

CHAPTER 52

THE FACTORY WORKERS OF TURIN AND THE OTHERS

Marco Revelli

An analysis of the historic five week strike of FIAT workers in Turin against mass layoffs, which was defeated, and which marked the end of an era for organised labour in Italy.

PREFACE by Bob Lumley: This article originally appeared under the title “The Factory Workers of Turin and the Others”, in *Primo Maggio* No. 14 (Winter 1980/81). It was written in the immediate aftermath of what has since proved to be the historic defeat of the five week strike against mass redundancy at the FIAT plant in Turin during October 1980. Central to the outcome of this struggle was the impact of a demonstration by some 20,000 middle managers, foremen and moderate workers under the slogan “Work is defended by working”. Up to that point the strike had seemed solid. It had been called by the FLM (the engineering workers section of the three union confederations) with the overwhelming support of shop-floor delegates and with all three confederation secretaries pledging total support. Berlinguer, the Communist Party General Secretary, had also visited Turin in support, and the news from the striking shipyard workers in Poland had led to the call “Do as in Gdansk – Occupy!” But immediately after being faced with middle management’s unprecedented show of support for the company both union and party leaderships surrendered the struggle. The confederation secretaries went over the heads of the FLM and concluded an agreement with FIAT that both accepted the redundancies and allowed the company to fire whomsoever it chose.

As Italy’s largest private manufacturing concern, FIAT has always acted as a barometer not only of the fortunes of the economy but also to a large extent of trends in the struggle between capital and labour in Italian industry as a whole. And since the events of autumn 1980 the list of major industrial companies declaring, and succeeding in achieving, massive lay-offs and redundancies has been virtually a roll call of the commanding heights of Italian manufacturing. Alfa Romeo, which laid off a third of its workforce at the beginning of 1982, is but the most recent example of an enterprise following FIAT’s robust assertion of “management’s right to manage” and restructure on its own terms. In Italy, as in the UK, manufacturing, and particularly engineering, employment has sharply declined in the last two years and productivity among the remaining workforce has equally sharply increased; at FIAT it has risen by 20% since the beginning of 1981.

Revelli’s analysis does not deal with the tactics or direct consequences of the strike – rather he addresses a more general question: “Have we reached a turning point, the end of a certain working class culture and identity in the face of

a qualitative, and historical alteration in the relations of production?" In other words, does the new management offensive amount to a modern version of Fordism in which the "mass worker" will now suffer the same fate as the craftsman? In explaining the FIAT defeat Revelli stresses the way in which the introduction of new technologies – carefully pursued by management during a period of apparent defensiveness during the 1970s – has transformed the labour process. As editor of *Primo Maggio* he writes from within the "operaismo" tradition that has developed on Panzieri's insights into capital's use of machinery in attaining the real subsumption of labour power. [1] Some may feel that this account lacks an analysis of the world outside the sphere of production and that it is too narrowly wedded to a vision that assumes the primacy of the relations of production (in the narrow sense of relations within the factory) in determining social and political behaviour. However, Revelli's analysis is not mechanistic and he introduces several concepts new to the "operaist" tradition which allow greater space for subjectivity (stressing generational differences among the strikers, for example). Questions of subjectivity and culture are more fully explored in relation to the shopfloor workforce than the middle layers, whose actions are explained entirely in terms of their political and economic subordination to FIAT. Nevertheless, Revelli makes extremely important points in relation to those he dubs 'the others'. In particular, he suggests that – in the climate of planned insecurity promoted by capital – the middle layers will be increasingly inclined to offer loyalty in exchange for security; and that, in its own wider interests, capital may hold back from technological innovation that could eradicate many such jobs.

"This is not just a battle – this is a war". That was the opinion of the older workers on the picket lines. "You can afford to lose a battle, you can lose a particular contract struggle – but not this time". This was FIAT's settling of accounts after ten years of workers' hegemony in the factories. What was at stake was the workers' working conditions at FIAT – and not only FIAT – for the coming 10 years.

That "war" was lost. And lost badly. Now comes the dismal job of weighing up what happened – how it happened, why it happened, and how long it will last. Is FIAT once again going to become the "sleeping giant" that it was all through the 1950s, weighing like lead on the class situation in Italy? or will it prove capable of reconstructing in the factories a working class resistance and staying-power, a new 1962? Or have we reached a turning point, the end of a certain working-class culture and identity in the face of a qualitative, and historical, change in the relations of production?

