

## CHAPTER 34

### INTERVIEW WITH A FIAT WORKER: ORGANISING WORKERS' AUTONOMY

**Red Notes:** At this moment the trade unions are negotiating a new national contract for the metalworking and engineering sector. Could you explain to us what this contract means for workers in Italy? And what are the positions being put forward by the employers?

**Marco:** We have done an analysis of this question, and I should say that before we discuss the point reached by the negotiations, we should outline what this contract means. We, as comrades, the old vanguards and the new vanguards of the FIAT motor company, have analysed this contract as a watershed event, an event of historic importance for Italian workers in general, and for FIAT workers in particular. It has to be seen in the light of the workers' struggles of the Hot Autumn of 1969. We say that the present contract negotiations, as regards the platform of demands that is being put forward, are no longer a working class initiative. They are in fact an employers' initiative, where the employers are moving to regain the ground that they lost during the hard-fought struggles (and the progressive objectives) that the workers carried forward in the struggles of 1969, 1970, 1971.

#### **Sacrifices for the workers**

Right from the start we have repeatedly said that the union platform is a platform of yet more sacrifices for the workers – and therefore an attempt to regain power, not only by FIAT, but also by the employers in general. For example, if we look at the wage increases that are being asked for by the trade unions, they simply confirm what we comrades have been saying all along – that this is a platform of workers' sacrifices. We say that the proposed 30,000 lire increase [£17.60 per month] will go nowhere near making up for inflation (i.e. the attack on wage levels) in recent years. It will also go nowhere near making up the inflation that has been built in with the Equo Canone ["Fair Rent"] law, which was promoted in Italy by the forces of the pseudo-Left – namely the Communist Party, the Socialist Party and the trade union organisations themselves – organisations which still, today, wave their flags as so-called spokesmen of the working class, but which, so far from being spokesmen of the working class, are in fact the co-managers of the power of the employers.

#### **Restructuring of FIAT's production**

Those organisations have acted as the transmission belt by which the employers can get over this famous "crisis". And now we should say something about this crisis. It has been a crisis where both large and small employers, with the sweat and blood of the workers, have enlarged their profits and amassed their capital. And they have not used these profits in terms of investments in Italy – no, they have carried their cash abroad, and have set up factories in other countries. In Brazil, for example, or Argentina... in all those countries with regimes that are fascist.

For example, the FIAT factory in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, where FIAT now manufacture all the engines for the FIAT 127, also now produces whole cars – the 127 and the 1050. This production takes place under the strangest agreements, by which, for example, Italy is compelled to import 127 engines and 1050 engines. Also, the industrial vehicle factory in Brazil, in Rio de Janeiro, is a case in point. These give some indications of the multinational policies and manoeuvres that are being carried

out by FIAT management today. And I shall now give you some practical examples of these policies, as I have seen them myself.

I am speaking from my own experiences of the period I was working at FIAT-Spa Stura, where FIAT build trucks (the 190, the 170 and the 82). In this plant, from 1974-77, the employer undertook a very large programme of restructuring, especially as regards the machinery in the plant. In the case of the V8 engine, for example, which is used for the FIAT 190 truck, a number of super-automated numerical control transfers were installed. These transfers machined the cylinder block of the engine. These very large transfer machines were able to replace hundreds of workers, with a machining process that was completely automatic. Quality control is built into these machines, making them capable of a minute control of the production process, and for FIAT this has meant the elimination of those small acts of sabotage that are carried out, not in organised terms, but by individual workers on a daily basis.

This restructuring took place not only at the technological level. It also happened through a saturation of work times, i.e. by making each worker work harder. For example, one worker was expected to run more than one machine tool at a time. This involved coupling together two or more machine tools into one job specification – and I can best show you the result of this policy by referring to an accident that took place as a result of it.

### **The effect of job rationalisation**

Up until a few years ago, one worker would work exclusively on one machine tool. But today the FIAT management – and thus the Work Study Department – have planned a series of small modifications to machinery in the plant, in such a way as to eliminate any dead time. This means eliminating non-productive time – cutting down the time when the machine is not working and the worker can rest. So, the Work Study Department redesigned certain jobs in such a way that, while one machine was operating, the worker would be loading another piece onto another neighbouring machine.

