

CHAPTER 27

ABSENTEEISM AS A FORM OF STRUGGLE

PREFACE: When Agnelli presented the FIAT Company report for 1972, the main thing he emphasised was the damage being done to the Company by absenteeism. In recent years he has always blamed the continuing strikes at FIAT as the main reason for the Company's low productivity, but this year he explains every drop in productivity and under-utilisation of plant by pointing to the mass practice developed by workers of simply staying at home on sick pay.

In 1965 absenteeism among Italian workers ran at about 5%. By 1970 it had already risen to 9%, and it rose further, to 12% in 1971. This year it has hit 15%. For other countries, the levels are much lower: 7.5% in Britain, 6% in France, and 7% in Germany.

At Mirafiori, absenteeism levels are far above the national average. The lowest level is 15% in the Mechanical Parts plant – but it rises to its highest level in the Body Plant (Assembly Lines, Paint, Wet Deck and Roundabout) where it hits 28%! Among the white collar staff in the Administration Block, absenteeism runs at about 7-8%.

The Unions argue – backed up by sociologists employed by the Company – that absenteeism is highest at the points where the work is hardest. But this is only half the answer. It doesn't explain the political importance of this mass attitude of refusal of work, which goes under the name of absenteeism. In fact absenteeism is highest at the points where the struggle is strongest in the factory, where workers have fought the hardest and the employers have cracked down the most.

Italy may be the country of workers' struggles, but it's also the country of absenteeism. And in particular, Mirafiori, the political centre of the class struggle in Italy, is the one plant where this refusal to work is at its highest.

FIAT workers win a new sick pay agreement

This habit of simply not coming into work began to spread among FIAT workers as a mass rejection of the huge speed-ups that Agnelli tried to introduce in the factory in the Summer of 1969, when he signed on several thousand new workers and tried to force them into new levels of productivity. But at that time there was not much scope for workers to practice absenteeism at a mass level, because it was no joke staying at home when you knew that you wouldn't get a penny for the first three days, and after that you could only count on 50% sick pay at the very most.

But in the months that followed, FIAT workers won an agreement giving them 85% of their wages for the first 3 days off sick, and 90% from the fourth day. It was at this point that absenteeism began to turn from a casual, spontaneous form of protest into planned and deliberate use of sick pay as a way of getting time off work. And this soon began to have a devastating effect on the whole factory.

FIAT management tried to get production going again after the struggles of 1969, but all their attempts were brought to nothing by the absenteeism. A good example is what happened several times in the Body Plant: the FIAT 500 line was running at 400 cars per shift. FIAT wanted to increase it by 60 cars. Every day they increased schedules by 10 cars per day. But then they found that, as the work was made more

and more intense, the number of workers reporting for work got fewer and fewer. In a very short time, absenteeism had shot up from 13% to 18%.

It's important to point out that, as long as production speeds were controlled entirely by foremen, absenteeism had much less effect on production, because the workers who were left in the factory were made to do the work of those who stayed at home.

But as soon as mutuality on line speeds and production schedules was achieved, with shop stewards having a say in the matter, then production was run according to how many workers were available, and this meant that the worker who stayed at home had the same effect on production as if he had gone on strike.

Then, when it happens (as it happens regularly at FIAT-Mirafiori) that 15,000 out of the 56,000 workforce simply decide to stay at home, it doesn't take much to see this as a mass form of action, which not only means that productivity can't be raised, but in the long term, since it is so unpredictable, it is also going to mess up FIAT's whole control over the production process. The weapon of absenteeism is used not only as a long-term refusal to work at Agnelli's beck and call, but also as a way of fighting in a period when traditional forms of attack (e.g. formal strikes, etc) are no longer capable of making a significant dent in the employer's powers of resistance.

Workers' absenteeism as a form of struggle

Workers are finding that the traditional weapons of the working class – like the strike, whether it's an all-out strike, or a staggered sectional strike – is having less and less effect on the Company. So they are shifting their ground to another front – the possibility of getting a guaranteed wage without having to work for it. In other words, absenteeism. They are attacking Agnelli by taking his money and refusing his work. It goes without saying that using this weapon means that workers are able to continue fighting and attacking the Company more or less indefinitely.

The reason for this ongoing rejection of the factory system undoubtedly lies in the strength and the militancy of the marches (*cortei*) that have regularly been going round inside the factory, at Mirafiori. It's the strength of these marches that makes this mass absenteeism possible. And the same thing has been happening – perhaps with even more strength – in the other plants, Rivalta, Lingotto and the smaller factories.

Nobody can avoid seeing the enormous problems of organisation posed by absenteeism at this level.

Least of all Agnelli. He has realised that this form of workers' struggle has arisen and is growing within a framework of permanent opposition to work. People just don't want to work at FIAT, and he knows that not only are they able to avoid work and still manage to live, but also that this is a real political threat. And he knows that if he is to get anywhere in containing and limiting the present struggles, he's going to have to attack and destroy the ground on which they are organised and can grow. The content of these struggles is the refusal of work. So, for Agnelli, the plan must be to make workers work.

