**Akkord ist Mord?**

Piece-work, factory system and workers' organisation

in the north-German shipbuilding

(1870-1933)

The paper starts from the belief that the history of the remuneration form, especially the structure and the development of the piece-work could offer the perspective of an organic study of the history of production, factory system and workers' organisation. The concret “case study” which it was intended to propose, is the genesis and the endurance of the piece-work system in the shipyards on the river Weser, in north-west Germany between 1870 and 1933. The form and structure of salary, will be considered in a double perspective, as job payment and as the primary matter of contention in factory conflicts.

Three related aspects will be taken into consideration:

1) The first plane of analysis is the genetic one. It wuold retrace the piece-work-setting process in the shipbuilding industry and the transition from time work’ to [performance-linke](http://www.dict.cc/english-german/performance%2Blinked%2Bpayment.html)d wages. In the German shipyards the piece-work evolved later than other branches of the metallurgical and mechanical industry, included ironfounder, machine-tool manufactures, locomitive and engine makers. The process of overcoming the traditional forms of “time work” was the direct result of the transition from wood shipbuilding to iron shipbuilding and of the consequent radical change in the shipyard's workers squads.

2) The turbolent setting process of piece-work wages was followed by a almost 30-years-period of relative stabilty which reflected the endurance of a factory system relied on the centrality of skilled workers in production. Thus the continuos cut of piece rates was the most important instrument, in the hands of the shipyard employers in order to intensify the work rate, above all in absence of radical changes in the work organisation and in the tecnological set up. Thus, cyclical fluctuations, avoided standardisation of the output, traditional organisation of the production made difficult the rise of the scientific management.

At the same time, these characteristics of the factory system made impossibile the implementation of the tayloristic "differential piece rate system", which relied on accurate measurements of productivity rates to create a "standard" production output target. This payment system was difficult to carry through in practice, mostly because of the low level of standardisation of the production and because of the scarce division of work in the shipyards. Indeed, the key factors of production were largely manual skills and empirical working knowledges over which the management had little controll.

3) The history of remuneration and of remuneration forms is a tematic issue that goes beyond the tecnical aspects of wages and salaries and makes it possible to extend the analysis to the industrial relations among the shipyards.

In the shipbuilding industry, piece-work rates were the primary matter of contention in factory conflicts: at the same time the mainly cohesive factors of the workers' organisations and unions were aimed to contrast the manufacturers strategy to cut the rates and to harden the factory discipline and were aimed to protect the wage standard.

Also the the genetic process of the workers' committees in the shipbuilding industry tends to confirm the hypothesis of the perduring centrality of the piece-work problem for Labour Unions. Workers' committees, indeed, were mostly shop-based committees, able to organize workers from different skill groups, central to the struggle against piecework, and to the emergence, especially in the vision of workers' councils (1918-1921) of stances concerning workers' control on production.

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