

CHAPTER 3

TURIN 1920: THE FORMATION OF THE WORKERS' COUNCILS

PREFACE: In another article translated from *L'Ordine nuovo*, Gramsci gives a detailed description of the structures of both industry and working class organisation in the Turin region. He outlines, among other things, the political principles that lay behind the formation of Factory Councils. He also describes the way that the Turin workers' movement was sabotaged and isolated by other political forces of the Left – an isolation which led to its defeat

THE FACTORY COUNCIL MOVEMENT

by Antonio Gramsci

One of the members of the Italian delegation recently returned from Soviet Russia, reported to the workers of Turin that the welcoming platform for the delegation at Kronstadt was decorated with the following inscription: "Long Live the Turin General Strike of April 1920".

The Turin workers received this news with much pleasure and great satisfaction. The majority of the members of the Italian delegation that went to Russia had been against the General Strike in April, and in their writings against the strike had maintained that the workers of Turin had been victims of an illusion, and had overestimated the importance of the strike.

It was for this reason that the workers had received with such pleasure the Kronstadt comrades' act of solidarity. They said to themselves: "Our communist comrades in Russia have a better understanding and appraisal of the importance of the April strike than the Italian opportunists, and so have taught them a good lesson."

THE APRIL STRIKE

The April movement in Turin was in fact an impressive event in the history not only of the Italian proletariat, but also of the European, and, we may say, in the history of the whole world proletariat.

For the first time in history we saw a proletariat undertaking a struggle for the control of production, without having been driven to action by hunger or unemployment. Moreover, it was not just a minority, a vanguard of the working class, that undertook the struggle: the entire mass of the workers of Turin entered the field and carried the struggle right through to the end, without a thought for the sacrifices and the privation involved.

The engineering workers struck for one month, and the other categories of workers struck for ten days.

The General Strike of the final ten days spread to the whole of Piedmont region, mobilising about half a million industrial and agricultural workers, and involving a population of about 4 million people.

The Italian capitalists exerted every effort to suffocate the Turin workers' movement. All the means of the bourgeois state were put at their disposal, while the workers had to struggle all alone, with no help from either the leaders of the Socialist Party, or from the

General Confederation of Labour (CGL). In fact, the leaders of the Party and the Confederation spurned the Turin workers, and did everything possible to prevent the workers and peasants of Italy from undertaking any revolutionary action by which they might have planned to show their solidarity with their brothers in Turin, and to bring them effective assistance.

But the Turin workers did not lose heart. They bore the whole brunt of the capitalists' reaction, maintained discipline right to the last moment, and, after the defeat, remained faithful to the banner of communism and world revolution.

ANARCHISTS AND SYNDICALISTS

The propaganda of the anarchists and syndicalists against Party discipline and the dictatorship of the proletariat had no influence on the masses, even when, because of betrayal by the leaders of the workers, the strike ended in defeat. In fact the Turin workers swore to intensify the revolutionary struggle, and to wage it on two fronts: on the one hand against the victorious bourgeoisie, and on the other against their own treacherous leaders.

The revolutionary awareness and discipline shown by the Turin masses have their historical basis in the economic and political conditions under which class struggle has developed in Turin.

Turin is principally an industrial city. Almost three quarters of the population of 500,000 inhabitants, is composed of workers. Petty bourgeois elements are a minute quantity. Furthermore, in Turin there is a compact mass of office workers, who are organised in unions, and who belong to the Chamber of Labour. During all the big strikes, they stood by the workers, and have thus (if not all, at least the majority) acquired the consciousness of true proletarians in the struggle against capital, for the revolution, and for communism.

INDUSTRIAL PRODUCTION

Seen from outside, production in Turin is perfectly centralised and homogeneous. The engineering industry, with about 50,000 workers and 10,000 white collar workers and technicians, takes pride of place. In the FIAT factories alone there are 35,000 workers, staff and technicians: in the principal factories of this firm there are 16,000 workers employed in the construction of motor vehicles of every kind, by the most modern and efficient methods.

Automobile production is the keystone of Turin's engineering industry. The majority of the work-teams are made up of skilled workers and technicians who do not, however, have the petty bourgeois mentality of skilled workers in other countries – England for instance.

