

CHAPTER 10

THE COMMUNIST PARTY AT FIAT AFTER THE WAR

Ed Emery

In the redundancy battle at FIAT, of September/October 1980, the Communist Party seized on the workers' struggle as a means to present a new militant face. It mobilised to support the FIAT workers. Its immediate aim was to chase the present government from power. And when the dust settled, the Party line was that FIAT must be made productive again, in the interests of the national economy. In the face of a movement of FIAT workers that was tending to destroy the capitalist relations of production, the Party's role was to conserve and restore the status quo.

This was not the first time. The Party played an equally reactionary role in the revolutionary period after World War II.

The class struggle and the partisan war as two moments of the revolutionary process

As the Second World War drew into its final phases, the Italian partisans, aided by the mass working-class anti-Nazi movement of strikes and sabotage in the big cities, drove the Nazi-fascists, and the bosses who had collaborated with them, out of the North. A tide of revolutionary hope was swelling among the working class. "Today in the mountains against the Nazi-fascists, tomorrow in the streets and squares of all Italy against the bourgeoisie and the last of fascism." This slogan reflected the revolutionary mood of a large part of the Resistance movement. The class struggle was inextricably tied to the partisan war, as "two successive moments in the revolutionary process itself".

In the wake of the fleeing owning class, factories were taken over by the workers themselves, and the job of converting war-production back to the needs of peace began.

Inside the factories, the nature of work changed radically. The bosses had gone, and with them went divisive incentive schemes, piece rates, foremen and time and motion men. In many factories the slogan *Mai più il cronometro* ["Never again the stopwatch"] appeared on the walls. Above all else, the workers were determined that the fascists and collaborators would not return to the factory, and that the place of work would from now on be organised in a truly democratic way.

But the understanding of the situation by the leadership of the Italian Communist Party (PCI), tantalised by a fleeting but nevertheless heady glimpse of power in the immediate post-War tripartite government, led to quite a different analysis:

[INSERT PICTURE]

Photo: Turin 1945: "In the wake of the fleeing owning class, factories were taken over by the workers themselves"

"The socialist revolution is not for today nor for tomorrow; the conditions for a revolutionary conquest of power do not exist, the revolutionary will of the working class is not a sufficient element for the creation of a socialist society in Italy. [The PCI's] objective is that of transforming the revolutionary tension of the masses into a will for political action, maintaining unity and faith in their class destiny."

Thus, at the precise moment when the working class was at its strongest and most confident; at the moment when, for many, the revolution had already been well started; at the moment when the Nazi-fascists had been beaten in the mountains and their bourgeois collaborators driven from the factories of the big towns, the Italian Communist Party denied the existence of the objective conditions for revolution. Not only this, but in collaboration with all social classes in Italy they threw themselves heart and muscle into the reconstruction of the war-damaged Italian economy.

As Liliansa Lanzardo says, in *Classe Operaia e Partito Comunista alla FIAT*:

"The Party managed to hegemonise the workers: that is, to transform its struggle into a political negotiating platform whose objectives coincided with the immediate interests of the most advanced sector of the bourgeoisie."

According to the PCI, then, the objective conditions for a social revolution in Italy could not exist until the (capitalist) economy had been sufficiently strengthened. Workers were confused to hear "their" Party was sharing one voice with the political spokesmen for capital on a whole series of questions.

The restoration of capitalist relations of production

The Party gave lip service to the three post-War demands of: a purging of fascist elements from all official and managerial posts; the democratisation of work; and finally the reconstruction of the war-damaged Italian economy. But it was the last of these demands which quickly took on an over-riding importance in the strategy of the PCI.

The "purge from the top" put into action at the end of the Resistance (for example with the "sacking" of Agnelli, Valletta and Camerara from FIAT) was slowly reversed under pressure from the top ranks of the Party. By June 1946 nearly all FIAT managers accused of collaboration with the fascists were back in office, and it was they who formed the backbone of FIAT management during the "hard years" of the 1950s.

The PCI urged that the purge "should not mean a stripping of the vital nerve centres of the nation" and called that it should not happen "with an indiscriminate and inopportune intransigence which could deprive the nation of people with special skills".

The failure of the purge consigned intact to the employing class its whole repressive apparatus, saving it the need to recreate the old hierarchical structure.