*Photo: CARTOON*

Then he would turn, to take the first piece off the first machine, when it was finished. As a result of this, one worker lost an arm inside one of these machines. He was taken to hospital, but he died a couple of days later. This death is laid at FIAT's door. But the most horrific thing about these events – a fact that was described in leaflets that the comrades put into the plants – was that at the funeral of this dead comrade you saw the FIAT management present, together with members of the union side of the Works Committee. After the funeral, the management and the union side went off drinking together in a restaurant.

I shall now continue with the question of FIAT as a multinational firm engaged in a process of restructuring. The FIAT motor company is today trying to eliminate those minimal levels of autonomous organisation that exist within the factory. They are seeking to eliminate those jobs and sections where vanguard workers have succeeded in becoming a point of reference for other workers in struggle.

### **Decentralisation of production**

In the case of FIAT-Spa Stura, for example, the vast majority of machining jobs have, been transferred out of the factory. The number of workers in the plant has been reduced by approximately 60 per cent. Some of this work has been transferred to France, and some has been shifted to more or less “peaceful” parts of Italy. This is what we call the decentralisation of production. In France you should bear in mind that these jobs have been transferred to areas that are mountainous, are non-industrialised, and where the majority of the workers arrive straight from the farms. For these workers, their jobs in the factories are in fact second jobs. This means that

social peace reigns inside these factories. In these factories there is a continuous blackmail by the foreman, for example, who wields a great deal of power... foremen in these factories have real management power.

To illustrate the attitude of these French workers, I would like to give some examples from the experience of workers from my own section at Spa-Stura, who had been transferred to France. They saw the way that these foremen dealt with the French workers. The Italian workers had the opposite attitude to the foremen: it was the Italian workers who would go up to the foreman and tell him to get off their backs, to stop breaking their balls. But the French workers were not even able to take a coffee break away from their machines. The work rhythms were extremely high, in comparison with Italy. The levels of production were very high. Down time simply did not exist. Eight hours work meant eight hours work, and intense work at that.

*Photo: LAVORO NERO*

Now, having finished with this question of Spa-Stura – which is only a small part of what has been happening all over FIAT – I want to go back to the question of the present engineering workers' contract. You asked me what point we have reached in the contract negotiations. Well, here is a difficulty. To answer that question would mean to play into the hands of those people who are trying to make out this contract – and its demands – as something progressive, as something that is going to change the life and conditions of the workers. But this is absolutely not true. The TV and the press have been carrying out a big propaganda drive, and the employers have been acting out a big “rock-hard resistance” to these contract demands, as if the trade unions were really carrying out the demands of the Italian workers today. But they are not carrying out those demands. I am not trying to avoid the question of the contents of the contract etc – but as I said at the start, this is not a contract that is based on the needs of the workers. When all is said and done, the workers knew, right at the start of these negotiations, what the outcome was going to be. It's going to mean more mobility for workers. It's also going to mean agreement – or at least an understanding – on how to deal with absenteeism, which is a big problem for the employers at present. The mobility is perhaps one of the more important aspects – something that FIAT has been moving on for 3-4 years now.

### **Reduction of hours and wage differentials**

As regards the reduction of hours, we feel that this question, in the terms in which the trade union organisation is carrying it forward, will not be capable of covering the number of unemployed that exist in Italy at present – at least partly because of the inclusion of the workers' mobility clauses. Therefore we have said that if there is to be a reduction in hours, it must be linked to a reduction in the level of exploitation of workers that capital is carrying out in Italy. Therefore not only must overtime working be cut – but so must black labour [trans. note: *lavoro nero*, work without cards or tax, the illegal work economy], because this has become one of capital's main policies in Italy today. Home-working, out-working, the number of people holding two jobs, the number of small factories that shut up shop and then re-appear in the form of small, scattered workshops whose exclusive function is to give work to women, to housewives, to children – all of which now takes place outside of the area of the organised working class.

Another crucial question in the contract is the question of wage differentials. This is important in the light of the struggles that the workers have carried out in recent years. In recent years they have aimed to reduce the wage differentials between the highest paid workers and the lowest paid workers. But today the trade unions are once again playing the employers' game of differentials. This means favouring those sections of workers who are most attached to the employers' exploitation. This is the framework in which we should see the discussions about staff status and so-called “skill recognition” [*professionalità*].

