

CHAPTER 4

THE ENGINEERING WORKERS' STRIKES OF 1924-25.

by Marco Revelli

1925-4 in Italy saw an economic upturn following the crisis of 1921-22. It also saw a growth of workers struggles: isolated incident at first, but then increasingly mass struggles. In the first four months of 1924, the number of strikes registered by the Confindustria employers' association was 70, involving 14,031 workers and 146,291 working days lost. In the six months that followed, the figure was 186 strikes, 64,732 workers, and 382,320 days lost. To this should be added the protest and demonstrations that accompanied the assassination of Matteotti (10 June) and the finding of his body (16 August). This growth of working class strength was also indicated in increased votes for the socialist unions, and against the fascist unions, in the factories.

June 1924 saw a series of mass struggles, all along similar themes: working class anger at the government's wage cuts; intervention by the fascist Corporations to head off workers' anger and assure themselves sole negotiating rights; workers going beyond the limits set by the fascist unions; and a final sell-out and defeat (miners in Arezzo and Iglesias, and quarry workers in Carrara). However, the most important struggle of this period was the long fight over the engineering workers' agreement. The issues at stake were the consolidation of cost-of-living payments, the establishment of minimum pay levels, and the question of who should have negotiating rights – the fascist Corporations [Corporazioni] or the General Confederation of Labour [Confederazione Generale del Lavoro]. The issues raised by the FIOM [Federazione Impiegati Operai Metallurgici] also included holidays, guarantees on redundancy, payment for overtime, shift payments and the question of the Internal Commissions.

Negotiations on this claim continued through to 29 September 1924, when the Milan , region engineering employers signed an agreement – the “Concordat” – with the fascist trade union federation, ignoring the presence of the FIOM as a negotiating party representative of the workforce. The deal gave even less than the fascist unions had been demanding, but at the same time it was a boost for them: it amounted to a recognition of sole negotiating rights.

A FIOM referendum among its membership registered wholesale rejection of this “Concordat” – but at the same time the FIOM did not have the political will to organise a mass fight. The Communist Party called for an intensification of the mass struggle, and the formation of Agitation Committees to force the union leadership into action.

Some strikes broke out, and it soon became clear that the extension or non-extension of the struggle was a point of issue between the political forces of the Communist Party (calling for nationwide action to support the Milan-region strikers) and the FIOM. It was only in early March 1925 that the issue began to take on broader significance, with the engineering workers of Brescia coming out in massive strike action (behind a call for action promoted by the fascist unions, to which the FIOM eventually also added their voice).

By this time the movement in Milan was extremely solid. The fascist unions had the aim of using this movement to consolidate their own negotiating position vis-à-vis the FIOM. They had come out on a demand for a renegotiation of the 1924 Concordat – and in an about-face they signed, an agreement with the employers which offered only derisory gains on overtime pay, and all other demands were deferred till a future date.

By now, the interest of both the employers and the fascist unions was to seek a showdown with the free trade union. Thousands of workers were now in struggle, and the FIOM had claimed a leadership role. Would it now plough ahead, or would it accept the sellout?. In the event, the FIOM had no choice but to continue the struggle.

In a leaflet issued on the night of 15/16 March, it announced: “For the FIOM, the struggle goes on” [*Per la FIOM... La Lotta Continua*].

The Prefect of Milan chose this moment to unleash the forces of repression. For the moment, the fascist union had disappeared from the scene and the engineering workers' strike was fast developing into a generalised confrontation of political significance. During the night, large contingents of carabinieri were drafted into Milan, and on the morning of 16 March the main factories were surrounded by the forces of law and order. A meeting of 2,000 workers at the Chamber of Labour was broken up by the Carabinieri; all newspapers were forbidden to publish communications from the FIOM; the ban on distributing leaflets was put into effect, and many people were arrested; in the days that followed, various newspapers (*Corriere della Sera*, *Avanti!*, *La Giustizia* and *L'Unità*) were several times seized, because “in various forms they have encouraged workers to continue with the strike, or have given exaggerated reports and tendentious reports about the extent of the strike”. On the evening of the 16th, the police went so far as to arrest all the members of the Executive Council of the FIOM in Turin, together with factory shop stewards who had come together in a private meeting to plan the extension of the strike to Turin. [...] The FIOM announced that the strike in Milan would continue, and that as from Tuesday 17 March it would also be extended to involve the engineering workers of Turin. [...]

