

CHAPTER 39

THE SACKING OF THE 61 – 1979

Red Notes: A lot of people are saying that FIAT's counter-attack started with the sacking of the 61 workers in 1979. Can you tell us a bit about the background to those sackings?

Marco: On this matter there have been a number of interviews and articles done by comrades, both in the Left press and in the bourgeois press, so that the news about FIAT's repressive action can reach further afield. The comrades have tried to stress that the violence that the workers expressed during the 1979 Contract negotiations was a correct violence, if you put it in relation to the violence that the employer practises every day, a direct violence against the whole of the working class, in the form of the repeated deaths at work that happen in the factory, the repeated accidents etc.

For example, in the FIAT Foundries (TEKSID) there was a serious accident involving the death of a number of workers. FIAT management, in order to produce more iron, had filled one of the furnaces with a larger quantity of materials than it was scheduled to hold. I received the facts of this matter directly from a white collar worker in the Work Study Department, where they have the figures for the maximum safe capacity for such furnaces. Thus the deaths – the murders – of these workers were due to the fact that FIAT (TEKSID) had loaded the furnaces with a far larger load than they were designed to handle. And when these deaths happened, the trade union organisations would not even call a strike – and here I am not talking of a general strike, but at least a strike in the areas of production associated with TEKSID – namely all the FIAT factories in Turin.

Workers' violence and insubordination

They were prepared to allow to pass almost unnoticed this form of official murder of workers. This is the true violence, and not that so-called "violence" that happens during demonstrations and during the strikes over national agreements. In this incident two workers and one foreman died, and another two workers were very seriously burned. This was in 1978.

Now, I remember that during the Moro kidnap (and I am not just trying to be polemical here) the trade unions called for strike action by workers, to protest against the actions of the Red Brigades. But the workers rejected the strike call. The unions had called for immediate strike action, pickets on the gates, and a stoppage of all production. The workers rejected the call because they wanted to show that, for the unions and the employers the life of a worker is worth nothing (and they cited the case of these workers who had died at TEKSID). While on the other hand the death of Moro's bodyguard, of the policemen who defended him and who uphold the bosses' system, is something that the union considers to be worth mourning. This situation came to serious blows on the factory gates, between workers and Communist Party goon squads supporting the strike call, with the workers rejecting the call.

As I was saying earlier, workers' violence is a daily form of action. The employer may succeed in destroying the level of mass organisation, by sacking those vanguard militants who, day after day, struggle towards the building of those mass

organisations. But, as I see it, the employer will never succeed in destroying the: workers' rejection of the whole system of work under capitalism.

From discussions with the comrades that FIAT has not sacked and who are still working in the factory, and from discussions with the kind of mass worker who does not play an active political part in the factory, we can see that the level of repression in the factory has increased, leaving very little space for mass actions of rebellion. But there still remains a will to fight.

Therefore the workers are waiting for a better time, in order, as we say, to make the employers pay, to make them pay for everything they've done. In fact, the comrades are waiting till September, after the Summer shutdown. They see September as a time when it will be possible for FIAT workers to take back the things which, in the space of only a few months, the employer has been able to take away from us. There have been so many gains over the past years, which the employer has been able to take away from us after the sackings of the "61".

When I refer to the daily level of the FIAT workers' struggle, I mean things like the following: when FIAT-Rivalta was first built, the assembly lines were controlled by photo-cells rather than by mechanical trip-switches. When the workers didn't feel like working any more, they pretended to go over and get a cup of coffee. They took the coffee cup and stuck it over one of the photo-cells. The line would stop automatically. The management would arrive, with foremen, maintenance workers etc, to mend the line, and get it going again. They couldn't work out why the line wouldn't run. After a while one of them noticed the coffee cup over the photo-cell. They went mad! It was great! This was on the assembly line. Then, in the Press Shop for example, and in Metal Finishing, you have counters that count the number of parts going through. All you have to do is bang them on the top, and they register a part going through. This is a daily thing – one of the thousand things that workers do. It's nothing special. It's a daily thing, something that you don't even remember as special. It's something that you do every day in the same way that you go to eat your lunch every day.

Photo: CARTOON – Continuous-Flow Production Process

Another example from the Press Shop is where workers throw a nut or bolt into one of the presses. The press comes down and the bolt leaves a mark or dent in the die. So the whole die has to be changed. The presses are enormous, and it takes them hours to do the change-around. And for the worker it takes just a moment – you're passing, you chuck a bolt in, nobody sees you. And the result of this is not just that you stop one press – it means you stop a whole line, because the lines in the Press Shop are all automated and interlinked. Stopping a press means stopping the line.

1979: FIAT Workers "Take Over the City"

Red Notes: During late 1979 there were the very important struggles around the negotiation of the 1979 FIAT national agreement. We have heard that FIAT workers were doing some amazing things in that period. Could you tell us about some of what happened?

