict between capital and labour which characterised entire seasons of struggles, claims and mobilisations in the 1970s. The AST workers who took part in the study do pose that season of powerful mobilisations as a horizon to be reconquered — a memory and culture inherited from the workers’ struggles that took place throughout AST’s history, which represents a universe of values and symbols to be understood as a political resource. This is not only the outcome of reform processes in the mechanisms of market regulation, but also a process of depoliticisation that directly involves the worker’s very subjectivity. The narrative construction that has been pursued around the issue of labour, and the justificatory repertoires that have legitimised the commodification of labour, have seen the progressive erosion of the worker’s sense of belonging to a class. When it was said during the focus group that the new generations, i.e. those portrayed as having less political consciousness, make recourse to the union on issues that directly and individually impact the situation of the individual applicant for assistance, this seems to represent a significant dynamic with respect to the norms and

values that qualify the public and political discourse on work. That is, it is understood not as a right but an individual responsibility, a question of personal merit. Conversely, unemployment — and this is clearly evident in the Italian public debate on the *Reddito di Cittadinanza*¹² — far from being discussed as an outcome of structural market processes, appears to be a status attributed to the individual as a demerit and, fundamentally, a matter of the incapacities of the person thus blamed. Thus, the accelerating rise of the neoliberal values of individual responsibility and activation, as pivotal principles which regulate the supply side of the labour market, profoundly affects the worker’s consciousness. For he no longer sees the links with other workers and the persistence of his own condition. In other words, the position of the worker within the market mechanisms is normalised as an individual condition, to such an extent that it becomes something of common sense from which it is difficult to escape even by exercising conscious and critical reflection.

Thus, work that depends on global-level financial market trends, and a conception of work and non-work as matters pertaining to the individual dimension, pose considerable challenges to collective action. Indeed, the challenges posed to labour seem to delineate a shift from a society based on a social contract to one based on individual contracts. Here, it is the individual who takes on the uncertainty of socio-economic risks that in the Fordist era, on the contrary, represented the subject of compromise and bargaining between capital and labour.

These two macro-dynamics outlined here, which we read in the words and positions of workers in Section 4, also profoundly question the role that trade unions and trade associations can play in helping to combat inequalities generated by the market from a systemic perspective. The disintegration involving the debasement of social solidarity and forms of collective identity, which characterised the Fordist-Keynesian regulatory model, poses significant problems with respect to issues of equality, redistribution of resources and fairness. It requires us to return to using and re-qualifying words such as social justice, since language and the meanings attributed to it are not secondary but are themselves institutions and thus, like any other institution, have the power to constitute and regulate courses of action. We can understand this from a line a former AST worker used during the day spent in Terni for the focus group: “words are not just words, in fact they steal those too”. The experience, commitment and testimony of the AST workers who participated in the focus group teaches us that spaces for re-appropriation are possible.

¹² An economic subsidy for the lowest income brackets, adopted in Italy from 2019 (and repealed in 2022) . It provided for a strong conditionality in the maintenance of the benefit, thus offering a workfare rather than a basic income measure.

V. CONCLUSIONS

This chapter addressed the issue of the working and living conditions of workers employed in a factory. The selected case study, Acciaierie Speciali Terni, allowed the workers' experience and their own words to bring out the impact of global and historical processes of transformation of capitalism's modes of accumulation. In particular, it has been seen how the financialisation of the economy and the dependence of companies on financial speculative trends heavily conditions workers' lives in terms of precariousness and uncertainty regarding their future.

At the same time, the space for trade union struggle to claim their rights as a working class seems to suffer from a limitation, which owes to a dynamic of depoliticisation of work as a field of collective action and organisation in favour of a thematisation of work as an individualised issue. However, the workers involved showed how the sense of belonging to a common condition and the sharing of a trade union culture are somehow felt to be the historical heritage of the Acciaierie and of the trade unionism there.

This space of awareness deserves to be further investigated and questioned with further analysis and research as it seems to be a resource capable of directing political action towards a (re)socialisation of a conflictual work culture. This also means trying to grasp which modalities and instruments of struggle can be pursued.

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THE CASE OF PUBLIC HEALTH CARE IN MADRID:

THE ONGOING CONFLICT

Beatriz Casas González

In October 2022, doctors in the Madrid public health care system, supported by some sectors of society, engaged in a mobilisation against the decision of the president of the Community of Madrid, Isabel Díaz Ayuso (Partido Popular) to reopen the 78 out-of-hospital emergency departments without budget or staffing. This was the trigger for an infinite strike called by family doctors and paediatricians in Primary Care in November 2022, which was still ongoing as of March 2023.

The current mobilisation for decent public health in Madrid represents the latest expression of a conflict that — as the present report will show — has been going on for more than a decade. It is, therefore, not new nor is it exclusive to the Community of Madrid, although the Madrid case has its own characteristics that differentiate it from the situation in other autonomous communities in Spain. Madrid is the region that spends the least on healthcare (€3,000 million less than the rest of the Spanish State)¹³. The working and health care conditions in the public health system in Madrid are, according to the workers interviewed for this research and according to the data provided in this report, particularly deficient by comparison with other regions. The responses of the Madrid executive, which the interviewed workers define as “imposition” and “absolute disregard”, also differ from more sensitive responses given by other regional governments. All this explains the long duration of the mobilisation by medical staff in Madrid, especially in primary care.

The motivations for this research are both sociological and political. From a social-scientific point of view, the present study seeks to understand the keys to the current health conflict in Madrid through the perspectives of the workers (medical staff of public health centres) directly involved in it. It therefore considers the background of and triggers for the mobilisation, with special attention to two of the major global crises of our time: the coronavirus pandemic and the energy crisis. Further, it analyses the limits and scope of such mobilisations from the perspective of the workers and asks about their objectives and demands for the future.

Among the political motivations of this research is the desire to share strategies and direct experiences of mobilisation in order to learn from them for future labour conflicts. And, of course, to make them visible and make them known to a wider public, inside and outside the Spanish state.

¹³ II Diagnosis of the Health and Health System of the Community of Madrid 2022



THE CONFLICT OVER PUBLIC HEALTH CARE IN MADRID

Background: White Tides¹⁴ (2012-2014)

In 2011, and following the 2008 crisis, the Spanish Parliament, succumbing to the pressure from the European Central Bank, voted to reform the Constitution to require 1) a cap on the country's budget deficit, and 2) the payment of public debt before any other state expenditures, including public services¹⁵.

A year later, in October 2012, the Minister of Health of the Community of Madrid, Javier Fernández-Lasquetty, announced a plan to “substantially lower the costs of the health system”, stating that “following the crisis funds to finance the system had dwindled drastically”. This so-called Plan for measures to guarantee the sustainability of the public health system (a fragment of the original is shown on the right side of this page), proposed numerous changes that would have direct impacts on users of the health system: it would require co-payments for prescriptions, would change the status of the level of care for some hospitals, and privatise the operation of six hospitals and 27 community health centres across Madrid's region. To justify this decision, the government noted that it would increase efficiency, result in improved clinical outcomes and higher satisfaction among patients.

This was not the first time that the government of the Community of Madrid took steps toward privatisation: smaller attempts were made in 2003 and later in 2008, for which the government also blamed the economic crisis. Some of these effects were longer waiting lists and lack of availability of some medical devices. However, the 2012 proposal would mean drastic changes that would create even greater problems for patients and pose a threat to the public health system.

In response, the Marea Blanca, or “White Tide” movement (in reference to the white coats of healthcare staff in Spain) rose up in opposition to the proposal. Actions spread rapidly from city to city across

the Community of Madrid and finally culminated in a region-wide strike which gained the support of their patients and local people.



¹⁴ This summary is largely taken from the article “Spain: Marea Blanca, A Rising Tide Against Privatization”, published by the People's Health Movement

¹⁵ Art. 135 of the Spanish Constitution

List of White Tide demonstrations¹⁶ :

- 9 December 2012: Video calling for the #WhiteTide
- 16 December 2012: Demonstration from Madrid hospital to the main square, “La Puerta del Sol”
- 19 December 2012 the Madrid Assembly was surrounded in defence of public health and against the plundering of health care, in the action known as “Rodea la Asamblea”
- 7 January 2013 Demonstration for public health care on 7 January 2013 in Madrid
- 17 February 2013: National White Tide
- 23 June 2013: National White Tide
- 22 September 2013: White Tide of 22 September 2013
- 27 October 2013: White Tide of 27 October 2013
- 19 January 2014: White Tide of 19 January 2014

¹⁶ Source: 15Mpedia [last visited: 25.1.2023]

Although the present case study focuses on the mobilisations taking place in the Community of Madrid, it is important to remark here that the mobilisations in Madrid were never a regional exception, either now nor back then. Indeed, the Marea Blanca had a nationwide character involving several organisations across Spain (an exhaustive list can be checked here).

After five weeks of strike action, on 27 December 2012, the government of the Community of Madrid—with the conservative Partido Popular holding an absolute majority of seats—passed the proposed plan. In response, AFEM (Asociación de Facultativos Especialistas de Madrid, in English: Madrid Association of Specialist Doctors), who initially called for the strikes, petitioned the High Court of Justice of Madrid to stop the implementation of the plan. On 11 September 2013, the Court ruled that the plan for privatisation must stop, stating that it is so extraordinarily broad that if the plan was to be carried out, it would create irreversible legal situations, if any irregularities were discovered later on.

Following an appeal against this decision by the government, the Court upheld its decision against the privatisation plan. On 14 January 2014 the president of the government, Ignacio González, announced that he would abandon the plan to privatise the public health system and the minister of health, Javier Fernández-Lasquetty, resigned. In 2019 Fernández-Lasquetty returned to the Madrid government as the new Minister of Finance and Public Function in the government of Isabel Díaz Ayuso, a position he still currently holds and which makes him one of the main political interlocutors in the present conflict.



Demonstration at the gates of the public hospital “12 de Octubre” in Madrid — Source: 15Mpedia

The Coronavirus Pandemic (2020-2022)

The coronavirus pandemic in early 2020 and its effects on the public health system reignited the wave of national protests. Spain was one of the countries within the European Union hardest hit by the pandemic. In June 2020, Spain had the highest number of healthcare workers infected by COVID-19 (55,000 people) globally¹⁷.

The pandemic aggravated the pre-existing problems in the health sector (precarious working conditions, privatisation, lack of investment, low pay for health workers, etc.), pushing public health workers to the limit.

In Madrid, as in other autonomous communities, demonstrations were called by different groups (such as the “Sanitarios Necesarios” movement, trade unions, professional organisations and the Marea Blanca platform). On 1 June 2020, the “Sanitarios Necesarios” movement made a national call to gather in front of the health centres to defend a “quality and fair” healthcare system (a copy of a banner calling for the mobilisation appears on the right side of this page).

Also in June 2020, in Madrid’s Puerta del Sol, at a rally organised by the same movement, the people attending the rally showed their rejection of privatisations in the public system and demanded improvements in working conditions.

Shortly afterwards, in July 2020, the MIR Strike Committee took to the streets of Madrid in defence of the rights of resident medical staff (a picture of one of these protests is shown in the next page).

A few months later, in October 2020, there were nationwide strikes and protests by the MIR collective to denounce “endless working hours for precarious wages, lack of rest and shortage of supervision.”¹⁸

In early September 2020, the Association of Doctors and Graduates of Madrid (AMYTS), the main

¹⁷ Euronews [30/6/2020]: Protestas de los sanitarios en Francia y España

¹⁸ El País [22/10/20]: Resident doctors on strike



Call launched by the “Sanitarios Necesarios” movement on 30 May 2020
Source: Twitter

doctors’ union in Madrid, announced the call for an “indefinite and complete” strike in response to a “unanimous request” from workers. In a statement on 10 September the doctors denounced “a situation of overloaded care for years, with a significant deficit of human resources”. According to their figures, there was a shortage of more than 600 family doctors and more than 150 paediatricians in the community, even before the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to AMYTS members, this, together with “the shortage of economic resources and the worsening of the situation in recent months due to the pandemic” had led to “an unbearable extreme” of



MIR at one of the protests in September in Barcelona. Albert García
Source: El País

work and “a deterioration in the quality of patient care”¹⁹. The strike was called off at the end of September, after an agreement was reached with the Community of Madrid with measures on pay, organisation and bureaucracy, on the removal of non-clinical activity from the surgeries, and on attracting doctors to the region²⁰.

On 27 October 2020, after learning of the full content of Royal Decree Law 29/2020, dated 29 September, the Executive Committee of the State Confederation of Medical Unions (CESM) called a general strike of medical staff throughout Spain, demanding the text’s withdrawal.

