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CHAPTER 12

THEN IT WAS 1962, AND THAT LONG-STOPPED BRAIN SUDDENLY BEGAN TO MOVE – PIAZZA STATUTO

Interview with Lucio Parlanti

Then came 1962: the political turning point for a lot of workers who were beginning to gain an understanding. That long-stopped brain, that robotised brain, suddenly began to move.

There was already discussion in the factory about a strike in the near future. People wanted a third week of vacation put into the contract. And they wanted a wage increase, because the money just wasn't enough. There were three days of strike over the contract in June and July.

Fiat-Mirafiori: the 1960s

Since I was already fairly political, I was really pissed off on the first day of the strike. I was a communist, and I didn't like Valletta's fascist dictatorship [trans. note: the head of FIAT]. It was fascism in a white shirt, maybe even worse than fascism in a black shirt. I got to the plant half an hour early on my motorcycle, and saw that all the workers were going in. I was able to stop a couple of workers who'd been with me on Headliners and had taken part in the struggle. We stayed outside the gates, but the workers kept going in as if the strike hadn't even been called. They just went marching on in. So I got on my motorcycle and said: "God damn, let's see if we can do it...!" And I started to disconnect the power-poles on the trams. I could move fast with my motorcycle, so I went along taking the poles off, all the way down to Piazza Carducci, even further. I wanted to make the workers arrive late. And a lot of them did arrive late. But at the end there were just seven of us on strike – five from Headliners, a CP activist from the Test area, and one other guy. We looked each other in the eye: "What do we do now?!" "...Ah, let's not go in!" And we stayed out.

The next day at work... we walked to our work stations. Everybody was murmuring. When a FIAT worker picks up a bit of news, it spreads up and down the line like wildfire. They were all talking about these seven workers from No. 12 Shop who had gone out on strike.

They were all looking at us, but not with that nasty look they usually give you when you put up a struggle and the Company screws you ("they got you too, huh?"). No, that day the workers looked at us differently. It seemed like they were thinking: "It wouldn't take much to get us on strike..."

There was a rumour that cars were being turned over, and people began to get excited...

The union called a second strike. I remember that the Communist Party – crafty guys – sent for militants from Milan and Genoa. They organised mass picketing. Damn, at this point it even encouraged me. It encouraged everybody. So once again I got onto my motorcycle. Allez! We stopped the trams, disconnected the poles, stopped the buses, and even diverted traffic at Lingotto, and it created havoc. The

strike came off well. Not even the office workers could get through, even though there were police and carabinieri to keep us away from them. The office workers... did you ever see Beruti when he takes off on the 100-metre sprint? Well, it was the same thing – they checked out the situation and took off for the plant entrance at full speed. But they were almost always caught before they could get in. Somebody would grab them by the pants or by the neck, pick them up in the air, and push them back. People were coming down from Mirafiori, saying that most of the workers had gone in there. But we had enough strength here at Lingotto.

Then came the first violence, when a manager wanted to drive into the plant. I wouldn't want to say who did it, but I remember that they took his car, a FIAT 500, and turned it upside down. Yeah... there was already violence back then... even if the union was shouting "No, that's not the way to go about things". There was such an intense, stored-up anger among the workers that they took this car with the manager still in it, turned it upside down, then put it back on its wheels, and made him drive off. And as he was driving off, a big rock crashed through his back windshield. It made a loud noise, god damn, and gave the people some enthusiasm. And the news started spreading that they were overturning cars, creating havoc, and, in effect, the people began to get excited.

In Piazza Statuto the workers let loose the anger that had accumulated in all those years

That strike was a complete success. But the night before the third strike, the UIL (the social-democratic "yellow" union) signed a separate agreement with FIAT at midnight. It was a contract that gave us bullshit trifles: a 25 lire increase, a small improvement in the health plan, and little else. Meanwhile the office workers got a 50 lire rise and a bunch of privileges. It seemed like the contract was more for the office workers than for the production workers. That's why we were so pissed off at the office workers while we picketed on the third day of the strike. There was a lot of hatred towards them, and the workers attacked them. These privileged office workers had always treated us badly, treated us like shit; when we had to go to the front office they made fun of us, sent us running here and there and treated us like arseholes. The hatred against them was intense.

On the morning of the third day of the strike, the UIL came round in speaker-cars, announcing that the contract had been signed. They told us to go back to work. Then the Fiom cars came round (the Communist union), saying: "No... Continue the struggle..." With such a crazy mix-up the workers became really mad. At Lingotto it was a mass strike, with fists and punches flying too... !! Heavy punches, flying against whoever came off the buses and tried to get in to work... heavy punches against the scabs. It had never happened before – there weren't even fist-fights among the workers back in '43. This type of strike had never been seen before. They even disarmed a cop – dragged him into the middle of the brawl and took his gun, holster, everything. Then they gave him back his gun, when he almost started crying, saying that he'd lose his job... At any rate, they called the police down in force...