Defeat was already in the air

The first impact of the events of that anguish-filled Friday 17 October was overwhelming; it was like a bad film about 8 September 1943 [trans. note: when the king and his government abandoned Rome to the Nazis], with organisation falling apart, generals fleeing, and the soldiers paying the price. The workers entered the factory in silence, subdued, whilst not far off, some hundreds of them tried, in desperation, to storm the local lead offices of the Engineering Union, the Quinta Lega.

Previously there had been the morning of the 15th, when, after a night of tense expectation, there had been scenes recalling "civil war", with the grey, colourless mass of white collar workers, middle management and foremen stretching out

along Corso Unione Sovietica, in confrontation with the colourful line-up of the workers' pickets outside the factory – and between the two, the dark line of the carabinieri, and a tension in the air... And on the 16th, a terribly sad and leaden day, the mass meetings were a suffering and a mockery.

But defeat had been in the air right from the start. We should have been ready for it. I had lived through 35 days of the struggle unsure of myself, wavering and impotent. I hadn't managed to write a word. I felt – and was proved right – that the affair was going to end badly, that it had been lost from the word go, and this was also the feeling, basically, of those thousands of comrades who threw their hearts and souls into this struggle. But at the same time I could hardly avoid being inspired by the moral strength that was being expressed – with an obstinacy that matched the desperation of the situation – by the workers of Turin as they tried to round off their own political cycle with their heads held high.

Such a strength, I told myself, cannot simply be erased – it must leave its mark.

Anybody who has followed events at FIAT closely over the past five years – the class dynamic, the transformations of technology and social composition of the factories, the changes in workers' subjectivity – knows that this little army entrenched in the factories of FIAT-Mirafiori, Rivalta and Lingotto, resisting Agnelli's offensive, had already ceased to be an emerging social force, a dynamic grouping, as had been the case at the end of the 1960s. By now it was reduced more to a "political class", a "political culture", without any real material base rooted in the relations of production. It was clear that in fact FIAT had begun to win this "war" a long time before open hostilities began – right back in 1973-4 when, with the agreement of all parties (shop stewards, trade unions and political parties) they had launched their first intensive cycle of technological innovation aimed at increasing the productivity of labour, at reducing the workers' powers of control over the cycle of production, and at breaking up and dispersing the rigidity of that class composition. FIAT's strategy played the twin cards of decentralisation of production, and financial manoeuvres.

A paradoxical situation was created at FIAT in that period. On the one hand, a kind of production-truce reigned in the factories, bearing all the hallmarks of considerable workers' power (job timings were laxer, workers had greater freedom of movement and greater amounts of free time in the factory, and foremen had less disciplinary power – in short the situation which is now known as the "ungovernability of the factory"). But at the same time, FIAT was going ahead with the most radical and systematic technological attack on workers' power that has been seen in the last 30 years.

Temporary advantage to the working class

FIAT seemed prepared to write off their resulting lack of competitiveness in the car market in that period (from 1975 to 1979 they seemed hardly interested in fighting for an increased market share), and they made up their losses via financial speculation (particularly by manoeuvres in the exchange markets). And in the meantime they put a tremendous effort into a deep-seated modification of their fixed capital, via "labour-saving" machinery and innovations designed to cut down the "socially necessary labour time" in the production of commodities. In these years the factory seemed in a state of semi-activity; workers could "work up the line", women workers could do their knitting, and young workers could "roam around" among the robots that were being run in, and the transfer machinery that was already obsolete. This was a very particular and contingent situation, which gave rise both to the aspects of workers' behaviour that aroused

the public's interest (via FIAT's propaganda machine), and to the forms of behaviour of the "new" workforce, so different from the older workforce.

This low-key factory operation was the result of a number of factors. First, a result of the restructuring itself: obviously, while work goes on with the replacement of whole segments of the cycle of production, overall production is not going to run 100%. Second, increasing the potential output of one section does not necessarily match with the capacities of the factory as a whole: therefore physical imbalances of production occur. Third, there was still a residual working class power in the factory, which imposed a working-class "capitalisation" of the technological innovation, and thus was able to turn it to function in the interests of increased free time rather than the production of commodities. For some time we had been talking of "politically necessary labour time" – which was far higher than "socially necessary labour time"; but we added that, very soon, once capital had finished its cycle of restructuring, it would then attempt to find new ways of combining its renewed fixed capital with its politically redefined variable capital in ways that would be favourable to capital, in order to match potential productivity with real production output.