Marco: I would start by saying that the contents of the union's platform during those negotiations were not at all what the workers wanted. The comrades of the Workers' Autonomy movement, for example, were very active in expressing their disagreement with the Union platform in that period. And in the mass meetings it was their contributions which always drew the loudest applause and got the biggest support. They were giving voice to the reality of the workers' position in FIAT, both in terms of wage levels, and in terms of the attacks, the daily attacks, by FIAT management.

As the workers saw it, the union platform was not sufficient to pay what had to be paid, in terms of meeting inflation. They felt it was a bit absurd to go ahead with a

long programme of hours and hours of strike action in order to win something that wasn't worth fighting for.

For this reason, both inside and outside the factory, we began to see clashes taking place, fairly violent clashes. This meant, for example, that heavy metal security gates were on occasion ripped out; windows were broken; factory fences broken down. There were instances in which roads were blocked outside the factory, during these negotiations, as well as roads being blocked in the centre of Turin.

For example there was one instance in which a demonstration of workers marched into the centre of Turin. They had had enough. They went to Piazza Castello, to Via Roma. They felt that the TV and the employers' channels of communication, were putting their case falsely, so they wanted to go and express their disagreement publicly, personally. They marched from the factory into the centre of town, which is quite a long way. They went to the offices of the Italian State Radio/TV company [RAI]; they blocked all the traffic in Piazza Castello; they made sure the public knew of their disagreement with the course of the negotiations.

The most remarkable action by the workers in this period was the action in Via Berthollet, where FIAT have their offices. This was just one of the many, many actions carried out by FIAT workers in this period. They broke windows; they marched into offices with spray cans to spray slogans; they spat at scab white collar workers; the white collar workers were forced to run a gauntlet down a corridor of workers; they were spat at and sprayed with paint; the offices in Via Berthollet were wrecked! Similar actions took place (though a bit less dramatic) in other FIAT offices in Piazza San Carlo, in the centre of town.

I remember, when all the workers arrived at Via Berthollet, the security guards were all shoved inside and some windows were broken. The workers went upstairs, and there was a manager there saying: "But you can't do this, there's the Russian Embassy just down the road... what will they think?" Needless to say, the workers weren't worried if there was a Russian Embassy, a Chinese Embassy, or an American Embassy. First of all they had a general clear-out of the place. Anything they found, they pocketed. Then they chased the white collar workers out, and put them at the head of their demonstration. The police stood by. They did absolutely nothing to intervene. The situation was so hot that, if the police had intervened, then all hell would have broken loose.

I remember that, during one of the workers' road blocks, there was an intervention by a police patrol. There was a tailback of miles and miles of cars and lorries held up by the workers' roadblock. A police car arrives on the scene. They wanted to take down the roadblock. The workers put themselves in front of the roadblock and refused to budge. One policeman went to put his hand to his pistol. What happened? His car was completely hammered by the workers, kicking it, hitting it with hammers. He just managed to get back into it, turn round and drive off again.

Road blocks and militant picketing

As I say, there were some moments of extreme high tension. Turin was virtually brought to a standstill during the period of the roadblocks. The roads were impassable. All round the Mirafiori plant it was almost impossible to drive through. The motorway feed-roads leading to the Milan motorway were blockaded by workers from Lancia and from Spa-Stura. The feed roads for the Piacenza/Bologna motorway were blockaded by workers from the smaller factories.

During this period of the road blocks some workers from one small factory came to ask our help, to help them picket their own factory, because the employer there was a bastard and was organising scab labour to beat up the pickets. So we went along with them, and when the scabs saw their workers arriving with workers from FIAT, they turned white and didn't give any more trouble. The employer was out of his

mind. He began pushing and shouting... in fact there were three of them, three brothers... and for their pains the workers punched them, kicked them in the bollocks, spat in their faces, and let them know what they thought of them. There was one comrade who would go up to one of these managers and say: "You ugly, poxy bastard, go and lose yourself somewhere," and he'd spit in his face. And the man stayed quiet.

A way of settling old scores

I tell you, in that period there so many amazing things happening that I can hardly even begin to describe them. I'm not a film director!

They're the sort of moments that you will remember all your life. For example, there were the workers from Metal Finishing, especially the younger workers; when they went on a march to the Admin offices, they never went empty-handed. They all had good, thick belts, into which they stuck a good, big hammer. As they went down the assembly lines they'd use the car bodies on the lines as drums! In this period there were hundreds and hundreds of car bodies that had to be taken away for repair work because they were all dented. Then, when we got to the offices, it would usually be the older workers, the ones who knew the score and had been at FIAT for some years, who would start the action. Then the younger ones would see that we were going in there to give management a brutal time, and they'd come along and join in. You'd see them taking a general foreman by the collar and chasing him out with kicks up the backside, if he refused to move.

Then, on one occasion, FIAT laid off a particular section, and the workers decided to chase the foremen out of the plant. The way they saw it was that they weren't being paid, because they were laid off, so nobody should be paid. So the workers went round the changing rooms and the toilets, and chased the foremen out of the plant.

