

CHAPTER 38

INTERVIEW WITH A FIAT FOREMAN

PREFACE: This interview was recorded and published by G. Pansa, deputy editor of the newspaper *La Repubblica*. It was published in the book *Storie italiane di violenza e terrorismo*, Laterza, 1980.

I don't want to pass an opinion on the 61 workers that have been sacked by FIAT. You'll understand why in a minute. As regards all the rest, though, I'm prepared to talk, because I think it would be useful to let people know what's going on here. In return, though, I ask one thing: please don't publish my name and personal details, and don't describe me. I would just say that I am 40 years old, and that I am one of the 2,000 foremen at FIAT-Mirafiori.

For those who are not familiar with factories, let me describe the pyramid of the factory hierarchy. First there's the worker, then the charge-hand, then the foreman, followed by the department foremen and the general foreman, up through the plant manager to senior management. I'm a Grade 1 foreman, the lowest level. I earn £75 a week, and I've been at FIAT for 20 years. Everything I know I have learnt at FIAT, and FIAT was my first family. But for me, today, it isn't any more.

Nowadays I work between 9 and 11 hours a day in the factory. And every day I ask myself "What am I doing here?" You've heard of production planning, quality control etc. Well, that is my job in the section where I work. When I arrive at the start of my shift, I count the workers who are working with me. I know that in order to make a certain amount of production I need a certain number of workers; I also know that, to be saleable, the product must be trustworthy, its quality must be alright.

In short, I look after the interests of the company that pays me. I'm not laying big claims. It's simply a necessity – in other times it would have been called a duty. Companies can only thrive if work is done properly, and the whole caboodle, the economy, only holds up if companies are thriving. This is what I have learned in twenty or so years of work. And that's what I used to do, for a long time. But now I don't do it any more.

"Capo, what nice legs you've got..."

Is it the fault of the workers? I would put it like this. Take a hundred workers from FIAT-Mirafiori. Thirty just don't want to know, don't want to know the union, or anything. For them the factory is just a place where they have to go to work, they work hard, and that's that. Another thirty want to see a fair and democratic trade union policy being followed. Then another twenty or thirty swing with the first wind that comes along...they don't know where they stand. And those twenty are the targets for the remaining fifteen to pressure – those fifteen who are extremists, and who use every occasion to kick up a ruckus, to avoid work, and to prevent others from working.

Fifteen is not many, but it's enough to create havoc if nobody reacts. They're a minority, but they can do what they like. Their enemy is the first level of management that comes to hand – namely the foreman. They keep the foreman in their sights, as if he was Agnelli himself, in person. You struggle to keep production going, you try to keep the required levels as regards quantity and quality of the product. But they –

particularly the young ones, the new starters of the last couple of years – one by one pile on the straws that are going to break your back.

“Capo, don’t piss me off, or we’ll strike”; “Capo, fuck off”; “Capo, you’re a bastard. Watch out, because I know you, I know where you live, and I’ll get you once we’re out of here”; “Capo, you’re a fascist”; “Oh Capo, what nice legs you’ve got! You wouldn’t want to lose them...!”; “Capo, don’t report me, or else...” We just have to take it. We just have to swallow.

Sometimes they go “Hunt the Foreman”. I’ve always managed to keep out of harm’s way – they’ve never thrown me out of the plant. Because, when they come marching round the factory, I’ve always got out of the way. But I’ve seen some pretty ugly moments. I’ve seen my friends pushed around all over the place, with red flags put into their hands, and I’ve had to stay hidden, dead still, so as not to end up in the same position as them.

Then there are things that happen to you outside the factory, at home. The threatening phone calls: “Try not to step out of line... stay on the side of the workers...” Or the threats to my wife: “Watch out, one of these days we’ll do away with that pig husband of yours.” I’ve always been OK, personally. They haven’t even set fire to my car – probably because I always take a different route to work and always park in a different place. But slashed tyres and burnt-out cars are quite a regular occurrence. Not to mention all the other things. Seeing your colleagues wounded – “lamed”, as you journalists put it, as if they were cattle, instead of men who are condemned to live with that for the rest of their lives. And the plant managers, killed by the armed bands, with the latest one being Ghiglieno, Planning Director for the FIAT cars group.

So, as the months have gone by, my life has changed. Once I used to come home in the evenings and rest, or play with the children, or do the odd bit of work. Now I can only think of recharging my personal batteries so as to face the next day’s battles at FIAT. I’ve changed inside myself too. Put yourself in my shoes. You’re at work, and you do one thing, and they say: “Bastard, you’re wrong.” So you do the other, and they still say: “Bastard, you’re wrong.” So how can you avoid beginning to think that there’s really something wrong with you, that you’re not the person you used to be?

“We foremen... we have already given in”

It’s in the factory, particularly, that you start noticing the changes in you. I saw it when they killed Ghiglieno. They waited for him in front of his house in via Petrarca, at about 8 in the morning, as he was on his way to work at FIAT, and they killed him more or less right in front of his wife. This was 21 September 1979. That day all the foremen and supervisors met, and we asked ourselves: “What are we going to do? How long will this go on? Are we still going to go on struggling to keep this company on its feet?” We told ourselves yes, but it was obvious that everybody really felt like giving in.

