

CHAPTER 16

INTERVIEW WITH THREE FIAT WORKERS ABOUT 1969

Red Notes: ...It was only after the summer of 1969 that people in Britain began to hear of the struggles at FIAT. Was there a tradition of struggle before mid-1969, or were these clashes the beginning of the revolutionary movement in FIAT?

Luigi: You mean was it they that broke the lethargy of the last twenty years here? Yes it was. Of course, there were struggles before this time, but they were all dominated by the unions. And they were struggles that came round at fixed intervals, when the unions set them. So every two or three years, when the contracts were about to expire, we would have the classic sort of struggle – you know, three days of strikes, all kept within union channels, and then the bosses' repression would begin all over again. And the little politicisation achieved during those two or three days would be blocked for the next three years of bosses' rule.

The southern immigrants arrive in Turin

But then, in about 1966, the immigrants from the South began to arrive. And the whole social situation in Turin blew up, what with the shortage of housing, lightning price increases, the building speculation and so on. All of a sudden there were 15,000-20,000 people arriving in the city, and quite apart from the way the prices rocketed, there were not the facilities to cope with them.

Red Notes: When did the three of you arrive in Turin?

Luigi: These two are young. For my part, I've been at FIAT for 20 years. This lot are the new generation who've broken with everything that we've become used to.

Toni: I've been here for two years. I joined FIAT right at the time that the struggles started.

Red Notes: When you arrived in Turin, what was it like for you?

Nino: I've been here for a couple of years now. For most of the time I've worked in small places – you know, sweat shops – always inside Turin. And then I was taken on at FIAT. At the beginning I really didn't know anything about anything. But the political work there was already well under way, and there were students doing leafletting at the factory, explaining a few things to people, like what the Union was all about. Then we had that whole big explosion during 1969. Everything went up. Boom!

Toni: I'd never seen anything like this in all my life. Because, as you know, I come from Calabria, and my town's a pretty small place. It's ruled by God, you might say: three or four priests who were all a bunch of shits, brought us up to be boy scouts and the like, and told us what they thought democracy was. There were the four or five communists and the seven or eight fascists, and that's it. Really Calabria is still a region that's in the hands of the counts and barons that ran the place in the time of Mussolini, and who did very well out of him, what with their power, their villas and so on. That's the way Calabria is.

Anyway, down there, even if I only had 50 lire (about 2½ pence) I could always buy myself a cheese roll or something, looking out of the windows, and saw us But I

come up to Turin, and fuck it, I find I'm paying out 200! It was all crazy to me. Then I began to pick up on the politics that Lotta Continua were putting forward. At first, you know, I didn't really understand too much. I used to read their leaflets, but only in an informative sort of way, so as to know what they were saying.

One day, one of the comrades, a student comrade from Lotta Continua, hunted me out and began talking to me. He really attacked me because I was still in the union. Before I worked at FIAT I'd worked for a few months in other little factories, and all that I'd heard was that the unions were there to defend the workers. Of course, down in Calabria we don't even know what a union is, people hardly know that they exist! But gradually I began to understand what they really are. There are so many things that I've learnt that I didn't know before, and I hope to be able to pass them on to all my workmates in the factory, and help them understand for themselves what I've learnt, you understand...

At the beginning, when we were few, we started our struggles by going round the factory in huge processions that you would think were never going to end. The *corteo*. One time there were three hours of official union strike called. This was about the time that all the big strikes were happening, in autumn '69. A few of us got together with other militants and asked ourselves what we were going to do.

Marching round the factory: kick out the foremen

We decided that the best thing would be to have a *corteo* – a big march round the factory, pulling out everyone we could. So there we were, with the three hour union strike, and the two of us got together with five or six other comrades, and contacted a few people of Lotta Continua. Then we set off. Just the seven of us. And by the time we got to the Admin offices where all the staff hang out, there were *seven thousand* of us. Bloody beautiful it was. The admin staff were all looking out of the windows, and saw us down below. They didn't know what to do. And the few security guards on the door were terrified. Beautiful! Now, when the next lot of contract negotiations come along... well, this year we started with seven and ended up with seven thousand and end up as seventy thousand, and that'll be the end of FIAT. Goodbye Agnelli!

There's another time that I remember was really fine. We'd been in and out on strikes for a couple of days, and then we were having one of those marches inside the factory. And people started saying: "Let's kick out the supervisors. They've been around giving orders for a hundred years now, and we've had enough." So we went down and started routing them out. People were looking at them, laughing and jeering, spitting on them, and they looked back as if they wanted to kill us, but there wasn't a thing they could do. They just didn't know what was happening! There's them who've worked their arses off to become supervisors, and there we were treating them like shit.

CARTOON CAPTION: Thinks: "It would be nice to take part". Ta-ra! Ta-ra!
The Olympics! 'Let's have 'em!' Ah yes, it would be really nice!

Luigi: It was these young people who began the fight, spontaneously. And we, logically, found that this was a sort of alternative to the usual union struggles. An alternative which went along with the contacts growing at the same time with the students. As you know, from 1967 the university movement joined up with the struggle of the workers.

Red Notes: What has been the relationship between the revolutionary workers and the militants from the student movement?

Luigi: It's been a sort of team effort really. Them outside and us inside. At the start we would work on all the antagonisms inside the factory, using them as a lever. For example, say FIAT hadn't provided some work-clothes. We would kick up a fuss, and the students would support us from the outside with loud-hailers, gate meetings, big posters, leaflets and so on.