Workers' reactions to a major offensive

That was also the period when you could see a progressive detachment of the political vanguards from the trade union organisations, as regards the real processes of transformation taking place in the factory. For almost 5 years the union was on a sort of retainer-fee, no longer matching the real balance of power between capital and labour-power within the process of production. This was a period in which FIAT was used by the employers more as a means for the enlarged reproduction of political mediation (and social consensus) rather than as a means of production of commodities, and it was clear that the union was able to survive, as a shadow, a fetishistic form of a hypostatized "workers' power". But it was also clear that, as the class composition which had made up the material and social base of that model of the union broke up, so the moment was approaching in which the boss aimed to settle a few scores.

[INSERT PICTURE – CARTOON]

And, of course, FIAT moved to this settlement of scores at a moment favourable to itself – when they held all the best cards: a government which was in a state of disarray (between Cossiga and Forlani); tensions at the economic level (the question of devaluation, and the agreement between Nissan and Alfa Romeo); tricky balancings going on within the Communist Party (between Napolitano and Berlinguer), and between the Communist Party and the Left; the restructuring taking place in the means of mass communication – the new law on the financing of newspapers, etc; an international situation which was "critical"; and, above all, the moment of the most extreme decomposition and fragmentation of the class, and the separation between the political behaviour of the class and its functioning within production.

The result was that when FIAT decided to strike their blow, the political leadership in the factory – that broad span of militants who had been formed politically in the struggles of the last ten years, that "vanguard" which was now

tight and compact in the face of FIAT's frontal attack – found itself completely wrong-footed in relation to the new reality of the production process. These vanguards were thrown; they found themselves in a state of disarray and disaggregation by virtue of the technological reorganisation, outflanked by the redefinition of political relationships in the plant. All they had left was to try, now, to defend themselves in a last-ditch stand against the “direction of history”; because in reality, those tens of thousands of comrades grouped around the factory gates were defending nothing more or less than their (and our) “culture” – that mixture of values and life-rules, of memories and certainties that had made up the soul and the identity of the workers' movement for the past 50 years, and which was now tending to be dissolved and marginalised by the new advance in technology, by the transformation of the social relations of production, by the new form of the “political” – in short, by “progress”.

Perhaps the ambiguity of our own position derives from this ambiguous relationship with “progress”. Because we knew all this, and yet despite the sense of inevitability of events, despite our understanding of the frightening structural weakness of this struggle (its tragic “paradoxical” nature), we maintained right to the end a desperate hope that the affair might turn out somehow different, if we willed it strongly enough. And this attitude was held at a mass level.

Perhaps because it was partially detached from its root-soil in the world of production, because it was the expression and synthesis of a “culture”, the battle of this “heroic minority” allowed its own principally ethical character to emerge. On the one hand stood FIAT, determined to intervene directly within the cultural composition of the working class, right down to questions of morality; on the other hand, the workers, the most conscious among them, determined to defend their own identity, their own class “tradition”. At stake was what I call the transition from an “ethic of solidarity” – the characteristic of working class morality over the past decade, with the prevalence of the collective point of view, together with an egalitarianism and a solidarity within people's individual behaviour – to an “ethic of survival”, of competitive individualism, which expresses the perverse logic of the market during periods of crisis: this competition between individuals, far from ensuring an optimised development, in fact becomes a “war of all against the rest”. An ethic which is larded with Darwinism – a kind of “productivist” Darwinism – as we have seen, in the systematic rooting-out of “weak”, handicapped and “unsuitable” sections of the workforce (including women) – and a paternalistic authoritarianism (workers are encouraged to compete with each other in order to remain in management's good books, and this reaches levels of virtual self-mutilation, in the sense of workers being scared to go sick.

We also see an atomisation, whereby each individual worker stands alone in the face of the company, and planned insecurity, resulting from the redundancy techniques employed. Perhaps we have been too involved in denouncing the political nature of this operation (the sacking of trade union militants, the sacking of insubordinate elements in the plant), and have under-emphasised the pre-political aspect, the vicious “productivism” and its implications at the level of the employers' “conception of the world” and of industrialist philosophy: virtually 70% of those sacked have been “worn-out labour power” – men who have been worn out by their years spent in the factory, and who are now treated as scrap.