¹⁹ El Mundo [11/09/2020]: “Doctors call indefinite strike in the health centres of Madrid from 28 September due to the “unacceptable limit” of work”

²⁰ El País [27/09/2020]: “Primary care doctors’ strike called off after reaching an agreement with the Community of Madrid”

According to statements made by the CESM, published by *La Vanguardia*²¹, “the supposed lack of doctors being aired by some administrations” is in reality “a lack of availability in the face of the deplorable working conditions in which professionals are being forced to work”. Furthermore, they denounced how “the procedure for implementing these measures, which leaves the way open to the autonomous communities for their subsequent application, means further increasing the heterogeneity in the working conditions of doctors in the different health services”.

The CESM also maintains that the regulation establishes “the option of forced mobility of doctors, not only physically but also between different levels of care”. This meant putting patient safety at risk, since “it is undermining the regulation of the profession, legalising professional intrusion and delegitimising the system of specialised health training”.

In November 2020, the national strike was postponed due to the epidemiological situation. But the rallies at the gates of health centres and hospitals throughout the country and at Madrid’s Puerta del Sol, organised by the doctors’ unions AMYTS and CEMS, were maintained. In the Community of Madrid, the second day of strike action in hospitals and SUMMA 112 (the Emergency Medical Service of the Community of Madrid) took place on 24 November 2020 to demand a series of labour and service improvements.

Protests continued throughout the pandemic, across Spain. In December 2021, marches organised by 110 bodies took place in many provincial capitals, with the backing of the major trade unions, to draw the governments’ and citizens’ attention to the state of primary care, which had been forgotten during the pandemic. There was a lack of face-to-face care and resources, and delays in consultations. As reported by the newspaper *El País*²², the main demands were to return to full attendance and end the saturation that “prevents good health care”, in the words of Marciano Sánchez Bayle, president of the Federation of Associations in Defence of Public Health, one of the associations who organised the marches. The recipe proposed was more budget and more staff.

Already in 2021, in the context of these demonstrations, there was a warning about the risks to public health posed by the closure of outpatient emergency services from March 2020 in the Community of Madrid. In 2018, the last year for which data were available, these services provided 741,072 consultations, which had to be referred to the overcrowded hospital emergency departments or not provided at all. The decision of the president of the Community of Madrid, Isabel Díaz Ayuso, was to reopen the 78 out-of-hospital emergency departments on 27 October 2022, but without budget or staffing. According to the plan presented to the unions, of the

360 doctors who worked in all the centres, only 210 would continue doing so²³. Ayuso’s decision fanned the flames of a conflict that, as we have seen, has been active for years and is still burning.

The present conflict in Madrid (October 2022 - present)

→ The reopening of outpatient emergency services

Beatriz García García, a family doctor affiliated to the professional trade union AMYTS union and interviewed for this research, also points to the reopening of outpatient emergency services as the starting point of the current conflict. As García recounts, the conflict erupted again in September 2022 when Ayuso announced her intention to reopen the 78 outpatient emergency centres — the so-called SUAPs (Servicios de Urgencias de Atención Primaria) in the urban municipalities of the Community of Madrid and their equivalent in rural centres, SARs (Servicios de Atención Rural) that she had closed in March 2020, due to the pandemic.

The SUAPs and SARs constituted the third pillar, together with hospital emergency units and primary care, of the Madrid public health system. One of their purposes is to support primary care health centres, open in the morning (from 8am to 3pm) and in the afternoon (from 3pm to 9pm). The outpatient clinics covered the health needs of the urban and rural population during the closing hours of the health centres (i.e., from 9 p.m. to 8 a.m. on weekdays and 24 hours on weekends). At the same time, they relieved the burden on hospital emergency units, attending to those urgent cases that it was not necessary or possible to refer to hospitals. This was the system that, despite the difficulties outlined above (staff overload, lack of budgetary investment, precarious recruitment conditions, etc.) was in place before March 2020.

The closure of out-of-hospital emergency units, coupled with the retirement of medical staff, and the health risk that remained among healthcare staff following the pandemic, led to a profound change in the structure and resourcing of the public health system in Madrid. The reopening of these centres is, in García’s words, an “electioneering measure, because there are no staff”. The out-of-hospital emergency units were now given a new name: Puntos de Atención Continuada (PAC). The SUAP staff had been relocated to other centres as a result of the pandemic, which meant that there was a lack of staff to open the new PACs. As García explains, the lack of staff especially affects doctors, because there has been an imbalance at national level and parti-

cularly in Madrid, where “doctors are treated worse and many have left for peripheral communities or abroad.” According to the Spanish Medical Association²⁴, in 2021, as in previous years, Catalonia (988) and Madrid (749) are once again the autonomous communities that issue the most certificates of suitability (a document required for doctors to work abroad). Therefore, the problem of lack of medical staff, as already mentioned above, already existed. Without guaranteeing the necessary staffing, Ayuso “suddenly wants to open — and opens 80 centres in a weekend”.

Medical staff posts in the SARs (both permanent and interim staff) were cancelled “from one day to the next” by means of a communiqué and became part of a common pool of workers. Doctors were informed by email or SMS where they would be working the next day, “which generated a lot of conflict”. Shortly afterwards, the government of the Community of Madrid realised that it could not open the PACs due to a lack of medical staff. The solution it offered was to move the doctors — sometimes even several times a day — to different centres, with hardly any notice. “As a result, the population never knows where there is a doctor, because they come and go.”

The vacancies thus left empty are not easily filled, since most workers (i.e., family doctors already employed in the SARs working overtime) do not want to volunteer for poorly paid additional shifts. “Obviously, there are a few weeks of chaos, there are very few volunteers, because primary care is already overloaded, and most people don’t want to work in poorly paid optional shifts”.

In November 2022, a massive demonstration in defence of “100% public, universal and quality healthcare” took place in Madrid. According to neighbourhood associations that organised the protest, 670,000 people gathered to denounce the healthcare policy of Isabel Díaz Ayuso’s government, which invests the least in this area among all regional governments, despite being the richest community in Spain²⁵. According to a report published in 2022 by the Federation of Associations for the Defence of Public Health (FADSP) and the trade union CCOO, Madrid is the region that spends the least on health, 3.7% of its GDP. It is also the penultimate region that spends the least money per inhabitant: €1,340 a year²⁶.

That same month, the Community of Madrid and AMYTS agreed to reduce the number of PACs they were going to open from the 80 centres announced to 49 (39 centres in rural care and 10 in primary care) with medical staff, nurses and caretakers, in exchange for a halt to the strike in outpatient emergency services. The call for an indefinite strike in primary care, however, was maintained.

The current situation “is chaos, because every day there may or may not be a doctor in the care centres. And some SARs have had to close, despite having functioned very well before and during the pandemic, because there is no doctor. Sometimes there is only one nurse dealing with emergencies, with the risk to the health of the population that this entails²⁷. This also affects other professional categories, such as nurses, who are forced to take on extra tasks outside their area of responsibility. As a result of all this, “many of the people working in the SUAPs and SARs have resigned from their permanent positions because they do not want to be working under these working conditions,” which have been aggravated in this new context, but have been deficient for years.



²¹ *La Vanguardia* [27/10/2020]: Doctors call for a general strike throughout Spain for “dignity at work”

²² *El País* [12/12/21]: Thousands of people march to “save” Primary Care knocked out by the pandemic

²³ *El País* [13/10/22]: Health workers strike in Madrid over the out-of-hospital emergency units that Ayuso will open with almost half the number of professionals

²⁴ Cristina Castro, in *El Independiente* [17/2/2022]: Exodus of doctors: 2021 sees record number of certificates to work abroad

²⁵ Patricia Peiró and Elenea Reinas, in *El País* [13/11/2022]: This is how we have told you about the massive demonstration for public health in Madrid

²⁶ II Diagnosis of the Health and Health System of the Community of Madrid 2022

²⁷ On 22 December 2022, a nine-month-old baby died in the out-of-hospital emergency department of Paracuellos (Madrid) where there were no medical staff. *Diario Público* [23/12/2022]: La muerte de un bebé en las Urgencias extrahospitalarias de Paracuellos reaviva la preocupación por la falta del médico

In addition, says García, the SUAPs and SARs had resident doctors to support the team that they no longer have. In view of the current situation, resident internships in the SUAPs and SARs have been cancelled because it is not possible to guarantee that, once the resident medical staff have travelled to the centre in question, they will find it open, or that they will not be transferred to another centre in the middle of the day. Without medical staff, the training and supervision of the resident staff cannot be guaranteed, nor can it be guaranteed that they will be able to carry out their work. Thus, there has been a deterioration also for the future, García concludes.

→ Primary care overload

The problem of overload in primary care is another key axis of the conflict. According to the Federation of Associations for the Defence of Public Health (Fadsp), the maximum quota established for family medicine staff is 1,500 patients per practitioner. This quota is actually exceeded in many primary care centres in Madrid, reaching 2,000 patients/professional or more. Fadsp data show that 57% of all doctors in Madrid exceed the quota of 1,500 patients/doctor, and 8% of them 2,000 patients/doctor. In this regard, Madrid is the Autonomous Community with the worst data, “surpassed” only by the Balearic Islands²⁸.

But the number of patients is not the only relevant indicator when talking about quality of care in public health. There are also socio-economic factors (age, gender, social class) that influence the complexity and time of medical care required by each patient. People with fewer resources and greater care needs are those who are most affected by this specific situation and, in general, by the dismantling of the public health system.

Overburdened primary care generates work stress for medical staff and deficiencies in medical care for the population in the form of long waiting times, lack of time and dedication of medical staff to each patient, etc.

The solution offered by the Community of Madrid is to pay for excess patients, as a salary supplement based on “productivity”. In this respect it is important to note that the medical profession in Spain, and specifically in Madrid, is one of the lowest-paid in the European Union with a basic salary of €1,000/month. Hence the economic relevance of such salary supplements. And yet, as García explains, “there are things that cannot be paid for with money”. While salary increases are one of the demands of the strike (see the list of demands drawn up by AMYTS in the appendices), the solution to the problem of

overload in primary medicine is, from the point of view of the workers involved in the conflict, a greater investment in public health, in general, and in medical staff in particular. This is the only way to ensure that medical professionals can carry out their work with dignity, and that patients receive quality medical care.

The lack of medical staff has been particularly serious in the case of the afternoon shift (from 15:00 to 21:00) for years. These positions are very difficult to fill, because this timetable is not easily compatible with social and family life. The population assigned to the afternoon shifts is therefore often deprived of medical care. For the medical staff on the morning shift, it means an extra overload, as they attend to patients on the afternoon shift who are “abandoned”. Incentivising the afternoon shift is indeed one of the main demands of the strike.

Other regions in Spain have afternoon shifts that end with the morning shift, and after the afternoon shift ends, emergency care is provided. Limiting the timetable, as in this case, is a way of encouraging the afternoon shift, but not always possible due to logistical limitations (in some centres there are not enough consulting rooms to cover two shifts in parallel).

Another option to incentivise the afternoon shift would be to offer stable contracts for medical professionals. Forty percent of doctors in Spain have temporary (weekly or even daily) contracts and in Madrid the situation is even worse. In this Autonomous Community, 52% of the hospital contracts are temporary, and in hospital urgencies 82% of the doctors do not have a permanent contract²⁹. Temporariness makes it difficult to reconcile work and family life (e.g. in terms of maternity/paternity leave, access to mortgage loans, etc.). Again, the proposal of the Community of Madrid is to pay more to encourage the late shift, “but there comes a point where it is not a question of money, nobody wants to work until 9 p.m.”.

The basic issue, García explains, is that “management is very poor, which has a negative impact on working conditions and on the quality of patient care”.

²⁸ *El diario.es* [19/1/2023]:

The key to saturation in primary care lies in ratios: half of the doctors are assigned to more than 1,500 patients

²⁹ Berta Ferrero in: *El País* [12/4/2022]: Hospital doctors in Madrid revolt against 52% of temporary contracts

II. METHOD

Collection and processing of data

The present study combines two qualitative methods of collecting empirical material: a semi-structured interview (i.e. the topics of the interview were planned in advance, but leaving room for others to emerge during the conversation) and a focus group. The focus group represents the main method of collecting empirical material, the interview serves as a support for understanding the context of the current conflict, as presented in the previous chapter.

