

## CHAPTER 2

### TURIN 1920; THE DEFEAT OF THE GENERAL STRIKE

**PREFACE:** In April 1920, the working class of Turin conducted a General Strike which was fired, in part, by the spirit of the Russian revolution. Already, the 1917 insurrection in Turin had assumed the character of an armed revolutionary struggle on a large scale. In many workplaces Factory Councils had been set up. It was these events that led to the split from the Socialist Party that was to create Italy's Communist Party. This article, by Antonio Gramsci, is translated from *L'Ordine nuovo*.

#### THE STRENGTH OF THE REVOLUTION

by Antonio Gramsci

The celebration of May Day in Turin occurred immediately after the whole of the proletariat had emerged from an enormous general strike that lasted for ten days and ended in defeat. The whole working population of Turin wanted to show that they had not lost their faith in the revolution. The whole working population of Turin wanted to show that the strength of the revolution, far from having diminished, has in fact multiplied the numbers of its battalions and its regiments.

In the general strike, capitalism and the power of the State vaunted the whole of their armoury. The bourgeois state had put at the disposition of the industrialists of Turin 50,000 troops in full battle gear, with tanks, flamethrowers and light artillery: for ten days the city was at the mercy of the Royal Guards, and the working class seemed to have been wiped out, seemed swallowed up into darkness and the void. The industrialists, with ten millions in funds, flooded the city with posters and leaflets, enlisted journalists and hacks, agent provocateurs and strike-breakers; they published a newspaper that imitated the style and layout of the workers' strike bulletin; they spread lies and false alarms; they spawned political clubs and associations, unions, parties and groups from every sewer in town; and they spread the most outrageous slanders against the leaders of the strike.

Against this unleashing of capitalist forces, the working class had nothing but the single sheet of the daily strike bulletin and their own powers of resistance and sacrifice. The metalworkers lasted out for a month, without wages. Many suffered hunger, and pledged their furniture, even their sheets and mattresses, at the pawn shop; the rest of the working population also suffered hardships, privation and desolation. Turin was like a city besieged; the working population had to endure all the troubles and hardships of a cruel and relentless siege.

The strike ended in defeat. The idea that had sustained the workers was scorned even by a number of those representing the working class; the energy and faith of those leading the general strike was described as illusionary simple mindedness and a mistake, by certain representatives of the working class; when they returned to the factories, the proletariat suddenly realised the full extent of the setback forced upon them by the terrible presence of the vast forces of the owning class and the power of the State: a certain disheartenment, a yielding of the mind and will, a collapse of class feelings and energies would have been justifiable, a surge of bitterness would have been natural, a faltering of the revolutionary army could have been foreseen...

But no! The hungry and the wretched, these folk, bleeding, beaten by the capitalist scourge and mocked by the stupidity or malevolence of their so-called comrades in

struggle, have not lost their faith in the communist revolution. The whole of the Turin proletariat came out onto the streets and into the squares to demonstrate their allegiance to the revolution, to spread before the millions and billions of capitalist wealth the human forces of the working class, the hundreds of thousands of hearts, arms and brains of the working class, to oppose the capitalists' cashboxes with the iron battalions of militants in the workers' revolution.

Ten days of strike, hunger, hardship, desolation and defeat were not enough to bring about what the capitalist class and the power of the State felt sure of achieving: the defeat of the proletariat, the exorcising of the spectre that broods like a nightmare over their palaces and strong-rooms.

The capitalist class and the power of the State transformed the day of May 1st into an orgy of blood and terror. The march was hit by a round of rifle fire – two killed and about fifty wounded. Just what was needed for the direst and fiercest repression to be unleashed on the city. The most scandalous rumours are spread: bombs, daggers, plots... arrests multiply. The Royal Guards set about hunting down the demonstrators. Those arrested are clubbed and maimed with rifle butts, are trampled to the point of vomiting blood; the streets and squares ring with the sound of guns firing at windows, at groups of passers-by; lorryloads of Royal Guards, with their guns aimed at windows, at doors and at passers-by, run riot in the city; groups of Royal Guards crawl from every sewer to jab their bayonets in the faces of all and sundry, regardless now of distinctions of class, age or sex, be they a worker, a soldier, an officer, a priest, a woman or a child, such is the rabid fury that their orders arouse in the confused and twilight minds of the mercenaries hired for this civil war.

But not even the ordeal of this great day, not even this barbarous saraband of unprecedented violence has managed to budge the position of the working class one inch: the funerals of the two people murdered are transformed into an indescribable show of strength and discipline. New forces of the people spill forth, new crowds join the revolutionary army as it accompanies its fallen to the cemetery.

The strength of the revolution bends before no defeat, bows to no pain, to no obstacle, however great. The working people have got beyond the critical phase of dispersal and disillusion: they have become a homogeneous and cohesive unit, they have become an ordered and disciplined army of desires conscious of a real aim, of minds that are aware of being the historic energies on whom weighs a mission that is higher than any human power. The working people, from being raw material for the history of the privileged classes, have finally become capable of creating their own history, of rebuilding their city.

[Translated from *L'Ordine Nuovo* – 8 May 1920]

*Photo: A page from L'Ordine nuovo*

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**Translated by Ed Emery**

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