We have to point out that in a period of real restructuring by capital – e.g. robotisation – any talk of skill, of “re-skilling”, is a con. When you are faced with these robots, with the automation of machine tools etc, you can see this talk of “re-skilling” for what it is – an ideological weapon aimed at dividing the workers. Obviously the effect of these machines is to de-skill the present workforce inside the factory. The only function of the workers is to watch the machines and push buttons to start and stop them. Meanwhile there is a very low percentage of actual skilled workers, who are involved in maintenance of these machines. The vast mass of the workers are becoming more and more de-skilled. For this reason we say that to speak of “re-skilling” today means simply reinforcing the bosses’ ideology and strengthening the divisions inside the working class.

The position that we put forward in the mass meetings before the Union platform was drawn up was as follows: automatic graduation to higher grades. This was the result of a deep analysis of precisely what the objectives of this platform. of demands meant for the workers. And it was a position with which the rest of the workers were in total agreement. This was the judgement of the mass meetings in the factories – but the trade union organisation in no sense took account of this rank and file push. In fact our group put up posters, “*dazebaos*”, in which we attacked this “couldn’t care less” attitude of the union in relation to the workers’ opinions regarding the demands. These posters stirred up a lot of discussion inside the plant, a lot of feeling.

### **Women workers at FIAT-Mirafiori**

**Red Notes:** In the past few days we have seen a revival of the FIAT workers’ struggle. The day before Mayday we saw the strike by women workers at the Mirafiori plant, and this was followed within a few days by mass picketing and workers’ violence against the Company’s layoff policies. Could you tell us your view of what was happening in those days?

**Marco:** OK. The question of the struggles that are developing inside FIAT-Mirafiori. The first thing I must say is that these struggles are still struggles at the mass level. Now, you might think that this is in contradiction with what I was saying earlier about the workers’ lack of interest in the contract negotiations. Well, the workers are participating en masse in this kind of struggle not because they are fighting for the objectives of the Union platform, but because these contract negotiations are historic negotiations. They are negotiations in which the workers are giving expression to all the repressions, all the anger that has been building up day by day, inside the workplaces, and in the society at large.

The struggles of the women at the end of April were a fight about the conditions of life and work for women. In a sense they were a miniature version of the struggles at FIAT in the Hot Autumn in 1969 – miniature in the sense that they were confined to the area of the Body Plant. This was a fight over questions of conditions and environment, over the structural conditions that women have to endure in the factory. The FIAT management have recently signed on a large number of women workers, housewives, but they were not structurally prepared for the arrival of these women into the factory. So you find two or three women having to share a changing locker; you’ve got the toilets without the facilities that women need; you’ve got showers that are no good, and are also very few in relation to the number of women being employed.

By the way, I do not agree with the union position that the hiring of, women is a trade union victory. I see it as a victory for capital. Precisely because it will reinforce the present levels of workers’ mobility in the plant. I am not saying that it’s easier to move women inside the factory just because they are women. The fact is that women tend to stay in the factory for 2 – 3 – 4 years at the most. This allows FIAT to operate a whole policy of workers’ flexibility, flexibility of numbers employed, in relation to the needs of the market.

The union's contract demands contained nothing which refers to the whole question of labour turnover. Therefore, when workers leave voluntarily, or when they are sacked, or when they retire, FIAT has a free hand in deciding whether to replace those workers or not, in relation to the needs of the car market.

The strike action that was taken by the women came at a moment of generalisation of the struggle, over the question of FIAT's layoffs. So now we must ask, how did we arrive at the position of being sent home on May 2nd?

The reasons were the usual ones. FIAT was trying to break the pattern of sectional strikes inside the plant. On this occasion it was a struggle in the Final Assembly area, a fight that was just, and almost sacrosanct – a fight against overtime. FIAT at this moment was continually making provocations as part of their side of the contract negotiations. During a period of workers' struggle, FIAT goes and calls in workers for Saturday and Sunday working in order to make up for production which had been lost as a result of previous strikes. So, after Mayday, the Final Assembly workers arrived in the plant and they saw that some of the unfinished cars that they had left had been finished by other workers during overtime working. This was Wednesday May 2nd – and the workers folded their arms and refused to start work. FIAT responded by laying off the Assembly Plant.