The interview took place one day before the focus group, on 18 January 2022 via Microsoft Teams and lasted approximately 60 minutes. Its content was recorded (with the consent of the interviewee), in order to be able to listen to it later and thus reproduce it faithfully. The interviewer, Beatriz García García, is, as already mentioned, an active family doctor in the Autonomous Community of Madrid, affiliated to the professional trade union AMYTS, who has first-hand knowledge of the current conflict.

The interview covered the following topics in depth: the organisation of the health system in the Community of Madrid, before and after the Coronavirus pandemic; the origin of the present conflict and demands to the Community of Madrid; a clarification of key terms and assessment of the questions planned for the focus group. The main points of the interview are summarised in the previous section [“The present conflict in Madrid (October 2022 - present)”).

The focus group took place on 19 January 2022 via Microsoft Teams and lasted approximately 105 minutes. A total of eight people took part (all of them medical staff currently working in different public health centres in Madrid). Six of them were members of the professional union AMYTS (again, AMYTS stands for “Association of Doctors and Graduates of Madrid”). It is, as already said, the majority medical-staff union in Madrid, and the only one calling for the primary care strike in Madrid at the time of this research. Of the other two participants, one has no trade union affiliation, and the other is a member of the class union UGT (General Workers’ Union). A list

with the details of the participants, who have consented to appear non-anonymously, is attached as an appendix at the end of this report.

The focus group participants were recruited mainly through AMYTS and, to a lesser extent, through personal contacts within the medical sector in Madrid. Other trade union organisations (both the main trade unions in Spain, CCOO and UGT, and the anarcho-sindicalist organisation CNT, as well as professional nursing unions) were contacted to participate in this research, but I did not receive a response from them.

The topics that were addressed in the group were largely in line with the questions set out as an appendix at the end of this report. The conversation was recorded, for the same reason as stated above (that is, for later re-listening and thus being able to faithfully and accurately reproduce its content for the purposes of this research), after having sought the consent of the participants. The audio is not intended to be shared with third parties.

Subsequently, the content of the recording was transcribed selectively, but in great detail and close to the text, with many passages transcribed verbatim. The transcript was shared with the focus-group participants prior to the publication of this report, in order to ensure that the content of their interventions was reproduced correctly, and they were all happy for their statements to be quoted in a non-anonymous manner. The interpretation and analysis of these statements presented here is, however, exclusively my own.



ON THE FOCUS GROUP

Strengths and limitations of the focus groups

Strengths:

+ Large group

Encourages a plurality of perspectives and fluency of conversation

+ Presence of important figures in the ongoing labour conflict

It provides first-hand information about negotiations with the municipal government. In addition, their longevity within the union offers a first-hand perspective on the union's history and the current conflict and a deeper understanding of the inner workings of the union

+ Heterogeneity in terms of age, gender, career path, speciality and workplace

Encourages a plurality of perspectives

+ Favourable group dynamics, fluent conversation in an organic way with hardly any intervention from the moderator

It fits in with the sense of this methodology, which is to promote horizontality, to focus on the experiences of the participants (taking the voice of the person responsible for the research out of the equation), and to allow space for group dynamics

+ Plurality of opinions, space for debate

This point also coincides with a main objective of the focus group as a research method, which is to allow differences of opinion to be expressed among the participants

Limits:

- Over-representation of AMYTS

Their positions carry more weight in the debate, and it is more difficult to get a view of the conflict from different perspectives

- Absence of executive positions from other unions

Their perspective on the conflict remains unclear and it is not possible to know their reasons for not joining the current strike of medical staff in Madrid called by AMYTS

- Absence of other job categories

It is not possible to know the perspectives on the conflict among other categories of workers, and their motivations for not supporting the strike

About the group dynamics

Ángela Hernández Puente takes a particularly active and relevant role in the discussion, most probably because of her position as the General Secretary of AMYTS, which is at this moment the only union representing medical staff in the negotiations with the Community of Madrid and the only one calling the strike. Of all the participants, she was the one who spoke most often and the one who spoke first after each question. The interventions by the other participants often took her intervention as a point of reference: in the case of the other AMYTS members,

to agree with her and complete their position by raising other points in the same line of argument, or to disagree with her and introduce a different perspective, as often happened with the interventions of Alberto Gil Cacho (the only participant affiliated to another union, namely the UGT).

The group dynamics were at all times favourable to debate, leaving room for a plurality of opinions. The conversation flowed organically with hardly any intervention on my part as moderator. All those present participated in it, albeit to different extents, as I mentioned earlier. In this respect, it is important to emphasise that the existence of group dynamics such as the one described here is neither an exception in focus groups nor a problem for the development of this method. On the contrary, it is a characteristic of any group and one of the fundamental aspects that the focus group as an empirical method aims to collect and analyze, as is the case here.

Presentation of the results of the focus group

→ On the self-identification of the trade union actors involved in the conflict

AMYTS is a trade union of graduates and medical doctors. Its aim is to defend the interests of the professional category of doctors. They define themselves as "doctors looking after doctors". They are, in the words of their general secretary, "in politics, but not politicised".

The other labour union represented in the focus group is the General Workers Union (UGT). It represents workers of all professional categories in the health sector. Alberto Gil Cacho, the only participant member of this union introduces himself as a "grassroots activist of the class-based trade union UGT". At present UGT does not support the strike in primary care and paediatrics.

→ Diagnosis of the current state of public health care in Madrid

The focus group participants corroborate the diagnosis of the current state of public health care, and specifically of primary care in Madrid, presented by Beatriz García García -see section "The present conflict in Madrid (October 2022 – present)."

Ángela Hernández Puente (AMYTS) points out that on the AMYTS website there have been warnings since 2011 that primary care paediatrics was losing many professionals and that if medical staff were not attracted to paediatrics, care would have problems, as in fact is happening. In line with García, Hernández claims that afternoon shifts have "practically disappeared" in paediatrics, despite the fact that the Community of Madrid boasts that it is the only community where afternoon shifts are offered in paediatrics. Family care services are also "very badly affected" (for instance, five doctors are missing from a team of ten), although this problem does not affect all health centres equally, as the situation is very heterogeneous, i.e. there are centres where there are more and others where there are fewer professionals. In those where there is a lack of staff, the situation is "very tough" and there are people in Madrid who have no family doctor or paediatrician assigned to them. They are being attended by other doctors, whose quotas are being overloaded. AMYTS made the problem visible even before the pandemic. "Our colleagues were in a situation of learned helplessness and did not even have the strength to denounce the overload to which they were subjected, seeing between 40 and 60 patients a day for weeks at a time. The shortage of medical staff in Spain, similar to that found in other European countries, is not due to a lack of medical schools or resident doctors who have completed their residency. It is due to a lack of the conditions that would make it attractive to work in these positions", says Hernández.

Victoria Velasco Sánchez, a family doctor and AMYTS's coordinator of Occupational Risk Prevention corroborates this view of the situation: "We have agendas of 60, 70, 80 patients a day and we have a maximum of 4 minutes per patient, which is not reconcilable with the care we want to give patients in the speciality we have chosen, Primary Care". The overloading of primary care staff, as well as the poor conditions in this speciality, leads professionals to opt for other specialities or to relocate to other communities, she adds.

Susana Rodríguez de Cos, also a family doctor (AMYTS), delves into the lack of staff in family and community medicine, where around 20% of vacancies are unoccupied, for various reasons, and in paediatrics and primary care, where there are around 30% vacancies. "This is why we, family doctors and paediatricians, are most tired categories and the most eager to move."

Javier Bermejo, Delegate and President of the AMYTS section for SUMMA 112, illustrates the current situation in out-of-hospital emergency units, where approximately 250 out-of-hospital emergency doctor posts have disappeared. PACs (Continuous Care Points) have been created which are only staffed by nurses, and there is a high percentage of

health centres which should have doctors at night and on public holidays, but which do not have them due to uncovered sick leave. The same staff have to deal with twice as many health centres, and this has disorganised the whole service. "In SUMMA, some of the workers have been lost because they belonged to these SUAPs (Primary Care Emergency Services) which have now become PACs. Another part of the staff of the SUAPs has gone to form part of the mobile units, which has also led to the loss of workers there. A significant percentage of workers will now be more or less forced to take part in a transfer competition in order to make the service work. At the moment there is no fully defined portfolio of SUMMA services, since after the reorganisation the SUMMA services have to be redefined", Bermejo explains.

→ *Current assessment of the conflict: What is the present situation, how has it reached this point and what is the future objective?*

According to Ángela Hernández (AMYTS), "the conflict is currently at a point of little progress in the negotiations. In reality there has been no real progress at any point, unlike in other Autonomous Communities, where the regional government meets with striking workers before the scheduled strike date."

From her point of view, "Madrid's regional government has not been negotiating, but rather imposing. They committed to speed up the issue of demand control, in other words, that family doctors and paediatricians should not start the schedules without any control over them, without knowing how many patients there are going to be. But this is also being delayed", she points out. And she adds: "The Regional Council said that the pilot programme would be launched on 11 January 2023, which was not fulfilled. Then they promised to start the programme on 18 January, which was not the case either. Another conflict, from which they did come out with an agreement, but which is not being fulfilled, is the out-of-hospital emergency units of the SARs, now called PACs. As a result, there is a lack of confidence, due to previous breaches of agreements after the September 2020 strike and previous breaches in 2007."

As Hernández tells us, on the same day that we organised the focus group (19/1/23) a group of Family Medicine and Paediatrics professionals began a lock-in at premises provided by a neighbourhood association in Manoteras (Madrid); this action was not taken at the initiative of the Strike Committee or AMYTS, but was supported by them. In her view, "this action responds to their tiredness because the Health Regional Minister and the President of the Government of the Community of Madrid did not

meet with them (unlike previous conflicts, such as the residents' strike in 2020). The aim of the action is to make the current state of the conflict visible. Demonstrations are being continued, they are awaiting the response from an intermediation of three national doctors, external to AMYTS and the Regional Ministry, although at the moment it seems that the latter does not want to accept the intermediation."

→ *Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on mobilisations*

According to Victoria Velasco (AMYTS), "the mobilisations of the last two months have been notably different, with a notably different awareness on the part of professionals, compared to what it had been up till now. Probably because we have seen that we have come out of a pandemic and we have not been able to revive primary care under any circumstances," she reflects.

During the pandemic, AMYTS continued to raise awareness and mobilise despite the obstacles faced, as Hernández (AMYTS) reports: "To overcome them, we sought imaginative solutions, such as buses to the health centres that had the most problems in paediatrics and family medicine, rallies with mannequins, etc. It was very difficult for doctors that the authorities did not recognise their efforts during the pandemic, even telling them that they did not want to see patients and insinuating that they were not doing their job well, when their workload throughout the different waves of the pandemic has been enormous and brutal. Medical staff had hoped that the pandemic would raise awareness of the importance of healthcare and the need to strengthen it. When they saw that this was not the case, that everything remained the same, the conditions for a perfect storm were created".

→ *Impact of the energy crisis and the rising cost of living on mobilisations*

In this respect, Ángela Hernández Puente (AMYTS) explains that "medical salaries in Spain are fourth from bottom among OECD countries. In other words, we were already starting from a low level. During the crisis of 2008-2010, a proportional cut was made (i.e., doctors' salaries were cut more than those of other categories), while recoveries have been very meagre (around 2-2.5% per year) and of a linear nature. Therefore, our purchasing power has not reached where it was at in 2008. Evidently, the repercussions of this new crisis affect us like they have other citizens, and, like everyone else, we have had to pay twice as much for petrol and diesel. In addition, with the increase in Euribor, those of us

who have mortgages have seen their purchasing power fall, like everyone else. My perception is that, however, this has not had an impact on the mobilisations. The demands are not primarily economic but are for dignity in working conditions." Hernández's position is also subscribed to by Beatriz García and Victoria Velasco (AMYTS).

→ *Strike demands and future goals*

There is broad consensus within the group on the general objectives for the future and the demands for the strike, which are set out below, with the exception of the budgetary issue. This, in the opinion of Alberto (UGT), should be one of the demands of the strike, since, according to him, "change requires, among other things, an increase in the real budget for primary care, which will therefore affect recruitment and improvements in the working conditions of doctors and paediatricians."

However, from Hernández's (AMYTS) point of view, the budget is a political issue that should be raised by the opposition in the Madrid Assembly. In her own words, this "is a humble political strike to improve practice conditions and to attract more doctors. In other words, the health budget is something that goes way beyond us". Yet, she shares the content of Alberto's demand: "Obviously we agree that Madrid should exceed the 10.77% percentage that the health system currently devotes to primary care. The national average for primary care is 15% and the desirable figure would be 25%" (a figure that the Madrid regional government claims is allocated to public health, but which, as Hernández reports, is false, because it also includes spending on pharmacies).