Automobile production, which holds first place in the engineering industry, has subordinated to itself other branches of production, such as the woodworking and rubber industries.

The engineering workers form the vanguard of the Turin proletariat. Given the particular nature of this industry, every movement by its workers becomes a general mass movement, and takes on a political and revolutionary aspect, even if, to start with, it was only pursuing trade union objectives. Turin possesses only one important trade union organisation, the 60,000 strong Chamber of Labour [*Camera del Lavoro*]. The anarchist and syndicalist groups that exist have almost no influence on the mass of the workers, who side firmly and decisively with the Socialist Party section, composed for the most part of communist workers.

The communist movement comprises the following organisations: the party section, with 1,500 members; 28 clubs, with 10,000 members; and 23 youth groups, with 2,000 members.

There is an ongoing communist group, with its own leadership, in every factory. Individual groups come together, according to the geographic location of their factories, in local groups which, in turn, lead into a steering committee within the party section which encompasses the whole communist movement in the city, and the leadership of the mass of the workers.

TURIN: CAPITAL OF ITALY

Before the bourgeois revolution which created the present bourgeois order in Italy, Turin was the capital of a small state, comprising Piedmont, Liguria and Sardinia. In that period, small industry and commerce predominated in Turin.

After the unification of the Kingdom of Italy, and the removal of the capital to Rome, it seemed that Turin was in danger of losing its importance. But the city soon overcame the economic crisis, and became one of the most important industrial centres in Italy. One might say that Italy has 3 capitals: Rome as the administrative centre of the bourgeois state; Milan as the commercial and financial centre of the country (all the banks, commercial offices and finance groups are concentrated in Milan); and finally Turin, as the industrial centre, where industrial production has reached its highest point of development.

With the transfer of the capital to Rome, the whole of the intellectual middle and petty bourgeoisie, which furnished the new bourgeois state with the administrative personnel necessary for it to function, emigrated from Turin, while the development of the big industries attracted to Turin the flower of the Italian working class. The process of development of this city is most interesting from the point of view of Italian history and the Italian proletarian revolution.

Thus the Turin proletariat became the spiritual leadership of the Italian working masses, who are bound to this city by many ties: through family relationships, tradition, history, and by spiritual links (every Italian worker's ideal is to be able to work in Turin).

Photo: Turin, September 1920. Mass meeting in the occupied FIAT factory

All this explains why the working masses of the whole of Italy wanted, even going against their leaders, to show their solidarity with the General Strike in Turin: they see in this city the centre, the capital of the communist revolution, the Petrograd of the Italian proletarian revolution.

TWO ARMED INSURRECTIONS

During the imperialist war of 1914-1918, Turin saw two armed insurrections. The first insurrection, in May 1915, was aimed to prevent the intervention of Italy in the war against Germany (on this occasion the Casa del Popolo was sacked); the second insurrection, in August 1917, assumed the character of an armed revolutionary struggle on a large scale.

The news of the March revolution in Russia was received with indescribable joy in Turin. Workers were weeping with emotion when they heard the news that the power of the Tsar had been overthrown by the Petrograd workers. But the Turin workers did not allow themselves to be taken in by the demagogic language of Kerensky and the Mensheviks. When the mission sent to Western Europe by the Petrograd Soviet arrived in Turin in July 1917, the delegates Smirnov and Goldemberg, who presented themselves before a crowd of 50,000 workers, were greeted with deafening cries of: "Long Live Lenin! Long Live the Bolsheviks!"

Goldemberg was none too happy with this welcome. He was at a loss to understand how it was that comrade Lenin had acquired such popularity among the Turin workers. And one must not forget that this episode occurred after the suppression of the Bolshevik revolt in July, and that the Italian bourgeois press was raging against Lenin and against the Bolsheviks, denouncing them as bandits and intriguers, agents and spies of German imperialism.

Since Italy's entry into the war (24 May 1915), the Italian proletariat had held no further mass demonstrations.