### **Fighting against FIAT's layoffs**

Now, on the question of layoffs, note that this is a policy that FIAT has carried out ever since 1972, as a means of breaking the sectional and departmental struggles inside the plant, which really hurt the employer's interests. It has been a general policy of FIAT management – but it has always had an extremely hard-hitting reply from the workers. This has meant a lot of anger in the plant, and large violent demonstrations inside the factory. This has meant that sometimes FIAT tries to avoid layoffs, in the sense that they prefer to pay workers to stay in the factory even if the actual levels of production are extremely low. For example, on May 2nd, they started by only sending home the Assembly Plant, because it's a plant where the comrades of the area of Autonomy are not so well represented.

However, on May 2nd, the Assembly workers decided to hit back at FIAT management. They decided to go round to the Administrative offices and drive the management and the white collar workers out of the factory. This was the decision of the workers – but a large section of the Works Committee was against this. At this point there was a violent reaction from the women, who argued against the shop stewards' unwillingness to act. Then the Works Committee were left standing there, and the workers marched off. They tried to break down the steel-plated gate that leads into the Administration area. But they did not succeed. At this point they ransacked the white collar staff canteen, taking away meals etc. Meanwhile, in the Body-in-White there was very little work – but the workers were not laid off, because FIAT was trying not to unite the two sections of workers in a common struggle. FIAT wanted to isolate that struggle, prevent it from spreading.

Then, on May 3rd FIAT once again played the layoff card. This time all sections of the plant were affected. The response of the workers on both shifts was solid. The factory gates were blockaded, locked and picketed. No workers were allowed in or out, and all traffic was stopped. Workers patrolled the perimeter walls of the plant to make sure nobody got in or out.

The intention of both the morning shift and the afternoon shift was to hit the FIAT management. But the steel gates had stood in the way... the comrades had not been expecting this layoff... people were not prepared... they didn't have the necessary equipment for dealing with the gate... so a second attempt on the gate also failed . . . (the comrades had intended to arm themselves with oxy-acetylene cutters in order to break down the gates).

So, the afternoon shift arrived, to find the gates manned by foremen, supervisors, superintendents etc – that whole layer of people whose only function is to control production and workers. At 2.45pm on May 3rd, the workers of the afternoon shift were also laid off. At this point the workers immediately formed up in angry groups to march round the factory. Inside the factory there are a number of points where workers gather in moments of struggle, reference points, where you get together to organise. 100-200 workers gather there and form up a march, and they go round the plant with a megaphone, carrying red flags, shouting slogans etc, in order to pull out all the workers who are still working in various parts of the plant. They go round for half an hour or an hour, until the demonstration has reached a suitable size. This is the usual way that a march forms up.

Now, to return to the layoff of the Body Plant and Assembly Plant. The workers' march formed up, in a manner which was spontaneous, immediate and violent. Right from the start, some comrades from the Body-in-White had been saying that the thing to do was to chase out of the factory all the foremen etc (FIAT's "structure of command") who had managed to get into the factory. Meanwhile, a number of workers were guarding the factory gates.

### **The workers' march inside the factory**

As the workers were marching round the plant – extremely angry at this umpteenth provocation by FIAT management – the factory became a battlefield. Half-finished cars were destroyed. Materials were scattered across the floor and trodden underfoot. Work benches were overturned onto cars on the line. Finished cars at the end of the lines were devastated. But this was still not enough for the workers.

They returned to the gates. They discussed with those workers who wanted to go home. They decided to take up the policy that had already been discussed in the Body-in-White – namely to hunt out the foremen, and chase them out. The factory was quiet as a grave – except that all you could hear was shouting, slogans etc of the workers in struggle. The workers were running – and you could see the foremen trying to escape. The foremen who were caught were put at the head of the march and forced to carry red flags. Any foremen who put up resistance – whether active or passive – was hit and kicked, and was then encouraged to join the head of the march, with his red flag, and to be frog-marched out of the factory gates.