The following is a list of the strike demands and future objectives put forward by each of the participants in the discussion:

For Javier Bermejo (AMYTS), the aim is "to give stability to the health system, in general, and to primary care in particular, with sufficient investment, which will not only affect doctors, but also other sectors, but where we need to focus most urgently right now is on primary care doctors and paediatricians. We must also raise the issue of out-of-hospital emergency units, which have practically been dismantled and require stability because they are an important anchor for the population, in terms of care".

Susana Rodríguez de Cos (AMYTS): "Our aim is dignity in healthcare and quality patient care. In primary care, many things can be done, and many things can be done well, as long as the managers lead us towards this goal".

Victoria Velasco Sánchez (AMYTS) shares this call: "Dignity in the practice of family medicine, consideration for the human factor of patients, recognition of medical work, investment in primary care, to attract professionals and maintain the quality of Primary Care."

Carlos Jimenez, 4th year resident in Family and Community Medicine (without union affiliation): "The goal should be to make the vacant posts in health centres which currently have shortfalls attractive to resident doctors and to enable them to practise in Primary Care. The aim is to reduce the unevenness which is the scourge of the system in Madrid. The centres with the greatest shortcomings in care are precisely those in the most deprived neighbourhoods, most difficult to reach. That would be the minimum objective."

Ángela Hernández Puente (AMYTS): "The objectives for the strike are the control of demand and regaining trust between professionals and managers by fulfilling the agreements. And the general objectives are: union, respect and recognition for the medical profession, as opposed to the fragmentation and deterioration caused by parties of all colours over the last three decades."

Javier Ortega López (AMYTS): "In hospital medicine we are in a period of reflection and surveying, to see whether we should mobilise or not, what our historical demands are and what has happened to them. The aim is to dignify our profession in every sense: quality of care, coexistence with the patient and with the family."

Beatriz García García (AMYTS): "I agree with the claims of my colleagues, the issue of heterogeneity is key and there is a strong need to make the afternoon quotas and the most under-resourced centres with the greatest care needs attractive to the population. In general, the goal is respect, unity and above all dignity in order to be able to work in a stable manner in the future."

Alberto Gil Cacho (UGT): "The goal is to comply with WHO recommendations, 20%-25% of the total health budget for primary care. To safeguard conditions and rights, both for patients and staff, a long-term strategic plan at the level of the Autonomous Community should be developed, in which social agents and political parties and the government of the Autonomous Community of Madrid itself participate."



→ Mobilisation strategies

As we have seen, there is largely consensus among the participants on the current state of public health in Madrid and the demands of the strike.

But we find differences in the assessment of both the magnitude and impact of the mobilisations and the strategies of AMYTS

especially between the only UGT militant present in the conversation (Alberto Gil) and the rest of the attendees (mostly AMYTS members). What follows is a reproduction of the interventions made by the participants. No interpretations on my behalf have been introduced here; my own analysis comes in the following section "Discussion of the results."

→ On the follow-up and impact of the mobilisations in Primary Care

According to Ángela Hernández (AMYTS), "family doctors and paediatricians are very mobilised, the current mobilisation is a kind of rebellion or medical uprising. There is a feeling of now or never". As she puts it, "the mobilisation in out-of-hospital emergency units was a real catalyst for the primary care centres to also ask us to go on strike, and we went into it as a medical union, because others did not want to go. It is up to them to explain their reasons." Hernández adds that "AMYTS has made a very big effort to unify, inform and involve all the relevant medical organisations in the Community of Madrid (all the scientific societies of family and community medicine, all the scientific societies of paediatrics, the Association of Specialist Doctors of Madrid, AFEM, and AP se mueve), and only the College of Doctors has remained on the side-lines. That institution must also explain why. Overall, however, this is, in my experience of ten years of trade unionism, an unprecedented unity".

Regarding the duration of the conflict, she insists that "it will last as long as the family doctors and paediatricians ask us to. We meet online, via open Te-

ams meetings, bringing together between 450 and 550 attendees, with the risks involved in sharing links on social media and holding open meetings, without the Regional Council's ears slipping in. The way we work is not by assembly, but by means of surveys (two have been carried out so far) to try to get a feel for what the professionals want to do. We are at their service; we are not doing anything else". According to Alberto (UGT), "although the demands of AMYTS for a strike in primary care and paediatrics are very, very interesting, its follow-up and impact have not been as successful as AMYTS believes". He refers to it as "discrete" and compares these mobilisations with others that he deems more multitudinous and as having prompted greater media coverage and debate, even at a national level, such as those of November 2022 in the Community of Madrid or those of the residents in 2020. From his point of view, "the mobilisation of primary care initially had a large following and then deflated very quickly."

Then spoke Javier Bermejo (AMYTS), emphasising the support of the population both in the mobilisations in out-of-hospital emergency departments and subsequently in primary care, which were on a greater scale than in previous conflicts. The mobilisations have put the spotlight on the situation of public health in Madrid. Support continues to this day from patients, despite the fact that they are affected by the strike. This conveys a sense of support for the striking workers.

In this regard, Victoria Velasco (AMYTS) acknowledges that "it is very difficult to maintain an indefinite strike every day; the very significant follow-up at the beginning has diminished, but the movements are still there" (in this sense she refers again to the lock-in at the neighbourhood association in Manoteras, mentioned earlier by Ángela Hernández and covered that same morning by the press). In the words of Velasco, "we cannot say that the mobilisations at this time have not been important".

With reference to the residents' strike of July 2020, mentioned by Alberto (UGT) as a point of comparison with the current mobilisation, Susana Rodríguez de Cos (AMYTS), recognises that "the residents were very well organised in social networks and in assemblies by hospital and that AMYTS only channelled them". As a figure for the mobilisation, she points out that "every Monday for four weeks between 1,500 and 2,000 residents took to the streets. However, right now the demonstrations of family doctors and paediatricians bring together some 4,000 people, probably not only medical staff, but also from other professional categories who are aware of the situation and the population". She cites as an example the demonstration the previous day (18.1.2023), which despite the cold weather was attended, according to AMYTS estimates,

by between 1,500 and 2,000 people (in the Community of Madrid, family doctors and paediatricians number a total of 5,000, she points out as a reference). "The figures, therefore, are very important and are comparable to the mobilisations of residents in 2020. What is not explained is why the Community of Madrid met with the residents and the strike committee back then, while this time the strategy is one of absolute disregard. The Regional Health Minister has not attended any of the meetings with the Strike Committee, let alone the President of the Community of Madrid taking an interest in the issue". This opinion is shared by other participants.

There is also controversy among participants as to why there is not more follow-up

On the one hand, they share the view that, as Velasco (AMYTS) pointed out, it is complicated to maintain an indefinite strike because of the economic cost to striking workers. On the other hand, there is a consensus among the participants that the heterogeneity in working conditions between the different health centres in Madrid acts as an obstacle to greater mobilisation. In this sense, Carlos Jiménez explains from his experience that "in the health centres that are better off (e.g., in the central area of Madrid), workers support the strike, but do not actively support it."

Beatriz García (AMYTS) agrees with Jiménez's assessment, and adds that "because many doctors in these health centres with comparatively better working conditions are not many years away from retirement, they don't feel [the mobilisation] is their problem". In this sense, we would have to consider how best to reach those doctors who do not support the strike."

This discussion as to why the primary care strike is not more widespread gives rise to

another topic of debate, namely why other professional categories do not take strike action

Gil Cacho (UGT) agrees with Jiménez that the diversity of conditions acts as an obstacle to broader mobilisation by medical staff. From his point of view, "it would have been a guarantee of success to

have support for the strike from other professional categories that historically are and have been more active union members than the medical staff". He recalls that the residents' strike in 2020 was also supported by residents from other specialisms and professional categories. He characterises it as a "more transversal mobilisation, which brought together other categories around the common experience of being a resident."

In October 2022, five unions called for an indefinite strike in out-of-hospital emergency units, namely the Nursing Union (Satse), Comisiones Obreras (CCOO), the Association of Doctors and Graduates (AMYTS), the Coalición Sindical Independiente de Trabajadores Unión Profesional (CSIT UP) and the General Union of Workers (UGT), against the decision of the Community of Madrid to reopen out-of-hospital emergency departments without budget or staffing. The joint call, as Hernández (AMYTS) says, "is not easy, because each organisation has its own interests. There are three unions that cover all professional categories, there are two of a professional nature (SATSE for nurses and AMYTS for doctors), but all five of us were clear about the need for a joint response. This did not last more than the week and a half that the strike lasted; the reasons would be the subject of another debate, where executive representatives of the other organisations would also be present", says Hernández.

Gil Cacho (UGT) is of the opinion, in this respect, that "it was a success" that the five trade union organisations were united in the out-of-hospital emergency strike. It is necessary for the other political and trade union actors to self-criticise as to why the doctors and paediatricians have gone on strike alone, which is detrimental to achieving benefits for Madrid's public health system."

Further, he shares Hernández's analysis that primary care lacks such working conditions as would make it attractive (temporary work, patient quotas, precariousness). However, in his experience, this is not a reality that only affects Family Medicine: "in Nursing the groups are as high or even higher. In fact, a large part of home care falls to Nursing, and this results in an exodus of nursing staff to other autonomous communities and abroad. The problem is transversal and civil society is demanding a union for a much more comprehensive fight, as far as public health is concerned," he reflects.

Hernández (AMYTS), referring to Alberto's criticism of the lack of support from other professional categories, insists once again that those who have to explain why they do not mobilise, faced with the precarious situation of primary care in Madrid, are the professionals of other professional categories themselves. "We, as AMYTS, can only mobilise doctors and not other categories. Or we could, since

we are a trade union organisation, but that would be greatly disloyal towards other trade union organisations. It remains to be seen what happens after the fresh meeting on 26 January between AMYTS and the other unions." And she concludes: "it is a complex dance, that of the health sector and representativeness".

According to Beatriz García (AMYTS), "the lack of support from other professional categories has to do with the very specific situation of primary care medical professionals, who are the categories with the greatest shortfalls. This worsening situation has been much more noticeable in recent years, and the overload taken on by medical staff, across all specialisms, is much greater than that taken on by other categories, such as nursing. Although the deficiencies in the working conditions of doctors affect other categories. So, I don't understand why they do not mobilise."

Gil Cacho (UGT) believes that "the low turnout for the strike has to do with the fact that it is very complicated to organise a strike only with the highest echelons of the health system." While he agrees with Hernández's analysis of the shortcomings in the working conditions of medical staff, he believes that the demands do not reach the population". He refers to a conversation with colleagues, where they commented on the fact that 6 out of 10 voters of the current government (of the Community of Madrid) are convinced that this strike is political and that it does not represent the interests of public health. So "as trade union organisations and above all as activists who are mobilised in defence of public health, we must be self-critical", Gil concludes.

That the demands do not reach the public is an opinion shared by García (AMYTS) too: "It is not heard, it does not reach enough, it is not clear why we are moving. There is work to be done".

In this respect, Hernández (AMYTS) reports that family doctors are collecting signatures in all health centres (in mid-February 2023 they had collected more than 120,000 of them). Both public health users and all professional categories can participate in this action. "But so far, workers from other professional categories are not showing much participation, with messages that do not express much solidarity, of the type: why am I going to collaborate if this is only for doctors? Well, we'll see what the point of all the categories is when there are no doctors," says Hernández.

The opinion of Gil Cacho (UGT) on this issue is that "we need to talk about patients, about waiting lists in primary care, from one to three weeks long, and a lot of explanation on our part of what is happening in primary care is needed. And for that it is necessary to invite other categories, but the discourse

of AMYTS does not end up convincing those who we have to convince, that is, voters and the general population, who are the users of public health care in Madrid".

→ *On the addressees of the demands, and calling off the strike over Christmas*

Beyond this issue, there was a diversity of opinions within the group on other strategic questions, such as the decision to call in the Health and Finance Departments and the calling-off of the strike over the Christmas 2022 period.

Alberto Gil (UGT) criticises the fact that at first the demands were addressed to the Regional Ministry of Health, and in the middle of the strike, the Ministry of Finance was singled out. This mistake was almost made by the residents during their strike in July 2020 and was a turning point where they almost lost the negotiation, he explains. Gil states: we, as health staff, should protest in front of the Regional Ministry of Health and then it should be the Regional Minister of Health himself who negotiates with the Treasury and, if necessary, assumes the political consequences of not reaching an agreement with the head of the Treasury."

