

CHAPTER 31

HOUSING STRUGGLES IN TURIN

“The spread of struggles into the communities, outside of the workplace, has been a crucial development in Italy over the past couple of years. Within the workplace, the combination of layoffs, increased sackings, mobility and speedup, plus the effects of inflation and the unwillingness of the Unions to initiate action, has meant that it has become harder to win much.

In many workplaces, workers have been forced into a defensive position, and organisation has been difficult to sustain. This has led to a growth of organising outside the workplace, in many cases sponsored by shop stewards from local factories, and built by women, students and militants from the various political organisations.

In November 1974 there were a number of developments in this area, which will become increasingly important. These have been the organisation against the rise in bus and train fares, organisation against the increased price of electricity; organisation for better schools and day care for children; and the movement to occupy empty housing. The following deals with the housing struggle in Turin.

THE MASS OCCUPATION OF THE NUOVA FALCHERA HOUSING ESTATE

The occupation of empty houses and the development of mass squatting is nothing new in Italy. For instance, in September there was day-long rioting in San Basilio, a suburb of Rome, when police went in to evict 148 families who had been squatting in newly-built council flats for 10 months. One comrade was killed, and barricades went up all over the area. However, many of the occupations had been organised beforehand, with everybody going down to squat all together. This had always been the situation previously in Turin.

In October there was a new development. A whole new housing estate at Nuova Falchera, on the outskirts of Turin, was occupied by nearly 1,000 families. It seems that the occupation started with just a few people going in, passing the word to their friends and fellow workers in the factories, until virtually the whole estate was taken over.

The point is that working class people in Turin have no choice. If they want to find somewhere to live, they either have to know someone in a position of influence, or they have to wait for years until they mass up the right number of points. And meanwhile the people who are getting new flats are... policemen, factory foremen, white collar workers etc... the kind of people who can pull strings.

The crisis has changed that, though. A lot of the families who have occupied Nuova Falchera have husbands, wives and young people who work in the factories of Turin. One Pirelli worker explained why they had decided to occupy: They, as a family, had always thought that if they worked hard and saved enough, they would be able to get out of the lousy flat they were living in, and into something decent. But when the bosses started on their “crisis plan”, they began laying off workers all around Turin – not only in the big FIAT factories, but also in the smaller factories that depend on FIAT directly for employment.

As a result, many workers realised that their hopes of saving up to get a place were just dreams. The layoffs threatened to be permanent – an indefinite wage cut. As a result, they decided to go ahead and take a place for themselves. And hundreds of other working class families did the same.

By the time that the number of occupying families had reached about 400, they started to get better organised. They set up a Struggle Committee, made up of 2 delegates from each staircase in each of the 5-storey flat-blocks. This committee was responsible for the defence of the occupation, for making sure that water, electricity etc were connected, and for negotiating with the housing authorities (a body known as GESCAL).

Photo:

At this point GESCAL came along and tried to organise the people to whom the flats had originally been allocated, so as to put pressure on the occupiers (the estate is brand new, and the new tenants hadn't arrived when the squatters moved in). But this move failed. Some of the new tenants already had flats elsewhere in Turin, and decided that they didn't like these new places anyway. And others decided that their interests would be best served by moving in straight away – which they did, against the advice of GESCAL. And some of them went further, and joined with the squatters' Struggle Committee, making it harder for the GESCAL to divide them.

The decision by the squatters was that they would be prepared to move out of the occupied houses – but only on condition that GESCAL provided each family with somewhere decent to live. Those places would have to be approved as suitable by the Struggle Committee.

At the time of writing, that's where things stand. One of the organisers of the Committee, a worker who had been sacked from FIAT at the time of the mass occupation in 1973, said that he didn't think the local authorities would try to evict them at this moment in time. The last time this was tried was at San Basilio, in Rome, and there was rioting all day, and a comrade got shot. And now the political situation in Italy is so tense (the papers are talking every day about a possible coup d'état) that any order to evict them would have to come direct from central government in Rome.

Meanwhile, the families from the occupation have become part of the growth of unification that is taking place between the different struggles in Turin. On the day of the general strike and the mass meeting in the grounds of Mirafiori (October 17th), not only were there thousands of students on strike, together with public sector workers and teachers, but also a contingent of families from the occupied houses, with their huge red banner, and a speaker to explain to the mass meeting what their struggle was all about.

Finally, what is the position of the trade unions? In previous housing occupations, the unions have generally stood apart and condemned the action. But this time they have been forced to support it, because of pressure from within the factories. Many of the workers involved in the occupation – some of them shop stewards – come from the big factories around Turin: FIAT Spa-Stura, Pirelli, FIAT-Mirafiori, Facis, Bertone and Cromodora. The Works Committees in some of these factories – Pirelli particularly – have voted resolutions of support for the squatters, and hopefully this will develop into more active support."

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