The democratisation of the organisation of work and of decision-making at work had occurred after the War when the factories were occupied and management councils were formed. "Taylorist" work methods, the finely timed division of labour, the hierarchy of supervision and all forms of incentive schemes and, individual bonuses were rejected.

The PCI was unhappy with this situation, which they saw as a drawback in the drive for productivity above all else.

The Party used propaganda about Russia to get the workers to accept the return to differentials, piece rates and work study. In February 1946, the Communist factory journal *Coscienza di Classe* ["Class Consciousness"] carried a piece remarking that:

"Stalin himself (at the XVII Congress of the Communist Party) decisively rejected any levelling tendency at work or in social life. Every Leninist knows, if he is a real Leninist, that a levelling of the needs and conditions of life is a petty bourgeois reactionary absurdity, worthy of some primitive sect of ascetics but not of socialist society organised on Marxist lines, because you cannot insist that all men live out a single model in their private lives."

[INSERT PICTURE]

Photo: Headlines from two Italian anti-fascist newspapers: 1944.

On the more general economic and political level, the PCI was equally reactionary. Togliatti and the rest of the Party leadership failed to press for even the smallest steps towards "socialisation" (for example, the abolition of monopolies and the *latifundias*, demands contained in the manifestos of nearly all the anti-fascist parties). However, non-private ownership of the means of production was recognised, and it was conceded that co-operative and state ownership were largely welcome. But by 2 September 1946, the PCI Central Committee approved a motion which gave up the old line on the economy, and conceded that:

"The only way out of the present serious situation lies in setting the national economy on a 'new course' in which ample liberty is left to private initiative..."

An indication of the economic thinking of the PCI can be read in the following speech by Togliatti at the PCI economic convention in 1945, defending the dissolution of the block on dismissals from work agreed between the CGIL (the newly-rebuilt PCI-dominated trade union federation) and the employers' association Confindustria:

"Our policy must be a policy of production and not of subsidy. I report here the example posed by comrade Roveda, which I stand by, about the agreement which comes to an end on 30 September. This agreement substantially consisted in subsidising for some months the fundamental nucleus of the working class in the North even if it is not working; maintaining workers in the factory even if they are at a standstill; and paying them % of their full wage packet. This measure was brought in during an exceptional situation – but we can't go on in this way, and we'll have to tell the workers so, openly. The first thing to do, I think, is to appeal to the workers so that productivity is increased. From now on this must be one of the fundamental points of our agitation."

But in the factory we're all rabbits....

In the post-War period, then, the Italian Communist Party spoke in unison with the parties of capital: as indeed they were to do on many occasions in the modern history of Italy. The workers' trust was betrayed; their revolutionary confidence trickled away in the absence of any organisation ready and able to defend the

workers' gains of the immediate post-War period and maintain, support and propagandise the struggle for more.

As Lucio Parlanti, an ex-FIAT worker, comments:

“The Communist Party was very persecuted during those years [the 1950s], but I think more than anything else we were paying the price of its post-War policy, when it really moved away from the masses. I remember straight after the War, Togliatti came to speak in Piazza Crispi – and then De Gasperi came – and they both argued exactly the same thing: the need to save the national economy. ‘We have got to work because Italy's on its knees, it's been bombed by the Americans, they've destroyed us – but don't worry, because if we produce, if we work hard, in a year or two we'll all be fine.’ Roll up your sleeves and put your noses to the grindstone... So the CP militants inside the factory set themselves the political task of producing to save the national economy, and the workers were left without a party. We became individualistic. Everyone thought of himself first, because the communists weren't communists any more, but just people working to save the national economy.”

“What was the Party doing in the 1950s? You never saw a leaflet, you never saw anything. I remember, I went to the Party social club once, furious: ‘Comrades,’ I said, Here we are every evening, drinking our wine, playing cards, and singing the Red Flag. But every morning in the factory, when the foreman comes up and tells us to make 5 extra pieces, I don't see one comrade there at FIAT. I don't understand it. Here we sing and give clenched fist salutes, but in the factory we're all rabbits.”

[*Trans. note:* This period of post-War class collaboration is dealt with, in detail, by Liliana Lanzardo, in her book *The Working Class and the Communist Party at FIAT: the Strategy of Collaboration 1945-49*, some of which is published elsewhere in this volume.]

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Translated by Ed Emery

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