In Turin, despite the arrests of the previous day, support for the strike was total. 60,000 engineering workers stayed away from work, including fascist workers, who joined with the strikers in defiance of severe injunctions from the fascist Corporations. Given the considerable Communist Party presence in the Turin factories, the conflict took on political overtones right from the start. The authorities were caught on the hop, and faced being unable to control the situation. On the 17th the Prefect of Turin telegraphed to Rome: “60,000 workers are on strike, and there are not sufficient public forces to maintain order”. The president of the AMMA, Fano, declared that “the stoppage of work is total”, and he complained of the “total absence”, of the forces of order, of information, and of arrangements by the political authorities. The employers' united front was coming apart at the seams. That very morning, 17 March, had seen FIAT resigning from the AMMA. Behind Agnelli's decision undoubtedly lay the desire of Turin's largest manufacturing group (30,000 workers) to “transfer negotiations to a company level”, in order to “stifle at birth any prospect of a major political mobilisation of the engineering workforce”.

On 18 March the strike continued in Milan, with something between 90% and 100% of the engineering workforce on strike. In Turin the strike was strengthened when workers from the smaller factories (who had not been informed the previous day) also joined the movement. However, the joint reaction of the police and the fascists was not long in coming. In Milan, in addition to hundreds of carabinieri, the strikers were confronted with around 500 “industrial security voluntary militia”, and gangs of armed

strikebreakers at the factory gates.

In Turin large detachments of carabinieri were sent to surround the working-class areas, principally with the idea of preventing communication between working class militants and blocking any communication between the centre and the workers (leafleting was banned, and publications containing FIOM communiqués were seized).

It was at this point that the FIOM chose to end the strike in the Milan region. They ordered a return to work precisely at the moment of greatest strength and combativity among the workers. And they had won nothing. The FIOM communiqué issued on the evening of 18 March stated: "Two days of protest strikes against the Corporations' Concordat are sufficient to warn the authorities that free trade unionism and autonomy cannot be abolished... We do not feel that we can ask more of you. We did not imagine that we would achieve full victory in this first great battle. We simply wanted to sow the seeds, and this we have done. The seeds sown in the last few days will bear fruit. We told you to return to work only when your own, free, organisations instructed you. That hour has come. As from this evening the strike is over."

In Milan, the 100,000 engineering workers who for two days had stayed away from work following FIOM directives, and who were expecting the FIOM to negotiate a favourable end to the struggle, were caught unawares by the order to end the strike. Some of them expressed their anger at this "unconditional" surrender by staying away from work for all of the following day.

In Turin, where the strike continued throughout the day, and the FIOM order only arrived on the evening of 19 March, the workers reacted even more violently to the ending of the strike. The FIOM order to end the strike was accepted by only a minority of the workers (it was estimated that only 15-20% reported for work on Friday 20 March). The majority continued the strike, and many believed that "the fascists have arrested Buozzi and Scaravelli, have occupied *La Stampa*, and have published a false communiqué from the FIOM so as to force the engineering workers to return to work." [*L'Unità*, 21 March 1925]. Of the 50,000 FIAT workforce, those few who arrived at the factory gates found them shut (management later claimed that they did not know the strike had ended) and they only returned to work on Monday 25 March. Thus, the main and strongest component of the Turin engineering workforce, the FIAT workers (who could have played a key role in terms of autonomous initiatives at this delicate moment, given the absence of leadership from the trade union hierarchy) found themselves totally isolated and fragmented, outside the factory gates, excluded from their natural place of coordination and organisation.

The defeat of this strike was to leave its mark for many years.

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