[INSERT PICTURE – CARTOON]

We should have shouted from the roof-tops the fact that, after FIAT had signed on their 10,000 new starters in the past few years (fresh flesh to feed to their machines), they proceeded to sack over 15,000 older workers as part of their project of advanced rationalisation of their “human raw materials”, under which physiological (and more or less “biological”) efficiency was to be a crucial aspect of a worker’s compatibility within the new composition of capital. This was the real scandal, and was understood as such by the majority of workers. The most elementary respect for human rights was being thrown aside by FIAT management. In the name of dry calculations of efficiency, whole lives spent in the factory were being cast aside with a stroke of the pen.

The people of the picket lines

From the start this battle was clearly a matter of global totalisations, like any battle in which matters of principle are at stake. On the picket lines, two opposing “worlds of morality” confronted each other.

On the other hand, there were the “gate people” – the 10-15,000 men and women who, with courage and determination, lived, hoped and suffered every moment of those 35 days, bringing about a transformation in themselves and in the areas surrounding the factory: here, for a brief moment, they had constructed an “alternative society”, a “world-turned-upside-down”, with its own laws and symbols, languages and structures. The composition of this world was bizarre and improbable: it comprised a sort of compressed sandwich of each of the generations of workers that have come into the factory in the past 30 years, constructed in a sort of pyramid structure which summed up the whole gamut of political class composition.

At their head stood the workers from the 1950s – grey-haired, and imbued with a “resistance culture” that was formed in the hard years of the 1950s. They directed and organised the picket lines. They had undeniable political hegemony. Theirs was the language, the heritage of experience that allowed them to take a hard line, to organise themselves into a “war of position”. The struggle is perhaps one way of regaining your youth...

Next came the “mass worker” of the 1960s – a broad and effective operational structure, but politically fragile, uneasy in a terrain not of its own choosing. These workers provided the most solid links with the fabric of proletarian life in the city: via the intricate network of family relationships, via an extended network of channels, the news of the struggle reaches out to the population of the city. On Saturday and Sunday thousands of women and children, and family relations, besiege the Mirafiori plant, and take in its reality, and light fires around it on the picket lines. And you hear many different dialects...

Finally, at the bottom of the pyramid, are the “young ones”, the new starters. They are many, and active; but subordinate. The worker with curly hair and an ear-ring, the metropolitan worker who, a year ago, was so active during the road-blocks, has been forced to set aside his language, his ideology of mobility, his culture of casual working. He has to take on the viewpoint of the “others” – the older workers, the hard-liners, the ’46 generation who can remember the Resistance and the attempt on Togliatti’s life. This acceptance is the condition for their staying in the struggle, and it’s taken in good part. But when it is the

employers who attack you, who imposes “their” concept of mobility, “their” concept of casual working, even the most radical “refusal of the factory” becomes transformed into a “work ethic”.

Faced with this heterogeneous yet compact human totality, we have been forced to admit the schematic nature of our analyses, which sliced up the various strata of the workforce into “skilled workers”, “mass workers”, “social workers”, “diffuse workers” etc, without grasping the thousand subtle threads that interweave the fabric of the working class, which communicate the experience and language of the old, skilled sections to the raw young immigrant (transmitting a heritage of experience that has never been entirely subdued), or which permit the young metropolitan proletariat to go “beyond” work precisely because, in fact, the area behind the front line is well defended by a working class strength that has been moulded and formed in work...

Turning the factory world topsy-turvy

And at the same time we had to recognise how temporary and fragile was this unity which had been brought about by elements outside the material composition of the class – wholly and solely by the employer’s attack. We had to recognise how this unity was deaf to the colourful, articulate social language of the producing-class [*soggetti di produzione*]: the richness and variety of viewpoints, which had been seen clearly one year previously in the road-blocks of 1979, with its chaotic melée of voices, of women, young people, old people, their differences, their specificity... all this was levelled, became uniform, here, in this hard political language, in the homogeneity of this last stand... From out of this gelled, restricted composition, coiled and closed in on itself, no political autonomy emerged (nor could it have emerged), no capacity for political initiative independent of the all-absorbing terrain of negotiations, and no network of a mass leadership capable, in real terms, of acting on their own initiative.

Instead there emerged, with a force that was frightening, a radical instance at the level of ideas, an intransigent ethical stand, a rigorous existential commitment, virtually a challenge to their own political weakness.

[INSERT PICTURE – CARTOON]:

In September 1920, Piero Gobetti [1] wrote, in a letter from Turin: “Here we are in a state of revolution. I follow with sympathy the efforts of the workers, who really are building a new order... I feel that, gradually, the air is clearing and the ground being laid for the biggest battle of the century. And in that event my place will be on the side of those who have shown the greatest religious spirit, the greatest spirit of sacrifice...”

