

CHAPTER 5

THE “AGITATION COMMITTEES” IN TURIN

Interview with Battista Santhia

PREFACE: The article in Chapter 1 covers the broad history of FIAT from its beginnings to the outbreak of World War II. It gives some coverage of the workers’ forms of organisation and struggle during the fascist period. The following article takes that description a stage further. It is edited and translated from *Mezzosecolo*, Annals, Vol. 1, 1975, published by the Institute for the History of the Resistance in Piedmont, Centro Pietro Gobetti, Turin). The first section consists of excerpts from an interview with Battista Santhia, in which he stresses particularly the history of the Agitation Committees in Turin. The interview was recorded in January 1974, when Santhia, a Communist Party member with a lifetime’s history in the struggle, was 76 years old.

We have translated only parts of the interview – mainly the story of the historic struggles of 1943-5, at the end of the War, but also a reference to the struggles of 1924-5. This reference is then taken up in a piece rewritten from an article written by Marco Revelli, which tells some of the history of those struggles.

Battista Santhia: The phenomenon of the Agitation Committee was not something that suddenly sprang up out of the blue. Its origins go back a long way, in fact to the period preceding World War I, and these committees continued throughout the War, until the Internal Commissions gained recognition (1915-18) The Internal Commissions were active until the fascists came to power, whereupon they were abolished.

But later on, they were to re-emerge, in 1924-5, the period when Giacomo Matteotti was assassinated. This was a period of major working class struggles in Turin, and I have never understood why they have not been sufficiently documented by historians of the labour movement. Other periods have been studied, but why is there so little estimation of that period of great working class struggles, when the workers and their representatives were really putting their heads on the block, because the fascists weren’t joking in those days. Also, part of the value of that period lay in the fact that once again workers were calling for the Internal Commissions to be re-established, and once again it was the Agitation Committees that took up the leadership of the movement. Because, when the question of the Internal Commissions was brought up, the employers’ minds went straight back to the period prior to 1922 – i.e. to the period of the occupation of the factories, and the Factory Councils, and they put up a tremendous resistance. However, the pressure from within the working class was so strong that they were forced to discuss and negotiate, even though they were not willing to recognise the Internal Commissions. So, we began with the Agitation Committees. As soon as *L’Unità* started publication, in one of the earliest numbers, possibly even the first, there was an article written by myself in which we called for Agitation Committees to force the employers to recognise the Internal Commissions. In the meantime, workers’ actions were continuing, and at a certain point the employers gave in – but they still tried to limit their functions, put strings on them...

In the period leading up to the introduction of the Special Laws [*leggi eccezionali*] at the end of May 1927, there was a series of strikes and demonstrations at FIAT. These were followed by the definitive abolition of the Internal Commissions, a wave of sackings such as had already occurred in 1921 and subsequently, and effectively the third purging of Communist Party members from Turin’s factories. When people used

to criticise the behaviour of the Turin workers, and FIAT workers in particular, in the 1930s, they didn't take this fact into account. It wasn't that the Turin workers' movement had fallen prey to apathy or lack of confidence in this period; rather, it had suffered too many setbacks, and it had exposed itself in too many hard-fought struggles where it had not been followed and supported by others.

In 1927 we were in clandestinity, but I was in Turin, and together with Chan-So-Lin [t.n. nom de guerre of G.Li Causi, named after a well-known Chinese communist] we organised a secret conference; we continued with our political and trade union organising activity – although we had to abolish card membership, because there was too much risk of endangering a lot of people. Turin in this period became the de facto headquarters of the Communist Party's Central Committee (what was left of it) and of the national Political Office. [...] For a while our clandestine organisation held up, because the fascist police were not yet very efficient. Then they got organised, and we collapsed. The last political activity in which I took part in Turin in that period was a conference that we held in the Valle di Susa, and which went quite well, leaving aside the fact that I was brought up before a Special Tribunal and accused of having organised a meeting of the Central Committee of the Communist Party [...]

After that, I left Turin. I went through various things, living the life of an emigré. I returned to Italy to undertake clandestine activity, and was arrested in 1931. I was imprisoned, and then sent into *confino* [t.n. internment]. I returned after the fall of Fascism. [...]

Since I was in rather poor health (my lung wound had reopened, and I was pretty cracked up), they left me alone in Turin for a month or so. Then I became active again. I went onto the Federation secretariat, under Giovanni Nicola, together with Vittorio Flecchia. The regional Party secretary at that time was Arturo Colombi. The position of the Turin comrades was as follows: "Listen, Santhia, here we are weak in the factories, and we need to intensify our agitational work if we're going to have any effect as regards sabotage and reducing output (this was the problem at that time). You're to involve yourself with mass work, but particularly with setting up Agitation Committees." [...]