This is the only way open to Agnelli, and it means imposing solutions that are drastic and openly repressive, capable of destroying this form of resistance that has been developed by workers. It means using open violence in such a way as to reduce the margins of workers' autonomy from work.

The employers move to control absenteeism

So, in their negotiations with the Unions, the Engineering Employers' Federation has been insisting that absenteeism should somehow be controlled. The employers' demands include the following:

“The phenomenon of absenteeism must be brought back within limits that are socially acceptable, and acceptable at a Company level. It must be confronted in conjunction with the Unions, who must recognise that the phenomenon is not only harmful to the interests of the Company concerned, but is also harmful to the workpeople themselves.”

Then there are the very real and concrete initiatives taken by the employers within the factory, the main arena of the struggle.

Medical checks

During the past few months, in the Assembly Plant at Mirafiori, the number of foremen has increased by about 6%, which means that management has, at least for the time being, a permanent channel of control and information throughout the plant so that they know from day to day how many workers are present in the factory, and can get the names of workers who are absent. The line stewards themselves are used in this way, since in order to establish the day's production schedules, they have to provide the Company with details of the workers absent. Then the Company passes the list over to the National Health people, so that they can go and check up on the workers at home. The Health Insurance Office, which has the appearance of being an independent and autonomous body, is in fact part and parcel of FIAT's system of control over the workforce. It sends round a doctor on the same day, to check on the absent worker. Up until now it used to take days before this doctor arrived, but now you can expect him round the same day.

Scabs and spies

The other way that FIAT checks up on workers is to have a gang of scabs and spies employed by the Company for doing nothing in the factory except maintain a network of private detectives that can trail people, check up on them, spy on them and report back to the Company.

The reorganisation of FIAT's control of the labour force has also been happening through the political changes that the Company has been making inside the plant, in response to the struggles of recent months. These changes involve moving workers around (mobility), sacking them, or “encouraging” them to leave.

Sackings and transfers

What FIAT wants is to get rid of the workers who are always going absent. They are a real danger in the factory, not only because the Company loses money through lost production, but also because they are like a cancer. In the section where they work they will make a point of arranging with their workmates, and explaining to newcomers, a thousand-and-one ways of screwing money out of Agnelli by staying at home and having a nice time.

It is against this sort of worker, and not against absenteeism in general, that the main brunt of the employers' repressive measures are being launched. Needless to say, these sorts of workers are always going to exist, because they're a natural product of the capitalist factory. But the employers' main concern is to make sure that this network of workers who have learnt how to get a full pay packet without even having to set foot in the factory, make sure that they don't spread and begin organising absenteeism as an explicit way of fighting FIAT and creating havoc for the Company's production schedules.

The first effects of this campaign of bosses' violence is the sudden appearance in the Union's mailbag of hundreds of letters from the Company about workers who are to be sacked for absenteeism. And the fact is that the workers who repeatedly refuse to come to work are also the workers who, when they do work, work little and badly.

So, for Agnelli, fighting the absenteeists also means ridding the assembly lines of the ever-present fact of sabotage and non-cooperation.

Absenteeism and sabotage go hand in hand

It's no accident that in the Body Plant, where the absenteeism levels are highest, the number of incidents of sabotage of production are also higher than anywhere else. Whole lines are undermined by deliberate non-cooperation. It's hard to give details of the extent of this spread of workers' violence against production, but one example is the fact that the FIAT 132 line (sheetmetal working – a section that Agnelli is soon going to have to dismantle) produced 1,300 cars that came off the lines and were shipped out to Germany. They are still sitting in Germany, because the quality is so bad that they can't be sold. And in 85 Shop, the section manager has spent weeks chasing after production faults recently.

In body assembly, the use of transfer welding machines has meant that blisters and imperfections on the body of the 127 model have been reduced to a great degree, since manual welding now accounts for only 1.5% of the job. But on the 500 line, where automatic machines have not been introduced and where manual welding accounts for 85% of the job, there are a lot of spots and blisters, and supervision and making-good has increased a lot recently.

In the Paint Shop, instead of cars getting two coats of paint, they often only get one. On the assembly line, there are so many people leaving out bits that need to be screwed in that the Company is trying to make pieces that will just slot in.

Photo:

By now it's standard practice in the Engine Shop to reduce the number of operations done on each engine... some work simply never gets done.

Sometimes sabotage is clearly something that is organised, as happened at FIAT-Rivalta, where lumps of iron were found wedged into the body conveyor line, while at Mirafiori there was evidence of a job of work having been done on a heat treatment oven...

As a general thing, the struggle against the quality of the product is more developed the more that workers are involved bodily in production itself. And one of the ways that FIAT has tried to eliminate these points of resistance has been to introduce women into the labour force. It's no accident that there are now women working on component assembly, on testing, on sewing and upholstery, on assembly of small components etc.

In the last few weeks, Agnelli, with admirable foresight, has employed 16 super-inspectors on final testing, who are supposed to check the work of the 16 ordinary inspectors!

This is just another sign that the whole structure of control in the factory is in crisis. The inflexibility of the production cycle is a recognised problem of the motor industry. But this is now joined by a permanent tension in the whole control structure, and this could easily be pushed to the limit by a subversive initiative by the workers.

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