The most violent discussions and spontaneous meetings took place around the UIL cars – they were saying not to strike – and the Fiom cars – they were saying to strike. People were saying: "The one time the workers are united!" These bastard unions do it on purpose. They're not going to split us again..." This was the main thing that people were discussing. You saw a divided union, a union that was against us, a union that was against our power. People started spreading the word to go to Piazza Statuto. The idea came out of the discussions: "Let's go to Piazza Statuto... Piazza Statuto!!" Even one of the Fiom cars came by yelling: "Everybody to Piazza Statuto". The Fiom thought that we'd go to Piazza Statuto peacefully.

Not everybody knew that the headquarters of the UIL were in Piazza Statuto, but the word spread quickly. And we got on the move. A small group went to Yanni's house

– the UIL guy who had signed the separate agreement – and messed the place up a bit. I went to Piazza Statuto with other workers from FIAT, with other workers like me. They all had an intense desire to throw rocks, and they began to dig up the street cobbles and to throw them through the windows of the UIL offices. But then... you didn't even hear the trumpet announcing the police charge... You just saw the cops of the Padova division charging down, clubbing people... The police came down, beating everybody... I waded into the thick of it – I got my kicks that way. I saw a *compagno* that they caught: they got on top of him and pounded him with their feet. The struggle lasted from Saturday to Monday morning. You went home, ate, and came back, then went home again, and came back again. It went on like that. You saw groups of workers moving together; then the Padova riot squads would chase us, but we'd regroup in the nearby streets and come back to pick up the struggle. Ten workers here, ten workers there, onward...

CARTOON: Working Class for Sale! Amazing Cut Prices! Apply to your Union.

There were a lot of new faces around that you didn't recognise, since it's not as if the vanguards of Mirafiori and Lingotto knew each other. There were all of these new faces – good faces, workers' faces. Maybe a lot of them were those CP activists from Genoa or Milan – tough, courageous; they could handle the fight. But there were also some unknown faces. There were a lot of young kids who had popped up from who knows where. A lot of them had come on their own, to see what was going on. But you also heard that some of these youngsters had been recruited by the bosses. There were rumours that the bosses were offering kids a couple of bucks if they'd go down to Piazza Statuto... When I first saw the youngsters I thought they were on our side. But later I saw how the newspapers were dealing with them. The newspapers were trying to make this workers' movement – and it really was a workers' movement, god damn, down to the hole in its arse – pass for a movement of kids. The bosses – who were very politicised, and wiser than us – they found these kids everywhere, and brought them down to create havoc. And if these kids got arrested, you could make people believe that Piazza Statuto wasn't any workers' struggle but was a student thing. The bosses wanted to convince people that workers don't struggle. They didn't want the thing to develop in the other factories. Had the news gone round that the workers were raising hell, the struggle would have been taken up in other factories. It would have spread right away, automatically... like what happened later on, in 1969.

The factory doesn't run unless we're there...

When we went back to work... heh, party-time! The workers were no longer the same. You could tell that their morale was higher, that the struggle in Piazza Statuto had boosted their spirits.

But right about then the big fire broke out at Lingotto. It burned down a warehouse that was full of materials. We still weren't politicised enough to understand it at the time, but it had probably been FIAT that had started it. They wanted to scare us, make us lower our heads again. They told us to go put out the fire, but many refused to move. It wasn't our problem. A lot of us just sat down: "I'm not going to work, and I'm not going to put it out either. It doesn't bother me. As far as I'm concerned, all of FIAT can bum down". It showed that they had no commitment to their work. But during the next few days the foremen started coming round telling us to watch out, that some people were going to be sacked... They started talking to us like this because they wanted to reestablish repression and fear. That's why the workers thought that FIAT was responsible for the fire.

The repression came down... The bosses' discipline prevailed again. Workers transferred and sent to die in the Foundries; the dictatorship of the foremen, the

terror; the scab who dominated you and spied on you and helped increase the workloads. We couldn't get ourselves together. We couldn't pull off an autonomous strike. There was a lot of disillusionment, especially towards the union: we knew that we needed a new workers' organisation which could lead a revolutionary working class. It was a period of individualism among workers, since they couldn't count on the union any more. But it was also a period of preparation. We grew more mature. In fact the individualism was coming from this type of thing: people would say: "Enough! I've had it!" But they were also willing to start from scratch, to get into new forms of struggle.

Piazza Statuto had been our victory out in the streets. Afterwards, Agnelli was able to put the brakes on the struggle, and he held us down until 1966. But he made a mistake in overestimating his victory. Something had been put into motion. A certain idea was spreading – if we got organised, if we went on strike, we could hold a knife to his throat too. That factory doesn't run, god damn, unless we're there to make it run... it takes more than a couple of maintenance engineers!

It went on like that for years: the tough *compagni* struggling alone, isolated, without being able to get a united struggle together. But if you ask me, even if '62 ended in individualism, it also opened up a new political perspective for the workers – a perspective that developed and finally expressed itself fully in 1969.

[Translated from *Primo Maggio...*]

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Translated by Ed Emery

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