We set about building a network of Agitation Committees in every factory and for every sector of workers. We published duplicated news sheets which were the mouthpiece of the Committee in each factory and each sector. Even the Town Hall had its own newspaper, *The Bell*, where they made fun of the mayor. The news sheets contained mainly workers' demands and suchlike, which ranged from the detailed problems of working class family life, such as the lack of water, to the sabotage of production. We were able to reduce industrial output from the big factories by about 8%, a fact which amazed the Anglo-American delegation which visited the factories after the Liberation. Every tiny pretext was seized in order to stop work, to slow the arrival of material in the factories, not to mention the stuff that we were producing ourselves, such as the armoured cars that were being produced in the SPA workshops. This was not so much to the credit of the Party, but more to the strength and the organisation of the working class; only the working class could do some of these things, not us. [...]

THE 18 APRIL 1945 STRIKE

Now I would like to go back for a moment, to tell you about the strike of 18 April 1945, because I think that Turin has never seen a strike like it, and I think it should be known about. That strike involved every sector of workers, from the factories to the banks, to civil servants, magistrates and students. Imagine it: the railway station was occupied by the Germans. Then, at ten o'clock, the clerks closed their ticket windows, saying "Gentlemen, we are on strike". In the courts, law cases were suspended because of the strike action, not to mention the factories. A workers' demonstration from Borgo San Paolo marched right to the prisons, an indescribable moment, with the fascists terrified, taking off their uniforms and running away. Then, of course,

came the repression. Four comrades were executed the day after. [...]

Question: When were the Agitational Committees actually set up, organizationally? Did they already exist during the strike of March 1944, or were they set up afterwards?

Battista Santhia: They first took concrete form in early 1944; there were already one or two in existence in the March strikes, because as I have said, the idea was already in the air. There was also the problem of how we were going to get rid of the Internal Commissions. We didn't succeed in this everywhere, because the fascists had kept them alive and tried to extend them, and we had to oppose this because they were becoming instruments of collaboration, and not of struggle against the Germans and the fascists. So we tried to replace them with Agitation Committees – not without difficulty, because not everyone was in agreement. But the big events of that period were bringing the situation to a head, and when Mirafiori was bombed (I think it was June or July of that year), to stop the Germans transferring the machinery to Germany, there was a strike against the Germans' attempts to dismantle the machinery, and they were unable to do what they intended. This struggle was under the leadership of the Agitation Committee. This was an important chapter in the struggle against the Germans, the struggle to save out industrial heritage by stopping them dismantling machinery and carrying it away.

The railway workers gave invaluable help, because not only did they sabotage the machinery transporters, but they also managed to conceal a large number of locomotives from the Germans' raids, and they were able to save millions, hundreds of millions of lire of industrial equipment. The railway workers were very organised. Their Agitation Committee was one of the most efficient. I remember that I was responsible for maintaining links with their committee, which contained comrades, but also elements from all the other political tendencies, and even some managers. The railway workers' organisation contained not only the various political tendencies, but also non-political trade unionists, who were a left-over from anarcho-sindicalism. [...]

Question: You said that in Turin the Communist Party was weak in factory organisation. [...] Were the Agitation Committees in fact a vehicle for recruiting into the Communist Party, which was in the process of strengthening its organisation?

Santhia: Even though we were organisationally weak, the Party could always rely on there being a groups of people, or even an individual who would do something. That one, or ten, or twenty, were always able to give take initiatives at the political or trade union level. It wasn't that the Party substituted for the trade union, or vice, versa. One cannot substitute for the other. But for a thousand reasons, you have elements from whom you'll never get anything in terms of Party activity, but who will be mobilised on trade union issues. And there is always a relationship between these two kinds of activity.

The fact is, the reality of the factory is a dynamic reality which is constantly changing, and within it takes place the process of formation and transformation of the worker. In the 1920s we had the problem of transforming the workers from the South, or from the Piedmont countryside, into class-conscious workers. We got to the point of putting forward representatives from Southern Italy, or from the Piedmont countryside, for the elections to the Factory Councils, and these were not decisions that were taken on high... they came out of the nature of things, and they were a way of winning the majority of the working class in the factory to the policies of the Factory Council.

But then that was the function of the party and the trade union in those days. It wasn't a matter of winning the working class to this or that party, but of winning them to class consciousness. This is what we were all involved in. Because nowadays, a worker comes into the factory and gets his trade union card; then you have the job of turning him from a trade unionist into a communist. In the same way, in those days you had to transform him from any-old-worker into a class conscious worker, with an

awareness, a direction and a collective conception of things. So, during the First World War, I remember workers being brought into the factory, and the noise from the machinery would frighten them so much that they'd run away. These people were still influenced by the priests, and to talk of strikes, agitation, joining the union etc gave them the horrors – so the process of their transformation took a long time – but it got there in the end. Today everyone talks about “debate”... I don't like the word, because all it means really is discussion. Well, if anyone has ever given, in practice, a demonstration and a lesson in how to act democratically, it was us, even if nowadays they call us Stalinists. In Turin we built up the Communist Party inside factory mass meetings, where workers of all political persuasions were present, from anarchists to social democrats and socialists. In the course of these meetings there was always lively debate, and that is how we built up the Communist Party.”

[Recorded in Borghetto S. Spirito, 1 January 1974]

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Translated by Ed Emery

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