There was another very nice incident of this sort. There was one foreman who was working in the plant one time. He was the one who had led to the sackings of the first five workers sacked for disciplinary reasons at FIAT in this period. He was "transported" out of the factory, with kicks up the backside and punches in his face. The man was much hated. And two days later they found his house completely gutted by fire. There's nothing left of it now. His whole house was gutted. They went and left something behind his door... and the result was a fair-size bonfire!

Another thing the workers did was to hijack buses. By this stage in the negotiations, the city of Turin was in the hands of the workers. This situation was to last about 10 days in all. And since the city was completely in the hands of the workers, when the workers wanted to travel from one factory to another, they didn't want to go on foot. So they would stop a bus and say to the driver: "OK, let's go," and they'd set off to do the rounds of the city, or to do the rounds of factory gates, often with red flags flying out of the windows.

The art of helping yourself

There were so many things that happened in this period that I can hardly call them all to mind. Also because they were so spontaneous, so natural, that they hardly seemed worth noting at the time. For example, when we set off on marches, the workers would go into the ritzy bars all along the route, the "de luxe" bars, the sort of place where you only go if you've got a lot of money. You'd have 15-20 workers going in there and completely cleaning the place out. They'd strip the place, and you'd see everyone coming out with huge cream cakes, trifles, ice-creams etc, without paying a penny. In one place they went in for something to drink, and the boss refused to let them drink unless they paid the cashier in advance. Well, they were so upset that they just helped themselves, saying: "They won't serve us here, so we'll have to serve ourselves." And you saw the whole march going along, stuffing themselves with cake.

The same thing happened at the plush Motta bar in Piazza Castello. The barman refused to serve them unless they paid first. So they just helped themselves and walked out with the stuff. And the police didn't even try to intervene. You could say that this was a sort of general plundering of these sorts of places, the sorts of places where workers, in normal times, wouldn't even be able to show their faces, because they're so expensive.

Now, over the years I've seen so much of this sort of thing in Turin. Maybe that's the reason why I don't really see them as particularly remarkable.

But the most remarkable things that were happening in this period were happening inside the plant, in the daily struggles on the shop floor, which had nothing to do with the official course of union negotiations. For example, in that period, the Paint Shop workers, in addition to the hours of strike action called by the union for the Contract, were striking regularly over their own issues in the Paint Shop – in particular, conditions. They were calling for a reduction of the time they have to spend inside the paint booth. Instead of working half an hour inside and a quarter of an hour outside, they were demanding a quarter of an hour in the booth, and a quarter of an hour's rest. They were carrying this struggle forward, and it was this kind of struggle that FIAT was then using in order to lay off other departments.

FIAT tries to break organisation

FIAT's idea was to set up a conflict ; between the Paint Shop workers and the workers who were being laid off; FIAT was using the layoffs as a weapon of division. But the division did not succeed. I remember one occasion when the workers were laid off. They formed up a march to go to the Admin offices, and they forced FIAT to pay the lay-off period. They confronted the management, and said, more or less: "Look, if you're not going to pay us, then you're going straight through that window..."

The result was that all the Body Plant workers who had been laid off got paid for the day, a complete day's wages.

The struggles of the Paint Shop workers continued, at that sort of pace. Then FIAT decided to sack five workers, in order to break that continuity of struggles in the Paint Shop. This was in May/June 1979. But the Paint Shop was not broken, because they had a strong organisation. They were able to carry forward struggles over gradings, over a reduction of working time on the line, over their conditions of work, and other such issues which gained a lot more support than the official Union strikes for the National Agreement. Anyway, FIAT opted for a trial of strength with these 5 sackings. In a sense the sackings were a setback. But then, after the summer shutdown, the struggles started up again... although a little weakened.

After September...

Now, to come up to date, after the sacking of the "61". In the factory today the situation is stagnant. Among the mass of workers there is a certain fear, a fear for the future. Umberto Agnelli has stated that he is looking for mass redundancies at FIAT. However, as I say, the comrades inside the plant are looking to September as the period when they expect the struggle to pick up again, with more workers getting involved. The September struggle will deal with the issue of the 1980 national contract, and with the planned sackings – which are expected to be around 15,000, out of a national FIAT manual workforce of 180,000.

[Red Notes – Interview recorded in Turin, August 1980]

Photo: CARTOON

CARTOON: GASPARAZZO AND THE RED BRIGADES:

Our autonomist hero is caught up in the state's witch-hunt for the Red Brigades. Everyone is suspect. "Now I think of it, he says, that card that I sent the wife from prison was a bit dodgy.....not to mention when I bought a book in that Left bookshop... Damn!! And I've still got all those empty mineral water bottles lying around. They'll say they're for Molotovs! It's curtains for me!" And as he falls asleep he can see the headlines: "Gasparazzo Implicated in the Red Brigades!"... "State Prosecutor declares: 'We have prepared arrest warrants for 15,634 Gasparazzists'." Gasp!!

Translated by Ed Emery

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