For her part, Ángela Hernández (AMYTS) argues that the decision to involve the Regional Treasury has to do with their status as statutory personnel. This marks a difference with respect to agreements resulting from strikes in the workplace, which have the status of a committee agreement and are ratified for the regulation of the company's workers. As Hernández explains, "in the statutory sphere in the Community of Madrid they have tightened things up quite a bit with budget support laws that were put in place during the crisis in 2010. This means that any proposal has to have the approval of an economic report from the Treasury, and this has significantly reduced the scope of action of the Regional Ministry of Health. For this reason, AMYTS has insisted from the outset that there had to be representatives from the Department of Health and the Department of Finance, or someone from the Government of the Community, who had sufficient authority to be able to carry out these agreements."

In addition, Hernández recalls that during the residents' strike, the Treasury and Health were always addressed. Hernández defends the continuity of the AMYTS strategy, followed from the first meeting, of approaching the Health Department, specifying that if they could not make a budgetary commitment, the Treasury would have to be consulted.

Susana Rodríguez (AMYTS) goes into more detail on this issue and points out that "the decision to inclu-

de the Treasury has to do with the fact that in September 2020, the Regional Health Ministry said yes to some agreements that it failed to comply with, with the excuse that the Treasury was absent. For this reason, involving the Treasury does not mean a change of strategy by AMYTS."

Another mistake pointed out by Alberto (UGT) is that of "calling the strike off during the Christmas holidays, because it is strange and complicated to read. I know that it is difficult to maintain an indefi-

Discussion of the focus group results

Underlying some of the main points of debate presented above is a conflict between two opposing understandings of trade unionism. On the one hand, a class-based trade unionism, which makes use of politically charged concepts (such as "social class", "neoliberalism", "activist") and positions itself ideologically and politically as defender of the interests of the working class. On the other hand, a corporate trade unionism, which does not see itself as the representative of a social class but of a professional group (in this case, medical staff) and understands its work as "non-politicised". In the words of Ángela Hernández Puente, Secretary General of AMYTS, "the fact that it is AMYTS, a professional union, which is leading the strike, removes much more risk of politicisation. If other unions were leading the strike, politicisation would be assured, because of the way they are financed and because of the history of political links of other unions. We have no such links...

We are accused of politicisation, on the one hand by the government and on the other by those who really have partisan interests". Although Ángela Hernández does not specify who she means by "those who really have partisan interests", one can infer from the context of the mobilisation and from her interpellation at that moment to the only UGT member ("I'm not saying it for you"), that she could be alluding, broadly speaking, to other unions, such as UGT and CCOO, which do have an explicit political orientation and historically share links with left-wing political parties. Therefore, as is clear from this intervention, class unions defend "partisan interests" and are susceptible to "politicisation", "because of their historical links and their sources of funding" - in reference to the public subsidies received by all trade union organisations that have been represented in trade union elections.

nite strike, but on a political level this was a very big mistake, and a way out should have been sought." According to Rodríguez, calling off the strike before Christmas "was an act of goodwill that was asked of us by the council. One of many that we have been doing, after seven meetings sitting at the sectoral table. We were asked for a reasonable amount of time to reach agreements and AMYTS gave it to them. The criticism of Alberto reminds me of the regional ministry's speech to discredit AMYTS and I don't agree with it at all."

That the labour conflict is "politicised" means that it has been rendered political in tone, interest, or awareness³⁰. Hernández uses the term with a negative connotation and in relation to third parties (others politicise or are politicised), from which she dissociates AMYTS as an organisation. Thus, "the government of the Community of Madrid should have much more responsibility and much more sense not to do it" [so as not to politicise] and "the fact that it is AMYTS, a professional union, that is leading the strike removes much more risk of politicisation".

This contrasts with the way in which Alberto Gil (UGT) approaches the conflict, as a "class issue", and therefore political in its very content, and not just in the means employed, as Hernández argued: "we are in politics, obviously, because we want to change things, but we are not politicised in one sense or another".

However, it is necessary to mention in this regard that the AMYTS strategy of dissociating itself from any form of politicisation is not only related to a corporatist understanding of trade unionism, but also to the context of the mobilisations and the way in which they are being carried out. There is a strategy of discrediting the strike, pursued by the Government of the Community of Madrid and its media, which consists of accusing AMYTS of instrumentalising the conflict for "political" purposes, in the sense of partisanship³¹.

³⁰ Collins Dictionary

³¹ To take one random example: *El Debate* [26/2/2023]: Enrique Ossorio: "The strike is not a health strike, it is political and is being followed by a ridiculous number of people"

The two forms of trade unionism (class and corporatist) and their differences emerge in the talk at several points: with regard to the characterisation of the trade union organisation to which they belong; whereas Gil (UGT) introduces himself as a “grassroots activist of a class union,” AMYTS members refer to their union as “doctors who look after doctors.” The difference becomes evident also in their approach to the current conflict. While for Gil, the present conflict has a “more global character,” affecting the health system as a whole (“doctors are a fundamental pillar of the public health system, but so are the rest of the staff of other professional categories,” he states), AMYTS focuses on the working conditions of medical staff (“the overload assumed by medical staff, in all specialisms, is much greater than that assumed by other categories, such as nursing,” claims García; “We will see what sense all the categories make when there are no doctors,” Hernández notes).

When Alberto Gil (UGT) says that “the defence of public health is a class issue”, he is referring to the population as users of the public health system. “Those who cannot afford to pay for private insurance or are unwilling to do so because they consider public health to be an earned right will see their health threatened when they have to wait three weeks for an appointment with their family doctor or paediatrician”, argues Alberto.

Although Alberto does not put it in these terms, one can detect in his discourse the idea that the present conflict is a class problem because it affects all workers in the health sector as providers of the health system. Gil stresses the cross-cutting nature of the labour problem and therefore of the demands of the strike: “The problem is transversal and civil society is demanding a union for a much more comprehensive fight, as far as public health is concerned.” And he adds that “it would have been a guarantee of success to have the support for the strike from other professional categories that historically are and have been more active trade unionists than medical staff”.

It should be observed here, as a side note, that the coexistence of two different ways of understanding and experiencing trade unionism also exists in other countries. Thus, for example, health care staff in public hospitals in Germany experience a similar situation, in that staff are organised and mobilised through different institutions. For example, doctors in public hospitals in Berlin, such as Charité and Vivantes, mobilised in October 2022³² through the corporate union Marburger Bund, a professional association and specialised union of doctors in Germany. Meanwhile nursing staff in those same hospitals (on strike for fifty days in October 2021)³³ are organised through the class union ver.di (in English, United Service Union, affiliated to the German Federation of Trade Unions, DGB). Here, too,

the question of solidarity between professional categories arises, as a nurse from the Charité hospital tells us in an interview for the online media outlet communaut.org³⁴.

Another difference between the two forms of trade unionism is expressed in the different terms of the criticism that Alberto Gil (UGT) and Ángela Hernández (AMYTS) make of the regional management of public health. “AMYTS does not make political analyses” (Hernández), but her personal opinion is that “the different regional and national governments, regardless of their colour, have washed their hands and accuse the other party (i.e., the national government, in the case of the regional governments, and vice versa) of bad health management for partisan purposes.” Alberto makes a differentiated criticism of the management of the Community of Madrid, which he describes as ideologically “neoliberal” (again, a term with a markedly political character). For him, the case of Madrid represents a “much more radical change of paradigm, in terms of the issue of introducing neoliberal ideology and privatisation and more management formulas that put the public system in check. (The relationship between privatisation and the deterioration of the health care is also supported by the already cited report published by FDASP and CCOO).

Gil adds: “In the Community of Madrid there is a strategy that there is no better way to privatise a health system than one that works badly. This needs to be explained and goes far beyond the demands of doctors. The problem must be approached in a more comprehensive way and as what it is, a class issue and the defence of the public sector.”

³² Press release of Marburger Bund [26/9/2022]: Warning strike at Charité on 5 October — central rally in Berlin Mitte

³³ Press release of Ver.di [29/10/2021]: After 50 days of strike, at the goal

³⁴ Interview in Communaut.org by Toni Suricato (5/2/2023): Strike must emancipate

V. CONCLUSIONS

The primary health care doctors have, at the moment of writing this report (March 2023) been on indefinite strike since November 2022 (with the exception of a truce period around Christmas 2022). At the beginning of March 2023 the doctors in hospital emergency units joined the strike, too³⁵

Madrid’s conservative regional government has during the last two decades followed a strategy of privatisation of the health care system, to the detriment of the quality of public health care. Thus, as we have shown in this report, the lack of decent conditions for the exercise of public health care is not a problem that arose for the first time with the coronavirus pandemic. However, it is true that the COVID-19 crisis was a turning point for the current mobilisations. On the one hand, it aggravated pre-existing problems (overload, lack of medical staff and lack of recognition of the work of health workers); on the other hand, it gave rise to a profound disenchantment among professionals when they realised that, after the “enormous” work taken on by health workers during the pandemic, the situation of the public health system showed no signs of improving.

The other crisis that we have considered for this research, the energy crisis and generalised inflation, has negatively affected the living conditions of medical professionals, but it is not at the origin of the mobilisations, whose demands are “for dignity in practice and not primarily economic”.

With regard to the interpretation of the results of the focus group, there was general consensus in the diagnosis of the working conditions of medical staff (overload due to lack of staff, precariousness and temporariness in recruitment, heterogeneity in working conditions between different health centres, lack of recognition of medical work, etc.) as well as in the demands of the strike (dignity in working conditions, guarantee of quality patient care, control of demand, recovery of trust between doctors and managers through the fulfilment of agreements). Only the budgetary issue is the subject of debate: should the budget increase for primary care be one of the demands of the strike, as some claim, or does this go beyond the framework of the demands of a political strike, as others maintain?

There are also differences over mobilisation strategies, in particular the decision to address the Treasury and the Health Service and the decision to call off the Primary Care strike upon Christmas 2022. Moreover, the opinions of the participants in the focus group diverge on the scale and impact of the mobilisations and the reasons for the lack of a larger strike turnout. On the one hand, they all agree on the difficulty of sustaining an indefinite strike and that the heterogeneity of working conditions in the different centres in the Madrid region makes it difficult to mobilise more widely. However, they differ as to who is responsible for the decision to call a strike exclusively for doctors. Here AMYTS points towards the other trade union organisations for not supporting the strike and notes a lack of solidarity on the part of workers in other professional categories. Alberto Gil (UGT) criticises the AMYTS message for not addressing other professional categories, despite the fact that they are also affected by the same poor working conditions that underlie the mobilisations of medical staff. As I have argued in the previous section “Discussion of the focus group results”, the divergence of opinions and approaches identified here is largely related to differences between corporatist trade unionism and class unionism, represented here by AMYTS and UGT, respectively.

Despite these differences, all participants agree on the need to reach out to more workers, both medical and non-medical, as well as to the general population. The conflict is still ongoing, and the mobilisation is spreading to other sectors of the public health care system. The demonstration last November shows that the defence of public health is one of the few issues in Spain bringing together tens of thousands of people to take to the streets. At least, when society perceives that it is under attack. What the final outcome will be still to be seen; what is sure is that there is a lot at stake. It is about the right to decent working conditions and to decent public health care.

³⁵ SER [1/3/2023]: Total strike in Madrid’s public health system: hospital doctors join the primary care strike

3

THE CASE OF THE YELLOW VESTS MOVEMENT:

BACK TO MOBILISATION,
FOUR YEARS AFTER THE BEGINNING

Louison Suberbie

At the beginning of 2023, France was the theatre of a major social movement to defend the legal minimum pension age at 62 years old. Three months after strikes in many sectors for improved wages, the first day of mobilisation was a clear success for organisers, with almost 1.5 million protesters on the streets across the country, according to trade unions. Behind this important reaction by workers seeking to protect their pension system, this mobilisation also shows a general state of contestation which has been emerging among the working classes in recent years, in opposition to the neoliberal agenda pursued by the government despite the difficult economic conjuncture. In a period in which workers, and especially precarious workers, have seen their purchasing power collapsing — after the economic recession caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the inflation stemming from the war in Ukraine — the government has followed its policy of austerity. Indeed, beyond this pension reform itself, we could mention, for instance, the 25 percent cut in social benefits for unemployed people, after a decree on 27 January 2023. This undermining of the welfare state in a context of social tensions and a difficult economic conjuncture reminds us, four years after its beginning, of the Yellow Vests movement. It began in November 2018, when workers and the precarious gathered around roundabouts to demand decent purchasing power but also a more equal distribution of wealth and a better tax system. Beyond their sociological composition, these two movements share similarities at the level of political discourse, also through their demands regarding the value placed on precarious work.

