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The Wildcat Strike Today

Gary Genosko

The frustrations with technological exploitation experienced by mass industrial labour gave rise to a new form of struggle: the wildcat strike. The study of wildcat actions was pioneered by Italian Romano Alquati (b. 1935 - d. 2010), founder of the co-research (*conricerca*) method,¹ in his landmark studies of labour relations in the automobile and high-tech sectors, at FIAT and Olivetti specifically, in Italy during the 1960s (Alquati 1961 and 1964). New information-based technologies in both plants gave rise to worker-organized strikes directly against managerial *and* union controls. Wildcat walk-outs were not, Alquati insisted, chaotic events, but displayed a cohesiveness that could be performed outside of official union organizations. The “spontaneous” walk-out doubly rejected managerial *and* union controls over working class determination of its mode of struggle.

As an unmediated act of struggle managed by and for workers, the wildcat in its historical context was a force that furthered labour’s continuous recomposition of itself against capital. In this respect, labour moved beyond specific demand-based struggles, subject to periodic negotiation, inked in contracts, and defended through processes such as grievance procedures, and thus called into question the role of the contractual relation and its settlement that, as far as technology was concerned, basically put into writing the crushing of workers under the alibi of capital’s drive to ‘modernize’—often a euphemism for the reduction of labour costs. In the case of family run Olivetti, famous for its calculators and typewriters, the myth of a happy factory was propagated as part of an integrated company town, yet the pressures of transistorization ran up against more artisanal modes of unit assembly, as workers became less skilled and automated production lines eventually reduced the workforce. Alquati taught us how to decode the rhetoric of the company town and to analyze how new information technologies changed the work environment.

The character of the wildcat strike emerged in its relative unpredictability; often in demand-less aims; advanced forms of non-collaboration and the invisibility of its organization; its fulsome refusal and scandalous spoilage of so-called existing workplace cooperation; and in workers’ attempts to reduce the working day as a means of controlling their own struggles through demands that neither management nor unions could possibly get behind. This diffuse malcontent took many creative shapes. The use of irony, ridicule, sarcasm, anti-political actions—mocking chants, street theatre, artistic nihilism, pirate radio, zines, memes, blogs, all popular among countercultural urban youth in particular—

gave to the wildcat the performative air of an affective politics: ambivalent, contentious, self-legitimizing, answerless.

Same decade, different country. In the late 1960s in the US, automotive assembly lines were also rocked by unauthorized wildcats, but not exactly for the same reasons. The race politics that troubled many plants where Black workers were in the majority (for instance, the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement or DRUM at Chrysler in the late 60s and early 70s) and refused to follow white union bosses as a component of a revolutionary cultural ethos, affectively heightened the impact of the technological changes on the assembly lines.

In Canada, wildcat strikes are not authorized by unions because they violate most provincial labour laws. Yet Canada saw a wildcat strike in 2012 by Air Canada employees, during the back-to-work legislation promoted by the federal Conservative government; baggage handlers, ground crews and even pilots participated. Wildcats are treated by the courts and provincial labour boards as illegal actions and those considered leaders may be either jailed or fined. These outcomes have turned stoppages into struggles more in line with work-to-rule campaigns, although these are typically union sanctioned and thus diverge from the classical Alquati characterization. The question is whether a union would act against wildcatting members. Recent history in the province of Alberta, when the Union of Public Employees in health services walked off the job for one day in 2020, led the provincial labour board to fine the union by preventing it from collecting dues for one month for failing to prevent the strike action. Essentially, the union subsidized the wildcat action with its payment of a fine.

The apparent illegality and stigmatization of wildcat strikes produces aberrant outcomes. No other than the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), with support from affiliates, sponsored walkouts in support of the lowest paid education workers in the fall of 2022 in Toronto, Ontario. In both the previous cases we see that the wildcat is traditionally without union control; yet such control is vital to grasping the contemporary meaning of the wildcat, because unions tend to shoulder responsibility for them. This can go in two different directions: either heightening tensions between union leaders and members; or enhancing and deepening an understanding by union leaders of the independent collective actions of workers. Whether the latter amounts to an admission by big industrial unions that they have lost control of the working class, or that the big unions henceforth cloak their actions in a wildcat-coat, is an ongoing question. Beside the large organized labour supported strikes of 'Striketober' in 2021, there was a blend of labour militancy by unorganized gig economy workers at the same moment.

Now, a future-facing consideration. We need the wildcat more than ever in Canada as labour is rocked by pandemic-conditioned technological invasions of workplaces that heighten surveillance and break contractual protections pertaining to work processes, taking away worker decision-making in the spirit of adaptation, resilience and innovation. Labour standards defining when and how work takes place have been thrown out the window by the digital dogmas of permanent availability, mobile work, and the blurring of life and work. As the sites of production have become more and more diffuse, the wildcat

becomes less and less focused on the factory as such. The wildcat must adapt to the decentralization of production and the tertiarization of the economy. It needs to operate at large and respond to precarity, mobility, hyper-exploitation, and the collapse of the work/leisure distinction in the era of immaterial labour (Lazzarato 1996).

The wildcat promotes workers' solidarity as it passes through the barriers of its estrangement from the production process itself, by means of the temporary and unpredictable refusal of work. This refusal has no pre-set resolution and remains diffuse and marked by indifference.