In fact, to tell the truth, with us foremen it’s no longer a matter of wanting to give in. We have already given in. All that’s missing is for us to start going sick – but in effect, we might as well. I know that if a customer has brakes which don’t work, or a scratched piston, it’s our fault as well. But it’s become hard to behave by the rule book.

You don’t believe me? Come into the factory. If I see a worker kicking a component about, I’m only able to do one thing: I wait for a while, and then go and pick it up. And what if I see someone stealing parts? I turn the other way and pretend I don’t see. Report him? I wouldn’t even think of it. All we can do is swallow. This factory is turning into a piece of shit.

Do you think that's putting it too strongly? Well, I don't think I could find words sufficiently bad to describe the FIAT factory today. Did you know that we often find used condoms inside the car bodies? To say that the place is in a state of chaos is not to do it justice. And the newspapers have never told the truth.

So how can we stand up to it? I would like to use a difficult word: sometimes I feel myself de-personalised, completely. Even when I'm outside FIAT I feel like that. When someone asks me who I am, and where I work, I don't know how to answer. Am I a foreman? No, not any more. I'm not anything any more. I'm just someone who does his job badly, or, rather, someone who doesn't know what his job is . . .

The decisions that I can take are virtually nil. I can't punish anyone, because if I do, I run the risk of getting shot. I can't even reward good workers. Sometimes a worker will say to me: 'OK, so you can't do anything about the layabouts who won't work, but you could at least give a bonus to people like me who will work.' But I can't even do that. In the factory now we're all the same, all equal, all at the same level.

Lama goes on the television to talk about rewarding skill levels. Don't talk balls! I'd like to have Lama here in Turin, let him spend a week in Mirafiori and see how things really are. A lot of the fault lies with the union. Ten years ago, in the Hot Autumn, the union made use of the more fiery elements in order to win itself a certain amount of power. Well and good. I would have done the same. But then it should have got rid of those elements – but it didn't. In fact, the union has precisely let itself be dragged along by the hotheads, the violent ones.

"I don't want to end up in the casualty ward"

I'm not in the union any more. And the only reason I don't criticise it openly is because of fear. OK, let them call me a coward, but the only reason I don't speak out against the way the union is going is because I'm scared shitless. I've got extremists in my section, and I don't want to end up in the Casualty Ward. But at the same time, I'm not a right-winger. Far from it. I try to think for myself. Every day I read two newspapers – *La Stampa* [t.n. the paper owned by FIAT] and *L'Unità* [t.n. the Communist Party newspaper] – so as to keep up with the news and get a balanced view. I know that we can't go back to the iron fist of the old days, because that was an unfair system, and anyway it would be impossible nowadays. And the word "intimidate" frightens me. For too many years the FIAT worker was intimidated. But nowadays those – and there are some – who. want to work don't get a chance to breathe.

Photo: FOREMEN

Sometimes it makes you despair. And I ask myself: "Why doesn't someone do something?" But then, when I look outside FIAT, the answer comes easily: "But who has got the moral authority to be able to do something?" My grandad used to say that a fish always starts rotting from the head downwards. And it's precisely the head of our country that's rotten – the leaders. Our political system is frightful. I could make comparisons with the factory. If I want to deal with a worker who arrives late to work, after 6.00am, then I have to be there, in the factory, before 6.00am. But if I don't get up until 7.00am, then I don't have any right to go telling people off for coming in late. It's the same in Rome. If the "head" of the country isn't in order, doesn't clean itself up and doesn't do its duty, then what can it expect from the base?

At this point I should finish by saying something about myself again. The first thing is that Turin scares me now. I don't want to live in Turin any more. As soon as I can, I want to get out of Turin. The second thing is that even the thought of carrying on doing my work scares me. But why do I still call it "work"? Every day, when I go into Mirafiori, it seems more like going to a battle-station . . .

I'm going to ask to be transferred to one of the offices. Other colleagues of mine have done it, and I'm going to do it too. I don't want to have responsibilities any more. I don't want to be a foreman any more. I just want to obey orders, and that's all. That way, I'll be able to live my life without risk of getting shot at, or nervous exhaustion. I've refused a promotion already. And I would be more than happy to give up some of my pay so as to be able to live a safer life, both inside and outside the factory. I'd do it straight away, as from tomorrow morning!

My wife's trying to get me to leave; FIAT as well. "Leave the job. I'm working, and anyway I'm sure you'll find another job." I tell you, I'm on the point of doing it, and there's no saying that I wouldn't do it soon. Where's the joy of staying? FIAT is a sick animal, that could die at any moment. And here we are, managers and foremen, all equally impotent, standing around to watch it die. Inside FIAT nobody's in charge any more, and outside, the guns are shooting. That about sums up the situation.

I have to admit it. When I first started at FIAT twenty years ago, I imagined everything would be different. Today I think I still have a sense of balance, But I feel like a man who has been struck down by a continual humiliation. Yes, humiliation, that's exactly the word. Humiliated, and it's as if I was caught in a trap, the trap of Mirafiori, like a prisoner in a cage. I'm a coward, you'll say. Maybe I am. But my only desire at the present moment is to escape from this humiliation, and escape from the trap. Escape from it, so that I can say to myself: "Now I can breathe a bit."

[Translated from *Storie italiane di violenza e terrorismo*, Laterza, 1980]

Translated by Ed Emery

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