In this specific context of the resumption of the social movement, this chapter seeks to take us back a few years, in order to gather a few elements to understand Yellow Vests activists' participation in this emerging mobilisation. The questions that guide our approach are the following: What changed on the political level since the Yellow Vests movement? How have the COVID-19 pandemic and inflation impacted the mobilisation and everyday lives of Yellow Vests activists?



METHOD

This chapter is based on a dual qualitative methodology, combining four semi-structured interviews as well as a focus group. The semi-structured interviews were conducted between December 2021 and February 2022.

These interviews were conducted with activists who were initially involved in the Yellow Vests movement in the suburbs of Paris and then participated in demonstrations in the capital. Beyond their biographical backgrounds, the themes addressed during these interviews included the participants' work careers, working conditions, experience of wage negotiations, involvement in this movement, and demands made. The interviews were used to provide elements of contextualisation, notably on the origin and the course of the mobilisation as experienced by the demonstrators. The interviews lasted between two and three hours and were then transcribed and thematised.

The focus group took place on November 16, 2022, in a separate room in a café in the northern suburbs of Paris. Six people participated. The profiles of the participants are, however, not necessarily representative of the sociological composition of the movement as a whole, since the militants who are involved today, four years after the outset, are those with most time available — namely retired people, unemployed people or working people who no longer have a family to support.

The objective of the focus group was to interview gilets jaunes activists about their perception of the political and economic situation but also on how they experienced the end of the Yellow Vests movement, four years after the beginning of the mobilisation. The discussion lasted an hour and half, during which participants introduced themselves individually and then discussed their involvement in the movement at the local level, since the COVID-19 crisis. Then, they spoke about their personal experiences of lockdowns and the impact of inflation. The discussion concluded with their perception of the future and their involvement in other social movements, particularly the one against the pension reform that was being prepared at the time of the focus group.

The discussion took place in a friendly atmosphere, all the activists present had known each other for several years, however only some of them mentioned their economic situation. The framework of the focus group did not allow for further discussion of this issue. The contact was made possible thanks to meeting one of them, one year beforehand, on the roundabout that they were occupying. The participants' names have been anonymised.

Presentation of the interviews

Name	Profession	Age
Viviane	building superintendent	55 years old
Guillaume	Shopkeeper	50 years old
Quentin	Worker in the pharmaceutical industry	45 years old
Clara	Unemployed	42 years old

Presentation of the participants to the focus group

Name	Profession	Age
Josiane	Retired teacher	65 years old
Benjamin	Unemployed graphic designer	23 years old
Corine	Unemployed dental assistant	52 years old
Franck	Informatician	53 years old
Sandrine	Administrative secretary	52 years old
Pascale	Bank assistant	55 years old

THE YELLOW VESTS MOVEMENT FROM NOVEMBER 2018 UNTIL THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Trigger of the movement

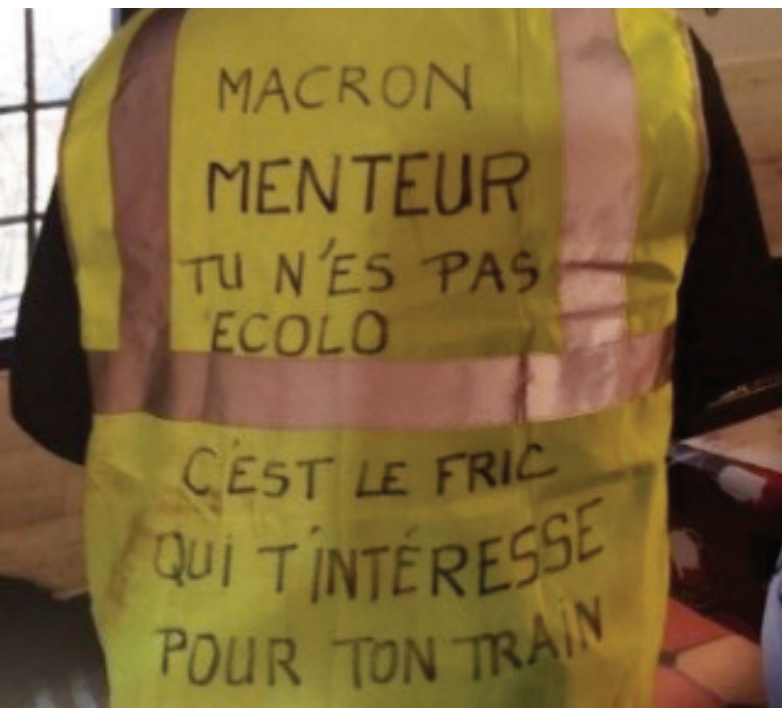
In 2018, Édouard Philippe's government announced an increase in the "carbon tax", a tax introduced in 2014 for ecological reasons. This tax levied on hydrocarbons was intended to encourage consumers to invest in more economical or electrical vehicles.

Priscilla Ludoski, a thirty-three-year-old motorist, published an online petition to denounce the unfairness of this reform, which especially penalised families with modest budgets, whose daily car trips are necessary in the rural areas where they live.

In November 2018 the petition was signed by more than a million people and the opposition to this rise in the carbon tax was increasingly shared on social networks. Facebook groups of opponents to this reform were created and on November 17, 2018, a call to blockade the country was published on social networks by these critics, outside of any political or union institutional structure. Nearly 3,000 blockade locations were identified throughout France. This was the "Act I" of the Yellow Vests movement. Quickly, the mobilisation intensified at the local level, the opponents to this tax met in collective forms and organised the continuation of the mobilisation in their area, as Corine tells us during the focus group:

“

In fact, on November 17 everyone came into the street without knowing each other. And that day we meet people from the area. I met a few people and immediately, actually with two other people we thought that it would be good if we could find a place to meet soon. And during the week, we had a meeting in a café where the owner of the café allowed us to gather. There were seven or eight of us, we got together, we discussed, and we met once a week and it grew from six or seven, we were ten or twelve, until the moment when we were around thirty and the press came to see us. During the weeks that followed we decided with two other people to occupy a roundabout, to have a strategic point so that people could come to meet us. In St Brice there is a roundabout near to a mall. We were four, five at the beginning and that's how the roundabout of St Brice was born, and which lasted for four years



Picture of a yellow vest with the following motto: "Macron you are a liar you are not ecologist it's just the money that interests you for your lifestyle".

From a sporadic and spontaneous opposition on the local level, mostly in the countryside, the Gilets Jaunes activists quickly linked up with other activist collectives from the areas around them and coordinated their actions, as Josiane tells us during the discussion:

“

Then we made contact with the other groups from Gisors, from Beauvais, and we did actions together, we also went to demonstrations together in Paris

After a few days of blockades in the countryside, the mobilisation took on a national dimension and spread to the whole country.

Demands

After three weeks of blockades, the activists came to France's main cities. From now on, the mobilisation was characterised by big demonstrations, every Saturday, gathering several hundred thousand people. The Yellow Vests movement took on a new dimension over the weeks: faced with the success of their mobilisation, the activists took up broader claims concerning their purchasing power but also "tax justice" as well as a constitutional reform and the establishment of a "citizens' initiative referendum" (RIC), allowing greater participation of citizens in democratic processes.



Blocking a road in Beauvais on 5 January 2019 — source: Oise: plus de 700 Gilets jaunes et des heurts à Beauvais - Le Parisien

From a mobilisation of motorists opposed to the carbon tax, the Yellow Vests movement had become the expression of the contestation of a population that no longer manages to live decently, because of low wages, of taxes deemed unfair, of a decrease in social assistance, and a decline in public services, particularly in rural areas. Viviane, a 55-year-old activist met last year, a former union repand now building attendant, summed up this general anger stirred by the announcement of the increase in the fuel tax, through the following slogan:

“

Stop taking us for idiots!" it was a set, it was the straw that broke the camel's back, "the ecological tax" it didn't pass, that one (laughs)... "ecological tax" I said "ahh damn, who are they kidding?!"

The feeling expressed by Viviane, of an anger latent for years that was waiting for a trigger to express itself, is widely shared within the mobilisation. The first sociological surveys showed that a significant part of the activists had been away from politics for years, 73% of them declared, before 1 December, that they were taking part in a political mobilisation for the first time³⁶.

³⁶ Bedock, C., Bendali, Z., Bernard de Raymond, A., Beurier, A., Blavier, P. & Walker, É. (2019). Enquêteur in situ par questionnaire sur une mobilisation: Une étude sur les gilets jaunes. *Revue française de science politique*, 69, 869-892.

For these new activists who have lost hope in politics, the Yellow Vests movement represented an unprecedented opportunity to finally be considered by the public authorities, as Corine suggests:

“

What really got me out was really the awakening of so many people that I had been waiting for, for so many years. I no longer vote, not out of conviction, but because I couldn't find anyone who really represented my expectations, so I preferred not to vote rather than vote out of spite. And when there was the Yellow Vests movement it spoke to me enormously because I had been waiting for this for years

The hope that many people have placed in this movement can also be explained by a feeling of marginalisation that some of them express, particularly those who have experienced precarious occupational trajectories.

A mobilisation of precarious workers outside of compagnies

If the Yellow Vests movement counted nearly 17% unemployed people in its ranks in 2018, while the national rate was around 10%, the mobilisation is also a social movement of precarious workers, who experience tough working conditions under a short-term employment status offering low social coverage and low pay. One of the first sociological surveys on the composition of the movement attests to an over-representation of workers concerned by economic difficulties and exposed to disaffiliation³⁷. For men, the mobilisation was marked by an over-representation of low-income self-employed workers, especially craftsmen (nearly 11%), but also public service employees of the lowest levels (category C), drivers, and industrial labourers, who together represented 40% of the men present.

As for women, the sociologists note an overrepresentation on the roundabouts of workers in the care sector, with nearly 13% of them employed as nurses and 20% as workers in the human services, but also nearly 14% as service employees. The researchers underline during this survey that the professional composition of the movement is also linked to the mobilisations developing in certain sectors of activity, for better working conditions, especially in the field of care.

The question of the evolutions of the labour market thus seems to be particularly connected to the themes underlined by the Yellow Vests movement. This is expressed by the emblematic slogan of the mo-

bilisation: “Pour l'honneur des travailleurs et pour un monde meilleur” [For the honour of the workers and a better world]. For the sociologist Yann Le Lann, although activists have been mobilised outside of companies, and did not explicitly raise many labour-market-related demands, due to its sociological composition the Yellow Vests movement nonetheless reflects a demand for the revaluation of work³⁸.

Indeed, over recent decades, the French legal framework has been opened to flexible work arrangements³⁹ and the frame of collective bargaining has itself recently been reformed⁴⁰. These recent evolutions of the legal framework regulating the labour market make it particularly difficult for many workers, especially the least qualified, to secure their wage claims. The Yellow Vests movement can thus be considered as a modern mobilisation of precarious workers. The demand for a tax cut, in line with the aspiration for “tax justice”, can be interpreted as a substantial means to regain purchasing power, as a compensation for low wages and the distance from wage negotiations felt by many workers.