Further, wildcats traditionally break the insistence upon communication and networking that falls upon workers, especially today in the era of digital labour—participants might simply refuse to be reached by their representatives for the briefest of moments by closing an app, and turn toward one another, staying off or jumping onto another in smaller communities for chats, using equally powerful connective applications of social media, but to different ends.

Wildcat strikes are today being regained as tools for workers' resistance against the platform capitalism of the gig economy. International examples of wildcats by delivery drivers gained traction during the COVID pandemic; in the US, in many sectors wildcats erupted as health and safety issues became acute. Wildcat strikes can be effective tools for worker disruption of global supply chains, as seen with apparel workers across the planet from southeast Asia, to Central America, and across the US as well; this is especially so in nations where official unions must sometimes be circumvented.

But the other side of the story is that it has been difficult to unionize in the gig economy. Nevertheless, the United Food and Commercial Workers in Canada have helped Uber drivers to gain representation, although the provincial labour landscape is uneven when it comes to legislatively correcting the misclassification of workers as self-employed contractors, a key factor in the ongoing exploitation of gig workers. The recent *Digital Platform Workers Rights Act* in Ontario (2022) failed miserably to address and correct this key issue, and so the struggle against wage theft structured around only "engaged time" (set at minimum wage) but not for all other working time during the day.

The Worldwide Black Friday one-day wildcats by Amazon warehouse workers against inhumane working conditions—five years in a row—may be short-lived but are important markers on the calendar, from Black Friday to Cyber Monday, following the US Thanksgiving holiday. The predictability of these protests in more than 20 countries changes the tenor of the wildcat event considerably. And the passage through the refusal of work for a short time and entry into an autonomous field of untried and undefined relations, looks to build solidarity globally against low wages (the campaign known as "Make Amazon Pay," <https://makeamazonpay.com/>). The timestamped, annual strikes and protests have enormous symbolic resonance for workers and their unions, especially the Teamsters, although Amazon does not recognize the affiliation in many US states, and its Labor Board challenges are mostly unresolved. On a day devoted to consumption, the economic reasons for the action appear in stark contrast to the employer's wealth, anti-union stance, and pioneering role

in digital wage theft techniques (such as asymmetrical quarter-hour rounding rules and refusal of early and late entry to employees).



Figure 1. “Make Amazon Pay,” <https://makeamazonpay.com/>

Although current wildcatting is beginning to take on quite a different look from the mass industrial labour actions of the 1960s, its vitality is not diminished and remains a valuable, and successful action for workers’ resistance against the gig economy and oppressive labour controls. Indeed, the novel temporalities of the wildcat have metamorphosed into multi-sectoral national “flash strikes” by workers across platforms, for example, last year during December, 2025 in India. And in Montréal, the Sex Workers Autonomous Committee

(SWAC - <https://cats-swac-mtl.org/en/about-us-anglo/>) announced a day of protest on May 23, 2026 in support of gigified dancers and masseuses.

While these short-term acts of collective resistance relinquish the spontaneity of classic wildcat walkouts, not to mention the invisibility of worker self-organization, they retain elements of unpredictable, tactical non-collaboration, and re-center cultural resistance. Indeed, use of the digital foundations of the gig economy for organizing against capital is leading to new lines of alliance with social movements and other counter-publics using social media and instant messaging. Even if the rawer elements of workerism, such as the importance of sabotage, or the wilder elements of Situationist Raoul Vaneigem's (1974/2001) vision of the wildcat as entailing factory occupation and the re-adaptation of its production by workers, cannot be satisfactorily accommodated by the newest forms of wildcatting, many novel forms of public protest, temporary occupations, log-outs and *generalized disconnections* are vital to current manifestations.

Thus, let's not fetishize what has been lost, but recognize the positive contributions of a variety of acts of collective resistance within the creeping gig economy. As computer hackers used to proclaim: 'Freedom, downtime'! On the one hand, the crafting and carving of downtime events, the modulation of unexpected periods of productive unavailability, brings digital capital into a collision course with militancy: even minimal readiness for downtime contingency can be exploited and foil efforts to handle and adapt to it. On the other hand, accidental downtime events can be fortuitous opportunities for work stoppages. Under such conditions, intermittent actions can be leveraged without union authorization, and without tripping the wire of unlawfulness. Perhaps this takes us all-too nostalgically into the territory of Youth International Party (YIP) pranks and performances. However, the creativity of today's youth underground is how it imagines that new technologies provide points of entry for acts of refusal and the liberation of time.

Biography

Gary Genosko is a long-time unionist in the university sector and professor of communication and digital media at Ontario Tech in Oshawa, Ontario.

Notes

1. Coresearch utilizes non-neutral methods that break down typical social science imbalances between researcher and subject. In traditional social science, method (i.e., surveys) is a tool wielded, and often monopolized, by trained experts in order to extract knowledge from workers. By contrast, Coresearch is an overtly political use of research as a way of mobilizing workers' self-understanding of their everyday struggles, transforming them into reflective researchers, leading to their greater autonomy. Workers engaged in co-research do not treat fellow workers as objects. They are subject-researchers in their own right and share in collective mutual interests. See Roggero (2014).

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