When you read the newspapers – in particular *La Stampa* of Turin, the newspaper which is majority owned by FIAT – you will find statements to the effect that the violence of those two days was due to autonomous groups of workers led by *Autonomia Operaia* [Workers' Autonomy], particularly on the afternoon shift. On the morning shift, on the other hand, they referred not so much to the autonomous workers, but to workers who were "acting outside the control of the trade union organisations". This gives you an idea of the strength of the autonomous groups inside the plant – in the sense that the organisational level that these groups have in the factory was so high that it was impossible for the trade union to control them.

### **Dealing with arrogant foremen**

Now, while we're still on the subject of chasing out foremen, there was another incident about a month ago. A workers' march from the Body Plant and the Press Shop went over to the Engine Plant. This march was an act of solidarity with the workers of the Engine Plant. This is a weak plant at Mirafiori, and there had been a series of provocations by foremen against the workers. Those foremen who had used violence or reprisals against workers were beaten up and hospitalised.

One of these foremen who comes to mind was one of those bastards who represses the workers, and who had sacked a woman worker. She was sacked because she refused to bring an ashtray to the foreman. This foreman was singled out, was badly beaten up, and ended up in hospital. Another foreman was also beaten up – in this

case the one who had been responsible for the sacking of comrade Motisi, a recognised vanguard in the struggles of the Engine Plant, who had been sacked because he put up a poster about the question of terrorism, where the FIAT management and the employers' organisations were denounced as the principal hiding place of the real terrorists. It stated that every day they carry out violence and murder within the working class.

Motisi was sacked for that poster – and the trade union organisation, even the union lawyers, absolutely refused to take up his case. They refused to offer any legal aid to comrade Motisi... one union lawyer, for example, who would rather defend a father who seduces his daughter, rather than a worker who is sacked for putting up a poster like that.

So, the foreman responsible for his sacking was also beaten up and hospitalised. As a result of this violence, FIAT took action against a worker from the Press Shop. They singled him out as one of the workers who had beaten up two foremen. But this worker received all possible help and support from the trade union organisation, because he is a sympathizer of the Communist Party. The line of defence adopted by the trade union organisations was that FIAT management was only picking on him because they were unwilling to act against the people who were really responsible – and the implication was (and was stated more or less openly in leaflets) that the “violent ones” came from the Body Plant.

### **The repression against Workers' Autonomy**

[The next section of the interview goes on to discuss the development of autonomous workers' organisation inside FIAT and inside the working class in general, from 1969 to the present day.]

**Red Notes:** In Britain the newspapers talk about “autonomous” groups of workers, building their own organisation in the workplaces, and often in direct conflict with the trade union organisation. Could you tell us some of the history of this movement in Italy?

**Marco:** Well, let's try a little history – let's talk about the development of organisation, and the initiatives developed by the political vanguards which were created in 1969 and subsequently, in the struggles inside FIAT. These vanguards were born with Lotta Continua and Potere Operaio [“Fight On” and “Workers' Power”]. They were organisations created with the support, the help, of intellectuals.

As far as I am concerned, these comrades made some tremendous advances. Here I think we should go back for a moment to the first conference of the Autonomia [“Autonomy”], held in Bologna in 1972. Its theme was the necessity of getting organised, in the light of the fact that the historical groups of the Italian extra-parliamentary Left had not provided the working class movement either with instruments or with objectives by which the organisation of conflict inside the workplaces of this society could become a permanent and ongoing practice, against exploitation and against the bosses.

*Photo: SCIOPERO*

In 1972, on the basis of an initiative by the comrades of via dei Volsci in Rome, and comrades from the Petrolchimica plant in Porto Marghera, from the FIAT motor company, and from the various collectives that existed at the national level, there was an attempt to discuss what was, in that period, the attitude of the working class towards the repression which was being carried out by the state against pickets, against workers' attempts to come outside of the factories during strikes, which involved hundreds of police and carabinieri on the factory gates during the high moments of the struggle inside FIAT.

The big advances that were being made by the comrades of the Policlinico Hospital in Rome, and by the comrades of the ENEL (nationalised electricity board), as well as the organisational advances that were being made outside the workplace, at the territorial level, combined with the continuous level of refusal by the proletariat. Namely, the self-reduction of electricity and telephone bills, the occupation of housing – all objectives which led, in real terms, to regaining some of the buying power of your wage, and which were (and still are) a means of cutting down the money available to the system. This was a general attempt by the proletariat in general to reduce the attack on its standard of living, the robbery from its wage packet.