During the focus group, there were several references to the career paths of some activists who linked their involvement in the movement to their professional experiences, which were particularly precarious. Corine, a 50-year-old secretary who worked in logistics, confided, during the focus group, her psychological fragility and the economic precariousness in which she found herself, after a difficult experience as an interim worker in a factory:

“

I took a long time to find a good job, but I had a hard time. I've experienced unemployment, and because of unemployment I had to accept a few positions that did not suit me. I did interim, I have accepted a job where I was really not well. When I came back from work, I had a stomach-ache, I didn't know if it was going to last or not, but I didn't want to go back anymore. And unfortunately, because of how it was going I had to ask for a contract termination. It was for my personal good because otherwise I don't know how I will end up. So, I regretted this conventional breakup for a long time but at the same time I couldn't go on like this anymore

This experience was also shared by Josiane, a dental assistant, who confided during the focus group that she had lost her job during the COVID-19 pandemic and had suffered burn-out which she is now struggling to recover from. If the degradation of low-qualified work is evoked by the most precarious acti-

vists, other workers employed in more permanent jobs, also perceive a change in their working conditions. These workers describe an individualisation of work, a loss of welfare benefits, a degradation of their employment status and an intensification of their activity. This is the case of Sandrine, a 60-year-old employee working in a bank branch:

“

In the world of banking, when I started it was not like it is now. At the time, we were half part of the public sector, so there was still a part of the state which was still there. So, we were a little protected, but then after the privatisation in 1986 it was opened to competition for finance, this meant that even the work was no longer the same. There were no longer the same expectations, and in big companies like this.... Sometimes, I feel unhappy because I tell myself I could have done something else. But soon, I'll have been 42 years in the same company... I see the changes. Now the mentality is really who's going to be the best, who will crush the other one to get a raise, and this is a mentality I can't stand anymore

Lack of political responses

As the mobilisation intensified week by week during 2019, the government's political responses to the Yellow Vests movement were widely perceived as insufficient by activists. Notwithstanding the reversal of the fuel tax hike itself, part of the demonstrators deplored the limited measures taken to support the purchasing power of modest-income

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ *Le Monde* [24/12/2018] (Sylvia Zappi) Interview with Yann Le Lann: Le mouvement des «gilets jaunes» est avant tout une demande de revalorisation du travail

³⁹ Howell, C. (2009) The transformation of French Industrial Relations: Labor's Representation and the State in a Post-Dirigiste Era. *Politics & Society*. Vol 37. 2, pp. 229-256

⁴⁰ On 8 August 2016, the “law on labour, modernisation of social dialogue and securing professional careers” was adopted: it reforms the framework of social dialogue by establishing the Social and Economic Committee but also allows employers to dismiss their employees more simply. The unions were particularly opposed to this reform, which reduced their margin of action in collective bargaining and weakened employees' rights.

households. Guillaume, a 50-year-old activist, speaks of the incomprehension he felt when he realised the lack of attention the government had for the activists' demands:

“

I was thinking: Emmanuel Macron what is he going to do? We ask for €1.30 for a litre of diesel he'll say, “well, I'll lower it to €1.30”. Then, we asked for a €150 raise in the minimum wage, and he says: “I'll raise it by €90”. And the pensions, we asked for €1,300: “I'll raise it to €1,000”. We play the game, we get back home, and everything goes well, but it did not happen like that...

Seeking to provide an answer to the crisis of purchasing power highlighted by the Yellow Vests, President Emmanuel Macron announced during a televised address on 24 December 2018, the possibility for employees to request a bonus from their employers.

Named the “Macron bonus”, it would be tax-free for companies and could reach up to €1,000. But here again, due to the fragmentation of the salaried workforce in France and the disappearance of work collectives, many self-employed or temporary workers and subcontractors have not been able to benefit from this bonus. Others say they have asked to their employer for the bonus, but because of the complexity of collective bargaining within companies, staff representatives and trade unions do not always have sufficient influence to obtain this bonus, even though it is tax-free.

Quentin, a worker in the pharmaceutical industry and trade union rep we met last year, speaks of the refusal he met with when he made the request to his employer within the legal framework of collective bargaining, i.e. the “Economic and Social Committee” (CSE) provided by the latest reform of the labour code:

“

I was thinking: Emmanuel Macron what is he going to do? We ask for €1.30 for a litre of diesel he'll say, “well, I'll lower it to €1.30”. Then, we asked for a €150 raise in the minimum wage, and he says: “I'll raise it by €90”. And the pensions, we asked for €1,300: “I'll raise it to €1,000”. We play the game, we get back home, and everything goes well, but it did not happen like that...

This bonus was also widely criticised within the movement. On the one hand, this was because in 2021 less than one employee out of five in the private sector benefited from it, and for an average of about €500, or half of the maximum amount announced⁴¹.

On the other hand, because of its unequal character, only the least precarious employees, having access to collective bargaining bodies, could benefit from this bonus. Finally, it is a temporary aid that does not bring any help in the long term. Many Gilets Jaunes perceived this announcement as a one-time communication strategy by the government rather than as real and lasting financial aid.

Regarding the democratic demands made by the Gilets Jaunes movement, in an effort to appease the social movement Emmanuel Macron proposed to establish — for a period of two months, from 15 January to 15 March, 2019 — a national consultation named “The Great National Debate”.

As part of this consultation, citizens were invited to share their claims, on books of grievances available in the town halls of each town, or on an Internet platform. But once again, the announcement aroused the mistrust of a large part of the demonstrators who once again saw a communication exercise, rather than a real wish to establish a dialogue between the government and citizens.

A study made by Cevipof has shown that the population that participated in the “Grand Débat National” is quite different in its sociological characteristics from the population that makes up the Yellow Vests movement. The participants in this consultation were mostly men (55%) over fifty years old, with higher education degrees (64%), and owned their own homes (75%)⁴².

Most of the Yellow Vests activists refused to participate in what they saw as a masquerade. An alternative platform, entitled “The Real Debate” [Le Vrai Débat], was launched online by activists on 30 January, 2019, to identify the proposals of the Gilets Jaunes, in a participatory approach that corresponds to movement’s horizontalist aspirations. This defiance of the Gilets Jaunes activists is illustrated through the words of Quentin:

“

I have always said it, I am in favour of dialogue, for debates, not Macron’s debate but debates. There have been debates among the Yellow Vests, there was the website ‘the real debate’, it was extraordinary!

The rupture between the activists and the government appears most flagrant when we ask the Yellow Vests about their feelings regarding the answers obtained during the movement.

In addition to the lack of relevance of the few measures that the government did take, the activists denounce communication manoeuvres that did not respond to the hopes that they placed in this social movement and their expectations in the recognition of their condition.

This fracture with the government is also exacerbated by the violence of the police during the demonstrations.

⁴¹ Math, A. (2022). Inflation, salaires. Réponses des États, revendications des salariés. *Chronique Internationale de l’IRES*, 180, 3-36

⁴² *Libération* [14/3/2019] (Simon Blin): Un public éloigné des traits sociologiques des gilets jaunes



Confronted with the authorities’ firm stance, dialogue between the Yellow Vests and the government seemed impossible.

This point of no return is described by Guillaume, who speaks of how he became radicalised after the violence he experienced during the movement:

“

I was quickly disappointed because from the beginning I thought that it was going to last ten or fifteen days and then the president would accept our demands and that would have been that. And then when we were beaten up, with the group effect, the more you beat us up the more we will come back. The media, when they said that the GJ are radicalised, they are right

Despite this violence during the demonstrations, and the lack of political responses obtained by the demonstrators, the mobilisation of the Yellow Vests continued in France’s main cities every Saturday until spring 2020. Nevertheless, many activists have lost hope in the possibility to obtain a significant change in their daily lives through the movement.

Some of them, like Guillaume, have become radicalised faced with the government’s deafness to this large-scale mobilisation and through the episodes of police violence during the demonstrations. But some others describe having become tired and having felt a deep disillusionment, leading to great frustration, as Clara explains:

“

Were we satisfied? No, we didn’t have the time to be satisfied, we had the time to be suffocated and we felt it a lot, we experienced it a lot and it traumatised us a lot, and as a result, it kept the demonstrators away from the big cities

Just like Clara, many activists who invested themselves body and soul, for almost two years, and who placed all their hopes in this mobilisation, gradually moved away from the movement during 2020.

A police officer beating a protester during an arrest of Yellow Vests activists in Paris in January 2019
Source: Les violences policières sous l’œil des médias (la-croix.com)

III.

FOUR YEARS AFTER THE BEGINNING OF THE MOBILISATION

Continued mobilisation at the local level

When the COVID-19 public health crisis emerged in April 2020, the national mobilisation of the Gilets Jaunes — whose momentum had already been waning in previous weeks, for the reasons we have mentioned — was definitively halted. The Gilets Jaunes movement had thus not reached a true conclusion, after nearly two years of mobilisation; activists continued to assert their allegiance to the movement as part of their identity, although the national mobilisation had itself faded. Groups of activists at the local level thus continued to meet even after the onset of the health crisis. Franck, a yellow vest present at the focus group, tells of how he maintained a weekly link with the other activists during lockdown, via Zoom: “We as Yellow Vests kept the link, we zoomed every week, sometimes twice a week.”

During the focus group, this deep attachment to the Yellow Vests movement is palpable among the activists present. Even today, four years after the beginning of the mobilisation, the feeling of incompleteness persists and is hardened by what part of the Yellow Vests see as the stagnation, or even the degradation, of the political and economic situation. Franck does not see any reason to detach himself from this movement which, according to him, remains as relevant as ever in the current context:

“

I am fully in the Yellow Vests movement because nothing has changed in these four years, now with the current government nothing happens. As long as we have not obtained anything, we will always be out [protesting], even if the intensity in and around the roundabout is not as it was before, we are still there, when there is a demonstration we come, when there are actions to be done, we do them

Since the re-election of Emmanuel Macron in the presidential elections on 24 April, 2022, with a record abstention rate reaching 28% of registered voters⁴³, the president has followed the neoliberal policy he began during his first term. The continui-

ty of this policy, which further impoverishes modest households, fuels the exasperation of a part of public opinion and particularly the Yellow Vests who participated in the focus group. When they came onto the streets in 2018, they denounced the lack of consideration that political decision-makers had paid to the decades-long worsening of their living conditions. Four years after the beginning of the movement, and despite the alarm sounded by the Yellow Vests, the Gilets Jaunes note things getting worse since Macron's election. Sandrine expresses this idea:

“

With the last governments, it's been a disaster for thirty-forty years, but with Macron, for the last five years, it's no longer a jackhammer, it's a bulldozer, it's a human catastrophe because there are so many people who suffer

⁴³ France Info [25/04/2022] (Marie-Adelaïde Scigaz): Présentielle 2022:

Comment expliquer une telle abstention au second tour?

Confronted with the degradation of their living conditions and the extension of precariousness to a wider part of the population, the Yellow Vests believe that in their engagement since in 2018 they have been pioneers. One year after the beginning of Emmanuel Macron's term, they raised the alarm over the consequences of a neoliberal policy, which undermines the welfare state. Today, they express their exasperation at not having been heard or supported, and having been stigmatised by part of public opinion:

“

The observation that makes me sad and at the same time a little amazed too is that it has been four years that it has gone on, and all the predictions we made four years ago— ‘beware, they are going to take away the social security, the hospitals are turning bad, the pensions are going to be affected, the national education...’ now, four years later, we are still there and it is even worse. And for me, it's an aberration, I can't understand people anymore

This “aberration” evoked by Corine can be understood through the light of the personal situations endured since the COVID-19 crisis, by some members of the group.

Worsening living conditions since the COVID-19 crisis

During the discussion, Corine and Josiane tell us that they lost their jobs during the COVID-19 health crisis and have been suffering from psychological problems ever since. They have both mentioned burn-out from which they are trying gradually to recover. We understand that the last few years have been even more difficult for them since they refused to be vaccinated against COVID-19. In France, from August 9, 2021 to August 1, 2022, a sanitary pass was mandatory to go to most public places and to practice certain professions, especially in the medical sector. This refusal to be vaccinated has harshened the social isolation that had already been caused by their precarious personal and professional situations. Corine thus speaks of her psychological fragilities, against which she is now fighting:

“

I am currently recovering physically and morally from this burn-out and I am on sick leave because there are still highs and lows, but I am in a situation where I can't go back to the job I love, because I am not vaccinated and at the

same time it is out of the question for me to get vaccinated. So, it's been nearly a year and for someone who has always worked since I was sixteen years old, it has been very, very hard and it still is psychologically. When I think about it, it's still hard to know what my solutions are to get out of this thing, it's very distressing, it's caused me insomnia linked to stress that I didn't know before

If Corine and Josiane speak of some of their own difficult personal and professional situations, these concerns are also shared by younger activists. This is notably the case of Benjamin, a 23-year-old activist, unemployed graphic designer and son of Sandrine, who was also present during the focus group. He tells us that he has not found a job since the COVID-19 crisis and that he has gone back to live with his parents, because he does not have enough income to live independently. His mother mentions the constant uncertainty in which he lives, but which also seems to be shared by many Gilets Jaunes, who face difficulties in finding more fulfilling horizons: “The situation does not get better at all in the current context, really I think we don't know at all where we are going, what is the future for us who are 50 years old, but also I have a 23-year-old son, it is very complicated to motivate him, to discuss with him, to give meaning to this life we lead, it is very complicated...”