BARRICADES, TRENCHES AND BARBED WIRE

The impressive meeting which had been organised in honour of the delegates from the Petrograd Soviet signalled the beginning of a new period of mass movements. There was not a single month passed when the Turin workers did not rise, arms in hand, against Italian militarism and imperialism. The insurrection broke out on 23 August 1917. For five days, the workers fought in the streets of the city. The insurgents, who had rifles, grenades and machine guns at their disposal, even managed to occupy certain quarters of the city, and tried two or three times to gain control of the centre, where the government institutions and military command centres were situated.

But two years of war and reaction had weakened the once-strong organisation of the proletariat. The workers, with their inferior supply of arms, were overcome. They hoped for support from the Army, but in vain, because the soldiers had allowed themselves to be fooled by insinuations that the revolt had been staged by the Germans.

The people erected barricades, dug trenches, surrounded some quarters with electrified barbed wire, and for five days they repulsed all attacks by the troops and by police. More than 500 workers died, and more than 2,000 were seriously wounded. After the defeat, the best elements were arrested and removed, and the proletarian movement lost some of its revolutionary intensity. But the communist sentiments of the Turin proletariat were not extinguished.

A proof of this can be found in the following episode: a short time after the August insurrection, elections took place for the Board of the Turin Cooperative Alliance (ACT), a huge organisation, which provides provisions for a quarter of the population of Turin.

THE COOPERATIVE ALLIANCE

The ACT is composed of the Railwaymen's Cooperative, and the workers' General Association. Many years previously, the Socialist Party had won control of the Board, but they were now no longer capable of organising active agitation among the working masses.

The capital of the Alliance was made up for the most part of shares in the Railwaymen's Cooperative, belonging to the railwaymen and their families. The progress made by the Alliance had increased the value of the shares from 50 to 700 lire. But the party managed to persuade the shareholders that a workers' cooperative has as its end not the profit of individuals, but the strengthening of revolutionary struggle, and the shareholders contented themselves with a dividend of 3% on the nominal value of 50 lire, instead of the real value of 700 lire.

After the August insurrection, a committee of railwaymen was formed, with the support of the police and the bourgeois and reformist press, which proposed to deprive the Socialist Party of their predominance on the Board. The shareholders were promised the immediate liquidation of the difference of 650 lire between the face value and the current value of each share. The railway workers were promised various prerogatives in the distribution of foodstuffs. The reformist traitors and the bourgeois press set in action every means of agitation and propaganda to transform the cooperative from a workers' organisation into a commercial business of a petty bourgeois nature. The

working class was exposed to persecutions of every kind. Censorship stifled the voice of the Socialist section. But in spite of all the persecutions and the brutalities, the Socialists, who had not for a single moment abandoned their view that the workers' cooperative is a weapon of the class struggle, once again obtained a majority in the Cooperative Alliance.

The Socialist Party obtained 700 out of 800 votes, despite the fact that the majority of the electors were white collar railway workers, whom one might have expected, after the defeat of the August insurrection, to have wavered in their loyalties, and even to have shown reactionary tendencies.

IN THE POST-WAR PERIOD

After the end of the imperialist war, the proletarian movement made rapid advances. The working masses of Turin understood that the historical period opened by the war was profoundly different from the epoch preceding the war. The Turin working class perceived immediately that the Third International is an organisation of the world proletariat for the organisation of civil war, for the conquest of political power, for the institution of the dictatorship of the proletariat, and for the creation of a new order in economic and social relationships.

The problems of the revolution were the object of discussion in all the workers' assemblies. The best elements of the working class vanguard came together to publish a weekly newspaper of communist inspiration, *L'Ordine nuovo* (The New Order). In the columns of this weekly, the various problems of the revolution were discussed: the revolutionary organisation of the masses, which were to win the Unions to the cause of communism; the transference of Union struggle from the field of narrow corporatism and reformism to the level of revolutionary struggle; control over production; and the dictatorship of the proletariat. The question of the Factory Councils was also high on the agenda.

In the Turin factories, small workers' committees already existed from previously, recognised by the capitalists, and some of them had already engaged in struggle against officialdom, the reformist spirit, and the constitutionalist tendencies of the trade unions.