Relations with the students: new forms of organisation

Usually what we do is find out the facts of the situation, write them out in rough form, and give them to the external militants to print, because they're good at that sort of thing – and they have more time than we do, to work right through the night. We hope that later on we shall begin to do the leaflets ourselves, and already we are starting to do more of the work – like typing and so on, as well as some of the distribution outside the gates.

Once upon a time it was the ex-students that held the leading role in Lotta Continua, and we were the ones that carried out the programmes. Now we are beginning to take the leadership. There's a bit of confusion about this at present, as to whether we should have the leadership of the organisation, because they still control a lot of the apparatus, like the national newspaper, the duplicators, the poster-printing facilities and so on. However, I would say that by now there is really a joint leadership.

Red Notes: So you can really say that the new wave of struggles started with the immigrants and the students?

Luigi: Yes. Italian students understood very early on, first with the Student Movement, and then with the ultra-left groups, that the only way they could expect to have any life at all was by allying themselves with the struggles of the workers. So that was how it really all started. Apart from the very early factory leafleting in isolated areas, like Pisa from 1964, it was in 1967 that the really massive work began in front of the factory gates. And this was precisely when all the new workers began to be signed on, all the workers from the South, cut off from their own roots, who had burned their bridges behind them and come here to Turin to find themselves without houses fit to live in, with sky-high prices and so on. Add to that the students outside, who were focusing on these problems, pushing them towards eruption, and of course everything exploded. But it exploded in ways that were sometimes very disorganised, very unconnected, sometimes a real mess.

Now the spontaneous struggles are over. I'm convinced of it. Now, when the struggles start again, they are going to have to be struggles for organisation. Last year we were fighting, seven or eight of us at a time, limited within single shops, all of us at Mirafiori, linked through Lotta Continua, because we'd had enough of the Unions. But now we're moving towards a situation in which we'll have the factory coordinated shop by shop. When we decide at a certain point to launch a strike, we'll start with an assembly in one shop, say 55 Shop. Then we'll begin the round-up, setting off in a *corteo* towards, say, the Paint Shop. Before we used to waste two or three hours getting everyone together. And by that time, as we were going round collecting the comrades, the anger would melt away. To coordinate the struggle inside the factory means that when we decide on a *corteo* it no longer takes half an hour to get it moving. Every group, every shop moves together. And when we start, we can come to a certain point where we can decide what objective we are going to be heading for. We can decide to leave the factory grounds and tie up with other factories in the area, radicalising the struggle outside the factory, so as to involve other places.

The role of the union as political control

Red Notes: What has been the role of the unions during these struggles?

Luigi: The Unions are there to make sure that the workers are kept inside the system, and have less possibility of beginning to challenge it. The Unions are the political extensions of sicknesses that exist inside the government; the “long arm inside the factories” of the political parties. Every group, every political party has a little hand inside the factory. The Christian Democrats have CISL, the Communists have the CGIL, the Socialists have a tendency inside the CGIL, SIDA are the Fascists, UIL is the Social Democrats, even some Republicans... every one of them has a certain presence inside the factory to control the situation.

A new project for revolutionary organisation

Now, a lot of workers understand this. However, they don't as yet have an alternative. Inside FIAT the unions don't count for anything, and everyone's well aware of where they stand. But at the moment they are the only organisations with a voice, they are the only ones who can say anything when it comes to dealing with management. So what's really necessary at the moment is that we begin to create inside the factory, agitational nuclei, or revolutionary committees, that are strong and so well-rooted among the workers that they are an alternative to the internal commissions and the shop steward structures that the unions have set up. Thus we can begin to create a point of reference in the factory to which the less politicised worker can look, so that they can escape the control of the unions, can talk together, and can politicise themselves further. That is exactly what we're engaged in at the moment – to form nuclei, to come to some agreement among ourselves, to study and understand the situation, and to provide a focal point inside the factory. These agitational nuclei are composed of ordinary workers inside the factory, but the best of them – the activists. It must be said that these nuclei are being formed not only from members of Lotta Continua, but also from other workers who are not members, but who have understood this need, and who come along with us because of that.

Red Notes: What are your aims with these agitational nuclei inside the factories?

Luigi: With the *nuclei*, and with the revolutionary committees, if we manage to create them, we are trying, not to be another union, but to provide a political, revolutionary perspective for the workers. We must not fall into economism, into parochialism. We must not say: “Look, we must fight for 5 lire more, or for 10 lire more, or to work one or two hours less.” We are fighting – and of course we are not going to achieve it tomorrow – for POWER, because the working class without power isn't worth a thing. Of course, we won't dissociate ourselves from the economic struggles, because for most workers economic struggles are the beginning. However, the economic struggles must go hand in hand with a revolutionary development of understanding, of politicisation, of awareness on the part of the mass of workers. Only in this way can we hope for the taking of power, because that's what we're aiming at. The point is to take the factory, because it's the factory that creates value, and it's us that should have it, and not them.

I've been in this factory for twenty years now, and I've seen people make so many mistakes. All the time fighting for handfuls of rice, you know. And it's never done us a scrap of good. But now they are beginning to understand that it's no good fighting for scraps, that the struggle now is to have everything. In the factory, either you have everything or you have nothing. There can't be any half measures.

[Interview done in Turin]

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