The feeling of marginalisation, which we perceive in many of their comments and which we can understand in light of the social isolation that some of the Yellow Vests have experienced since the beginning of the pandemic, reinforces a discourse within the group denouncing a growing individualism in society. Several of them, like Josiane, deplore a lack of collective awareness and solidarity, faced with the impoverishment of a growing part of the population:

“

Humanity has changed, they are in a situation where they are told to do this, to do that, they obey like robots. Do they think about their children? Even for them, life will not be the same anymore and that is scary. What scares me the most in this society is the lack of awakening of people who are not aware of what is happening — and what follows is aggressiveness. Instead of having a collective awakening, people turn against each other, people become violent

Through Josiane's comments, we can see that she sees a gap between the Yellow Vests activists who have mobilised and become politicised in defence

of their purchasing power and living conditions, and the rest of the population who are not aware of their condition. For others, like Pascale, this rise of individualism in French society is the result of a political will to divide the population, with the assistance of the traditional media which stirs up a narrative against “welfare recipients”:

“

People are not concerned, we have individualised them, everyone gazing at their own navel. We talk about six million unemployed, ten million poor, twelve million pensioners, not all of them are poor, but how many of us are there in France? If we take only those who are of voting age, when you add up the six million unemployed and the twelve million below the poverty line, that makes eighteen million needy people out of 45 million, but for them it is not the majority. So, these people are left to holler and from time to time we send them a small check to support themselves. Meanwhile, the others say “oh, do you realise? We give them checks and they are never happy, and they do not want to work”. All the government narrative is taken up by the media and we find ourselves, the minority, in the shit

Pascale is referring to interventions stigmatising the most precarious and discrediting the Yellow Vests. These interventions instrumentally play on the few pieces of help that were granted by the state at the end of 2022 to cope with inflation in energy costs. In anticipation of the winter, the government put in place a price cap on energy to reduce inflation by 3.1%, but it was lifted in early 2023⁴⁴.

Economic situations worsened by inflation

In France like throughout Europe, inflation increased significantly in 2022, in reaction to the outbreak of war in Ukraine. Food products are particularly impacted by this sudden rise in prices, which reached nearly 12% in November 2022, according to INSEE⁴⁵. This inflation in food products continued in early 2023; in January it reached 14%⁴⁶, suggesting economic difficulties for many households during coming months.

⁴⁴ Insee: La flambée des prix de l'énergie: un effet sur l'inflation réduit de moitié par le “bouclier tarifaire” [1/9/2022]

⁴⁵ Insee: En novembre 2022 les prix à la consommation augmentent de 6,2% [31/11/2022]

⁴⁶ *Le Monde* [02/02/2023] (Laurent Girard): L'inflation alimentaire en France a frôlé les 14% en janvier

Indices des prix à la consommation

Évolutions annuelles (en %), base 100 - année 2015

	Pondérations 2022	novembre 2021	octobre 2022	novembre 2022 (p)
Ensemble IPC*	10000	2,8	6,2	6,2
Alimentation	1649	0,5	12,0	12,2
- Produits frais	249	-0,7	17,3	12,5
- Autre alimentation	1400	0,7	11,1	12,1
Tabac	215	0,0	0,3	0,3
Énergie	886	21,6	19,1	18,5
Produits manufacturés	2444	0,8	4,2	4,4
Services	4806	1,9	3,1	3,0
Ensemble IPCH**	10000	3,4	7,1	7,1

(p) données provisoires
 * indice des prix à la consommation ** indice des prix à la consommation harmonisé
 Champ : France hors Mayotte
 Source : INSEE - indices des prix à la consommation

Table showing inflation on November 2022 and October 2022
 Source: Insee

For the Gilets Jaunes participating in the focus group, whose economic precariousness even before the beginning of the war in Ukraine we have mentioned, this surge in food and energy prices is particularly worrying. Josiane says that she has observed the effects of inflation over the past few months, and expresses her concerns:

“

Everything has gone up, what are people who get €100 on the RSA⁴⁷ going to do? When I go to the supermarket and see what I get for €100 – you get nothing...

The deterioration of the economic situation particularly worries the Yellow Vests, who mobilised in 2018 to raise the alarm over soaring prices, and especially the cost of fossil fuels. Today they say that they are worried that in a none-too-distant future, they will face difficulties feeding themselves properly if the situation does not get better soon. During the discussion, this question gave rise to an exchange between Josiane and Sandrine that was particularly revealing of their concerns about their future:

“

*Sandrine: We can't hold on much longer...
 Josiane: We've been saying that for four years
 Sandrine: Yes, but now we're really going to get into trouble
 Josiane: But we're already in the hard part!
 Sandrine: No, it's going to be even worse, not necessarily right away, but it's coming
 Josiane: But this is now that we have nothing left in the fridge, that's going to happen now*

The distress and powerlessness of the Yellow Vests, as expressed in this moment, led them to question the structural causes of this situation, in which they are now the first to feel the consequences. The question of the country's food sovereignty is then raised.

As Josiane sarcastically comments:

“

We were told that if there was no more mustard it was because of Ukraine, but since when does Ukraine make mustard?

The continuation of the discussion led the group to refer to climate issues, which they also link to the question of food sovereignty, and to conclude by discussing the conditions of a possible overcoming of capitalism.

Towards an overcoming of capitalism?

The conclusion of the exchange brought out the weariness of the Yellow Vests activists and their fears of seeing their living conditions deteriorate more and more, amidst the indifference of part of public opinion and the political class, four years after the alarm raised by the movement itself. Despite their loss of hope in the possibility of one day seeing a change in their daily lives, they express their aspirations for a more equitable society, in which individuals would not have to worry about their access to basic needs that are now threatened. This is what Corine says when she talks about her conception of what a dignified life should be:

“

Life is about getting a decent job, having a decent home, having leisure time and being able to feed yourself and raise your children in dignity

This aspiration to a more dignified life seems, for many of them, incompatible with the political and economic system which is today in force, in which the redistribution of wealth is inequitable. Without using the terms of “overcoming capitalism”, during the focus group the Yellow Vests developed a

⁴⁸ The continuity between the “marches for the climate” and the Yellow Vests movement has been highlighted by some studies: Le Lann, Y., Cugnata, G., Gaborit, N. & Gaborit, M. (2021). Faut-il soutenir les Gilets jaunes: Le rôle des positions de classe dans le mouvement climat. *Écologie & politique*, 62, 49-66.

reflection on the advent of a form of social organisation built around the collectivisation of the products of labour and a fair distribution of wealth.

Josiane expounds the following idea, summoning up an image of pre-capitalist social organisation:

“

The problem is that we are in societies where we have been taught that there are leaders, a person in charge, and humanity below. But humanity has forgotten its conscience. When we look at the Cro-Magnon man, in fact it was the collective work of a village, each one brought his small touch and after there was the redistribution, today the redistribution is not for the people, it is only for the leaders

These reflections — evoked as utopian wishes, devoid of a theoretical mooring — translate a will for radical social change and allow us to foresee a possible convergence between Yellow Vests activists and other social movements.

This is notably the case with the environmental movement⁴⁸, but more generally concerns mobilisations advocating an exit from the capitalist model and the advent of social justice.

This conclusion helps to understand the engagement of Yellow Vests activists in the social movement against the pension reform, which is in line with this mobilisation, as Franck reminds us:

“

We defend our purchasing power, we defend our living conditions, so we are concerned by all these issues and of course also pensions

The Yellow Vests movement thus brought individuals far from politics toward a questioning of political issues, and educated them in the action repertoire of activism. Today, they increasingly engage also in other mobilisations, thus setting this movement within a longer political sequence.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The Yellow Vests movement mobilised individuals from the working classes and precarious workers in reaction to the increase of the carbon tax. The demands of the activists quickly broadened, and concerned their purchasing power but also democratic reforms and "tax justice". The focus group allowed us to observe that questions relating to changes in the world of labour underlie the mobilisation, and several activists said that they have experienced worsening working conditions and precarious personal trajectories. In the absence of satisfactory political responses from the government, and because of the violence of confrontations with the police during the demonstrations, the movement gradually faded away from 2020, after two years of mobilisation. Now, after the COVID-19 crisis, which put an end to the national mobilisation, groups remain active at the local level and continue to meet.

Today, four years after the beginning of the mobilisation, activists express their weariness and their disillusionment regarding the worsening of their economic and occupational situations, weakened by the COVID-19 crisis and then the inflation related to the war in Ukraine. We can see, through their words, a pessimism concerning a future that looks uncertain. However, it seems necessary to conclude by recalling that the Yellow Vests movement has re-politicised individuals who were far from politics and has introduced them to the action repertoire of activism. The inflation crisis and the COVID-19 crisis have led them to elaborate a broader reasoning, notably on ecological and food-security issues, and this has also encouraged them to engage with other social struggles. Thus, if they were initially rallied by a fight over purchasing power, the concerns that led them into the streets in 2018 still seem highly relevant. And they help to explain their involvement among the demonstrators currently mobilised against the pension reform.

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L'inflation alimentaire en France a frolé les 14% en janvier [2/2/2023]

CONCLUSION

The aim of Coalition of Labour II was to highlight the working and living conditions of workers, in an era in which the historic political and economic attack on labour is intensified by dramatic global events such as the long-running consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. We ran the project with the idea that workers' voices and experiences are missing in the public debate, but are the main sources of knowledge for understanding the consequences of the unequal power distribution between classes. Therefore, the research based its analysis on asking them — inquiring about workers' condition starting with their direct experiences, voices and point of view. The analysis of the three case studies brings out two main issues that cut across each of the experiences presented here: first, the question of the possibilities and limits of politicisation at the workplace and broader societal level; second, the issue of individual and collective uncertainty as a political problem.

As far as politicisation is concerned, this has been addressed in a different but complementary way in the three cases. In his analysis of the current re-activation of the Yellow Vests movement in France, four years after their first rise in November 2018, Louison Suberbie shows how this movement has re-politicised individuals who were far from politics and has introduced them to the action repertoire of activism. Further, motivated by the effects that the inflation crisis and COVID-19 have had on their living and working conditions, they have linked their fight to other social struggles, notably around ecological and food-security issues.

A somehow inverse situation is to be found in Cecilia Ficcadenti's research on the working and living conditions of production workers in the Italian me-

talworking factory Acciaierie Speciali Terni (AST): once highly mobilised, trade unions are currently faced with tendencies toward depoliticisation and individualisation, limiting their possibilities to defend workers' rights as a working class. However, the sense of having common conditions and a shared trade-union culture have the potential to re-politicise workers.

The question of whether the ongoing fight for the public health system in Madrid is or should be political/politicised is also at the core of the discussion among the public health doctors interviewed by Beatriz Casas González. Different perspectives on unionism (class vs. corporatist unionism) underlie the debate between the workers, who nonetheless have one main goal in common; namely, the defence of the public health care. This is an issue with a great potential for social mobilisation, since it not only affects the working conditions of the public health care staff, but also society's right to decent health care.

The latter leads us to the second issue that cuts across all three cases: the problem of uncertainty and insecurity when basic human and social needs (such as having the means to afford basic goods and services, guaranteed access to decent public health care and pensions, etc.) are at risk. As one of the interviewed activists from the Yellow Vests movement puts it: "The observation that makes me sad and at the same time a little amazed too is that it has been four years that it has gone on, and all the predictions we made four years ago — 'beware, they are going to take away the social security, the hospitals are turning bad, the pensions are going to be affected, the national education...' now, four years later, we are still there and it is even worse. And for me, it's an aberration, I can't understand people anymore."

As all three case studies highlight, uncertainty has different social, political and economic sources (financialisation, individualisation, the erosion of social institutions and welfare, privatisation, precarisation) and its effects are unequally distributed. As one public health doctor points out in the interview:

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The defence of the public health care is a class issue, since those who cannot afford to pay for private insurance or are unwilling to do so because they consider public health to be an earned right will see their health threatened when they have to wait three weeks for an appointment with their family doctor or paediatrician

Against uncertainty, the right has taken ownership of the notion of "security", which it conceives primarily in punitive terms: more policing and police repression, reinforcement of penalties, shrinking the space of rights and (re)producing and deepening social divisions. The cases explored in this report prove the need for the left to reclaim "security" as part of our political vocabulary. Not in the form of punitive approaches, but as an expansion of social rights and guarantees. Cecilia Ficcadenti, quoting a former AST worker ('words are not just words, in fact they steal those too') reminds us that we are required to "return to using and re-qualifying words, since language and the meanings attributed to it ... have the power to constitute and regulate courses of action".

Creating spaces and coalitions for re-appropriation (of meanings, rights, and common goods) is necessary — and as the examples presented here show, it is also possible.

The research shows a scenario in which the working class is struggling even to access basic goods and services. A weakening of the capital-labour compromise to this extent leaves us wondering what is "work" today and how it could catch up in the political realm as a field for bargaining power and negotiating over citizens' rights. The cases analyzed show several facets and spaces for the (re)politicisation of labour. Indeed, overall, the case studies show that i) broadening the scope of mobilisations, ii) raising and enhancing belonging to a political narrative and culture, iii) linking labour rights to citizens' rights are all dimensions that might trigger a (re)politicisation process.

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