But the majority of these committees were nothing more than the union's creatures: the lists of candidates for these committees (the Internal Commissions) were prepared by the union machine, which would choose, in preference, workers of an opportunist inclination, who would give no trouble to the employers, and who would stifle every mass action at birth. In their propaganda the followers of *L'Ordine nuovo* were in the front line in supporting the transformation of the Internal Commissions, and the principle that the preparations of lists of candidates should take place in among the working masses, and not up in the heights of the Union bureaucracy. The tasks which they assigned to the Factory Councils were the control over production, the arming and military preparation of the masses, and their political and technical preparation. They were no longer to fulfil their old function of watchdogs to protect the interests of the ruling classes, nor to hold back the masses in their action against the capitalist regime.

THE ENTHUSIASM FOR THE COUNCILS

The propaganda for the Factory Councils was received with enthusiasm by the masses; in the course of half a year, Factory Councils were established in all the engineering factories and workshops, and the communists won a majority in the engineering workers' Union. The principle of Factory Councils and control over production was approved and accepted by a majority at the congress and by a majority of the Unions belonging to the Chamber of Labour.

The organisation of the Factory Councils is based on the following principles: a body is set up in every factory, in every workshop, on the basis of representation (and not on

the old basis of the bureaucratic system). It makes real the strength of the proletariat, struggles against the capitalist order, and exercises control over production, educating the whole mass of the workers for revolutionary struggle and for the creation of the Workers' State. The Factory Council must be formed on the principle of organisation by industries; it must represent for the working class the model of the communist society, which will be reached through the dictatorship of the proletariat. In this society there will no longer exist class divisions; all social relationships will be regulated according to the technical requirements of production and its corresponding organisation, and will not be made subject to an organised state power. The working class must understand the full beauty and nobility of the ideal for which it is struggling and sacrificing itself: it must realise that to reach this ideal it is necessary to pass through several stages; it must recognise the necessity of revolutionary discipline and of the dictatorship.

Every factory is divided into plants, and each plant into craft teams; each team performs a given part of the work; the workers of each team elect one worker with a binding and conditional mandate. The Assembly of the delegates of the factory forms a Council, which elects an Executive Committee from its own numbers. The assembly of the political secretaries of the Executive Committees forms the Central Committee of the Councils, which elects from among its own number a study committee for the city, for the organisation of propaganda, the elaboration of work plans, the approval of projects and proposals from individual factories, or, indeed, from individual workers, and finally for the general leadership of the whole movement.

THE COUNCILS AND THE INTERNAL COMMISSIONS DURING THE STRIKE

Some tasks of the Factory Councils have a purely technical and even industrial character, as, for example, the control of technical personnel, the dismissal of employees who show themselves to be enemies of the working class, struggles with the management for the conquest of rights and freedoms, and the control of production in the factory, and of financial operations.

The Factory Councils soon took root. The masses willingly accepted this form of communist organisation, grouped themselves round the Executive Committees, and energetically supported the struggle against the capitalist autocracy. Despite the fact that neither the industrialists nor the Union bureaucracies were willing to recognise the Councils and the committees, they nevertheless obtained considerable successes: they threw out the agents and spies of the capitalists, and forged links with the office workers and the technicians so as to get information of a financial and industrial nature. Inside the factory they themselves held the power of disciplining workers, and they showed the scattered and disunited workers what direct action by the workers in industry means.

The activity of the Councils and Internal Commissions showed itself more clearly during the strikes: these strikes lost their impulsive and haphazard character and became the expression of the conscious activity of the revolutionary masses. The technical organisation of the Councils and Internal Commissions and their capacity for action was perfected to such an extent that it was possible, within five minutes, to get 16,000 workers, scattered through 42 divisions of FIAT, to down tools. On 3 December 1919, the Factory Councils gave tangible proof of their capacity to lead mass movements in grand style. Behind the backs of the Socialist Party section, who held the whole mechanics of the movement in their control, the Factory Councils, without any preparation, and in the space of one hour, succeeded in mobilising 120,000 workers. One hour later this proletarian army launched itself like an avalanche into the centre of the city, and swept the whole nationalist and militarist rabble out of the squares and off the streets.