The comrades studied the objectives that could best be advanced in the various situations. They understood the refusal, the rejection of the power of a single organisation or organisations – as well as the question of control, of autonomy, in terms of controlling your own objectives and demands – a control which must be exclusively in the hands of the working class in each situation. In general terms this amounted to a refusal of centrality, of centralisation of precise political lines – at least as regards the objectives involved in specific struggle situations. It meant that control was to be exercised by the vanguards in those particular situations. It meant a concern by those vanguards to become reference points for the mass of workers.

This provided the basis for a big step forward – the transition towards the construction of a new movement at a time when the movement seemed almost dead. The new movement was born on the contradictions that, day after day, sprang up and were becoming clearer in all the institutional organisations. The movement which was dying – and which the trade union organisations were recuperating, in order to draw it into line with their own objectives – faced being drawn into the political line of the trade unions, towards a co-management of power with the bosses, and towards the policy of working class self-sacrifice in recent years.

The move was now towards a reconstruction of the old movement, towards a refusal of government austerity programmes and sacrifices, and this was a need that was felt very much by those who you could call the “historical cadres” of that movement. This new movement is not an “alternative” to the trade union organisations; it is not an attempt to build a “third” union. It is a movement that breaks off any form of relationship with the institutions. It is a movement that advances its objectives on the basis of what are the real needs of the working class. It is a movement that fights, day by day, against the continuous reprisals organised by the state and the bosses to crush, day by day, the working class. The sackings, the arrests that have taken place in the last few years, have not succeeded in silencing or blocking the initiatives taken by these movements that grew up out of those big contradictions that were developing in the institutional organisations.

*Photo: PRESS WITH TEETH*

We now come to the recent wave of arrests. The state has launched a violent attack, in order to strike against the “brains” – or rather, those who, in theoretical terms, or in terms of structural and material organisation rather than theory, were making their contribution to this movement. The state’s aim is to hit that layer of intellectuals who supported – and who are still supporting – these initiatives.

### **The importance of the April 7th case**

The attempt to brand these people as the brains behind the Red Brigades is a despicable accusation. Because not only are these people not the leaders of, or the brains behind, the Red Brigades – but at the same time the state is claiming that it has put an end to terrorism in Italy. This is absolutely not true. The Red Brigades have formed, have reformed; there has been the birth of hundreds of groups which have been acting, if not along the political line of the RB, at least along more or less the same lines in practice. The State, in order to stop this wave of armed attacks, has now arrested Toni Negri, Mario Dalmaviva (who, apart from anything else, has been



out of politics for three years now), Oreste Scalzone and other comrades who, in my personal judgement, are completely outside what the state is calling “terrorist organisation

Their only guilt is to have written, to have made analyses of, a new mode of the struggle carried out by what they call the “social worker”. The “social” worker [trans note: or “socialised”], as we see it, is that section of the proletariat and sub-proletariat which is unemployed, which (because of the restructuration of capitalism) finds itself having to live an extremely precarious life. So the fault of these comrades who have been arrested has been simply that they analysed the behaviour of the “social” worker, and of groups of workers that were born inside the factories, and who had analysed the fact that, at the personal level, the mass struggles were not and are not enough to defeat the employer. So, the advance of the logic of sabotage, of organised sabotage, the logic of the destruction of the structures of capital and of their organisational levels; organised groups who fight against the repression of the state, by sabotaging the repressive structure of that state, and therefore striking at prisons, carabinieri barracks and headquarters of political parties who have most taken up positions against the working class.

In relation to this, and in relation to the repression that is advancing day by day, the comrades of the Autonomia have started to organise and discuss among the workers. We have produced leaflets and newspapers. We have tried to make use of those very few spaces that the bosses’ state has left open to us.

[Red Notes – Interview recorded in Turin, 7 May 1979]

---

**Translated by Ed Emery**

**Extracted from: THE BOOK OF FIAT: Insurrection, insubordination, occupation and revolutionary politics at the FIAT motor company – 1907-1982**

**Published: Red Notes / May Day Rooms**

**First published in 2020**