

## CHAPTER 20

### THE BATTLE OF CORSO TRAIANO

**PREFACE:** This article is taken from *La Classe*, July 1969. It is an account of the Corso Traiano riot outside the FIAT-Mirafiori factory, which proved to be a turning point in the development of independent working class organisation in the factory.

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#### THURSDAY 3 JULY 1969

**5.00am:** Groups of workers and students gather at the gates of the Mirafiori and Rivalta plants for the strike picket. By 6.00am barely a single person has entered the factory, either at Mirafiori or Rivalta. At Gates 1 and 2 of Mirafiori the police are out in force, with wagons and Black Marias. Police Chief Voria is doing his best to intimidate the workers and students: the picket lines are repeatedly being broken up and pushed back to the other side of the wide avenue that runs around Mirafiori.

A few scabs try to get in, and the police do everything in their means to prevent them being stopped. Despite this no more than 5 or 6 manage to get in, and at Gate 1 they are immediately met by workers coming off the night shift, who drive them right back out of the gates again.

**1.00pm:** Tension on the gates is rising. At every entrance the picket lines are growing. Whenever the workers try to stop the few scabs who are trying to enter the factory for the afternoon shift, they are charged by the police.

**2.00pm:** In the area in front of Gate 2 the workers off both the morning and the afternoon shift begin to gather, along with a few hundred students. There are already more than 3,000 people there, and people keep arriving. There are two big banners proclaiming "*Tutto il potere agli operai*" and "*Lotta continua*" ["All power to the workers" and "The struggle goes on".

#### A BRUTAL ATTACK BY THE POLICE

A hundred, maybe two hundred police, in full riot gear, with helmets and tear gas, begin pushing people to the centre of the area, deliberately provoking them and trying to isolate them in every way. The Police Chief announces that under no circumstances will the march be allowed to leave.

**2.45pm:** People are still standing there when the police make their first charge, brutal, with them using their rifle butts as clubs. From this moment on, the charges follow thick and fast: the people disperse, regroup, scatter and regather again. Police reinforcements arrive, and begin to fire tear gas grenades. They fire directly into the crowd. Nobody can breathe, and everybody scatters into the surrounding fields. The police start grabbing people.

The response is immediate: the centre of the street is won back again, and stones gathered from the bed of the tramway begin to hail down on the police from all sides. They are driven back. By now the struggle is reaching mass dimensions. Seeing that it is impossible now that the march should start from Mirafiori, a new departure point is proposed.

**3.30pm:** Ten thousand people gather between Corso Agnelli and Corso Unione Sovietica. Then the march sets off. But when it turns into Corso Traiano, the police attack in force, using jeeps to charge the crowds, and teargas in incredible quantities. They try to encircle the crowd with a pincer action: with Carabinieri on one side and Public Security police on the other. Now a violent urban guerrilla battle starts, which will last right into the night. The police, with their violence and their teargas, are concentrating on preventing even small groups from re-forming. It is plain that they are absolutely determined to stop the march getting together again: they must foil any attempt at a repetition of the Piazza Statuto incident.

In the two hours that follow, the demonstration seems apparently to have dispersed. But in fact nobody has left the scene, and groups of people are reorganising spontaneously, throwing rocks, and then dispersing, only to reappear somewhere else.

**4.00pm:** Workers from the FIAT plants at Lingotto and Rivalta start arriving. The workers and students are joined by people from the neighbourhood around Mirafiori; young kids join the battle, women hand round damp handkerchiefs to protect people from the gas, and many local homes open their doors to comrades who are being chased by the police.

**5.30pm:** The real centre of the battle is Corso Traiano. The wide avenue becomes the scene of a raging street-battle: workers, students and folk from the neighbourhood return to the attack, construct the first barricades out of rocks and almost succeed in capturing Police Chief Voria. Meanwhile, groups of comrades have scattered and gone back to the University, where the Faculty of Architecture is occupied. The police arrive there with jeeps and lorries and prepare to surround the building. There is a moment of confusion and uncertainty. Some people propose that there should be a General Assembly inside the Faculty, so a couple of hundred people enter the building. The police promptly fire teargas grenades through the windows. For this they are attacked with a shower of rocks and bricks from the people who have stayed outside.

### **IN THE STREETS, FIGHTING HAND TO HAND**

Outside the violence of the police onslaught and the violence of the rockthrowing increase. The battle spreads out of the court-yard into the street, into the arcades and the surrounding side-streets: there is tear-gas, hand-to-hand fighting, and some arrests.

**6.30pm:** The majority of the comrades set off once again for Corso Traiano, which by now is totally in the hands of the demonstrators. People are still arriving. You can hear the steady rhythm of falling stones. The police have regrouped at the end of Corso Traiano. It's hard for them to surround and comb the whole area, what with the building sites, the factories, and people's houses.

**7.00pm:** The sheer volume of the teargas forces the workers and students to withdraw. The police slowly regain Corso Traiano, but barricades are being built in all the side-streets. People who are caught are beaten up and loaded into Black Marias, Many police take a beating too.

**8.00pm to 9.00pm:** The battle spreads. The most violent fighting is in front of the FIAT administrative offices in Corso Traiano, in Corso Agnelli, in all the side-streets, and in Piazza Bengasi, where the police are making absurd, insanely violent charges. The comrades respond to the attacks by building barricades one after another. Three cars are set on fire, and they manage to halt a FIAT car transporter loaded with FIAT cars, which becomes the target for well-aimed rocks. Meanwhile, the behaviour of the police becomes more bestial: they are firing teargas right into people's houses. Vice-questor Voria appears, brandishing a grenade launcher, and telling people to get back from the windows or else.

**10.00pm to 11.00pm:** In Piazza Bengasi the attacks and the rock-throwing continue. The police surround the square, enter apartment blocks, and even drag people out of their own apartments. Sporadic fighting goes on till way after midnight, with people shouting "Pigs" and "Nazis" as the police drag people out of their houses.

### **FIGHTING CONTINUES INTO THE NIGHT**

Meanwhile, in Nichelino, a working class suburb of Turin some miles away from Corso Traiano, street-fighting has also been going on all afternoon. Concrete sewer-pipes are used to build barricades across the streets. Via Sestriere, the big street that runs across Nichelino, is blocked by more than ten barricades, made from burning tyres and trailers, with road signs, rocks and timber. During the night they burn huge piles of wood and rubber tyres, and start a fire on a nearby, building site, which lights up the whole area.

**4.00am:** The fighting is still going on. The police are slowly winning back the ground they lost, and begin house-to-house searches with methods that are cruel and vicious. But still the people don't go away. By now the workers and the people of the neighbourhood are used to the teargas, and they ignore it, taking it in turns to build the barricades.

By now a hundred people have been held by the police, and thirty of these have been arrested. Every one of these thirty was a worker. Meanwhile, police reinforcements are converging on Turin from 80 miles away in Genoa, from Alessandria and Asti. The local police are just not able to cope.

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At FIAT the struggle has been moving ahead. People are refusing to accept the conditions in which they work and live, both inside the factory and out. They are refusing the unions and the political parties any control over their movement. And they are organising autonomously to fight for objectives that they themselves have decided on. Added to this, they are coming out onto the streets.

It's been twenty years since the workers of FIAT have been able to show themselves in the streets fighting hand-to-hand with the police and coming away victorious. Once again the bosses and their minions have provided us with a chance to generalise the struggle. The intervention of the police meant that the inhabitants of Turin-South were ready to come down and join the workers and the students in their fight. But the struggle also spread to many other areas of Turin, involving many other workers in a way that a routine union demonstration would never have done.

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