At the head of the struggle for the establishment of the Factory Councils were the communists belonging to the Socialist section and the Union organisations. The anarchists also took part, seeking to oppose their high-flying rhetoric to the clear and precise language of the Marxist communists.

However, the movement came up against additional resistance from Union officials, from the Socialist Party leadership, and from *Avanti!*. The polemic of these people was based on the difference between the concept of the Factory Council and that of the Soviet. Their conclusions had a purely theoretical, abstract and bureaucratic nature. Behind their high-sounding phrases was concealed the wish to avoid the direct participation of the masses in the revolutionary struggle, the desire to maintain the union's hold over the masses. The members of the Party directorates repeatedly refused to take any initiative towards revolutionary action before a coordinated plan of action had been drawn up, but they did nothing to prepare and elaborate this plan.

However, the Turin movement did not succeed in expanding beyond localised limits, since the whole bureaucratic machinery of the unions was set in motion to prevent the working masses in other parts of Italy from following the example of Turin.

THE STRUGGLE AGAINST THE COUNCILS

The Turin movement was mocked, sneered at, insulted and criticised in every way.

The bitter criticisms of the Union bodies and the Socialist Party leadership gave new encouragement to the capitalists, who no longer had any hindrance in their struggle against the Turin proletariat and against the Factory Councils. The conference of industrialists which was held in March 1920 in Milan drew up a plan of attack. But the "guardians of the working class" and their political and economic organisations, took no notice of this fact. Abandoned by all, the Turin proletariat was forced to confront, by itself, with its own resources, the nation's capitalists and the power of the State. Turin was inundated by an army of police. Around the city, heavy artillery and machine guns were set up at strategic points. And when this whole military apparatus was ready, the capitalists began to provoke the proletariat. It is true that, faced with these formidable conditions of struggle, the proletariat hesitated to take up the challenge. But when it was seen that the clash was inevitable, the workers emerged courageously from their positions of reserve, and were determined to fight on to victory.

THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF THE SOCIALIST PARTY IN MILAN

The engineering workers were on strike for a whole month, and the other categories of workers for ten days. Industry was at a standstill throughout the province, and communications were paralysed. But the Turin proletariat was isolated from the rest of Italy. The central bodies did nothing to assist them. They did not even publish a poster to explain to the Italian people the importance of the struggle of the Turin workers. *Avanti!* refused to publish the manifesto of the Turin party section. The Turin comrades were labelled everywhere as anarchists and adventurists. At that time the National Council of the Socialist Party was due to be held in Turin. But this convention was transferred to Milan, because a city "in the grip of a general strike" was not seen as suitable as a theatre of Socialist discussion!

On this occasion, the complete impotence of the men called upon to lead the party was revealed: while the working masses in Turin were courageously defending the Factory Councils, the first organisations based on workers' democracy and embodying the power of the proletariat, in Milan they were chattering over projects and methods for the formation of Councils, as a form of political power still to be won by the proletariat; they were discussing ways of consolidating victories not yet won, and meanwhile they were leaving the Turin proletariat to its fate, leaving the bourgeoisie the possibility of destroying a workers' power that had already been won.

The Italian proletarian masses showed their solidarity with the Turin comrades in various ways. The railway workers of Pisa, Livorno and Florence refused to transport troops bound for Turin; the port workers and sailors of Livorno and Genoa sabotaged the transportation of materials in the ports; the proletariat in many cities went on strike, contrary to the orders of their Unions.

The General Strike of Turin and Piedmont came up against sabotage and resistance by the Unions and by the Socialist Party itself. Nevertheless, it was of great educational significance because it demonstrated that a practical unity between workers and peasants is possible, and it once again proved the urgent necessity of fighting against the whole bureaucratic mechanism of the Unions, which are the most solid support behind the opportunist efforts of the parliamentarians and reformists to stifle any revolutionary movement of the working masses.

[Translated from *L'Ordine nuovo*, July 1920]

Translated by Ed Emery

Extracted from: THE BOOK OF FIAT: Insurrection, insubordination, occupation and revolutionary politics at the FIAT motor company – 1907-1982

Published: Red Notes / May Day Rooms

First published in 2020