Enacting citizenship

The role of the strike as a repertoire of actions in the irregular migrant workers’ movement in France (2008-2010)

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Characteristics of the movement

• A social movement of irregular migrants proceeding through two major strike waves
• Strikes were coordinated by CGT union
• Workers took considerable risks (income, expulsion)
• In October 2009, 6,800 workers occupied enterprises, employer federations and temporary work agencies
• End of the movement: When the government relaxed criteria for regularization of workers
Impressions
How can we account for the fact that irregular migrants’ claims were voiced through a strike movement and obtained the support of the CGT union?
Methods

• 20 semi-structured interviews with workers, unionists, social movement activists
• Analysis of union documents & newspaper articles
• Ethnographic study by Barron et al. 2011
The strike repertoire was capable of furthering irregular migrants’ claims as it

a) Allowed for exploiting a change in political opportunities

b) Proved to be transferable to other sites and sufficiently flexible to accommodate changing worker profiles

c) Provided a matrix for unionists to appropriate the movement as a workers’ cause and deploy their practical knowledge (*savoir faire*)
Discovery of the strike’s social productiveness

- A local conflict in 2006 at the *Modeluxe* industrial laundry in Chilly-Mazzarin at the origin of the discovery
- Local CGT and 20 workers decide to go on strike against unfair dismissal and pressure local prefecture to issue permits
- ‘Everything we know, we have experienced in this particular strike in a condensed fashion’ (R. Chauveau, CGT leader of the strike movement)
The Modeluxe experiences revealed the strike’s potential to
• Protect workers engaged in collective action against police arrests (legal dimension)
• Further processes of group-building and empowerment amongst the workers (dimension of solidarity)
• Attract public attention, in the form of media coverage or local solidarity groups (public dimension)
• Pressure prefectures and employers (power dimension)
• Voice the regularization claim in terms of their integration as workers, as opposed to their exclusion (dimension of legitimacy)
Changing political opportunity: Employers as a centrepiece for regularization

- 2008 government circular opens the possibility for regularization of irregular (non-EU) workers on ‘economic grounds’
- Employers become an ‘ally’ through the new regularization procedure
- CGT decides to exploit this by using the strike to make employers sign employment promises
• The strike passes its first major test under the 2008 circular: Workers occupy the *La Grande Armée* restaurant in Paris in February 2008 and get regularized

• CGT takes decision to launch a first major strike wave gathering some 600 undocumented workers in spring 2008

• Strategy: Centre the movement on workers who are most likely to benefit from regularization
Expanding boundaries: The casual workers strike wave (2009)

- Casual irregular workers urge CGT to take action
- Strategic change: No worker hands in application unless government has modified regularization criteria
- Strike delegates represent picket lines and participate in general assemblies; strike cards introduced
- Several Parisian sites gather dispersed casual workers: FNTP (400), SAMSIC (1,000), FAFIH (1,000)
- From November 2009 on, expulsions from the picket lines multiply and the movement starts to decline
The strike as a cognitive matrix

Appropriation of the migrants’ claim as a workers’ cause by unionists

• Because migrants go on strike, they are workers
• Because these workers go on strike, they are engaged in a labour conflict
• Because it is a labour conflict, the union is concerned
The strike as a practical matrix

The strike allowed unionists to deploy practical their practical knowledge as unionists

• Gathering local support for picket lines
• Organizing demonstrations
• Holding general strike assemblies
• Negotiating with employers over supporting the regularization
• Negotiating with the government
Conclusions