It seems incredible, but anyone who looked at the 1980 picket lines, not with the hasty glance of so many passing news-reporters, but “from within”, experienced once again, at sixty years’ distance, that same, embarrassing sense of respect in the face of a working class “religion”, which is also and at the same time a dignity and sense of history, an ethical rigour and finalism, an autonomy and awareness of the value of one’s own life, of one’s own non-indifference, of one’s

“expendability”. The strait-jacketed, serialised, massified worker of the workplace was expressing here, on the doorstep of the factory, his own autonomous individuality – a subjective dimension nonetheless still immanent to objectivised labour – making the “work ethic” subordinate to a radical instance of transcendence of the present state of things. The workers were reclaiming their image as “producers”, against an employer who wanted to deny it, and, precisely for this reason, they were liberating its individualising instance, that instance which is subversive of the standardised order of the production cycle; they were turning topsy-turvy the world of factory values and hierarchies, the world of norms and powers. “What are you going to tell the kids tonight?”

The march of the moderates: they came like sheep

“What will you tell your grandchildren in 20 years time?” they shouted at the foremen, at the scabs who were scrabbling over the perimeter wall. And it was not just words – it was a real antithesis, a total antithesis, of style, of custom, between those who believed that they could transcend their own present, deliberately “expending” themselves, and those who adhered to the most banal order of things; once again, to use a phrase of Castells, “between those who want to change life, and those who want to re-establish this dull noise of a traffic that is regulated on the basis of a daily rhythm of things which take place without actually happening”.

The rebellious individuality of the pickets found itself face to face with the mass of 20,000 foremen, middle management, white collar workers and the occasional blue collar worker. These were a social aggregate, defined in terms of their role in production, defined to the point where they virtually identify with work, with the “materiality of work”, with the very inert, raw material of production.

They came down like sheep, uniform and grey like the walls of a factory, with the dull noise of rolling pebbles, of muted whisperings, of dragging footsteps, the sort of noise that comes from a waiting crowd, or from a funeral... they slowly filled the centre of the city... no symbols, no colour, no banners... They were a piece of the factory, transferred into the city, a subjective expression of labour without subjectivity.

And yet they were the victors, the prime movers of the battle. Because the miraculous has happened: the “man of no qualities”, the atomised, serialised, homogenised factor of production par excellence had formed into an aggregate, had taken on a collective dimension, a vitality of his own. He had mobilised. This was the first time in Italy – and perhaps also in Europe – that capital had directly organised an anti-working-class mass, unified at the level of support for management, and cemented via an ideology of work. Here we are not talking about that mass of petty bourgeois whom Gramsci describes in “The Monkey People”, nor of the humanistic middle bourgeoisie that Salvatorelli described in his “National-Fascism” as the social base of the nascent reactionary dictatorships. This newly-composed human and political reality which has come to the forefront in the Savoyan heart of Turin bears more similarity to the “middle technical class” whose anti-workerism G. Ansaldo had described in the 1920s, and whom Musil had savaged: men “who never talk of anything other than their job... men who, if they talk of anything else, talk of it in a special way, stiff and external, with no correlation, swallowing it no further than their epiglotts... men tightly tied to their drawing tables, lovers of their own profession... But if you suggest to them that they apply the boldness of their thoughts to themselves, instead of to their machines, it would be like asking them to use a hammer in the same way as a murderer would use it; [men] accustomed to resolving their own

problems via the slide rule, which is a little symbol which they carry in their waistcoat pocket, a hard, white line across their hearts.”

This, then, was not a matter of some social stratum external to the relations and the apparatus of production, marginal and therefore crushed between the opposing forces of capital and labour – like the small urban bourgeoisie who gathered in the streets in the 1920s and 1930s. This was rather a direct part of that apparatus, a significant component of the technical organisation of its cycle of production, which was rediscovering its identity precisely in its function within production.

In part it was the command structure of the factory: that social area which has distanced itself from manual labour, and whose “skill” content consists of the ability to exercise “domination”; people who can present themselves as indispensable to the ability to organise production, and who can take pleasure in the exercise of a power which, albeit delegated, has wide powers of discretion. (“These people aren’t after the ‘right to work’, but the right to make us work”, as one worker put it, during a demonstration). This social area gathers around itself a huge, inert stratum of office workers, for whom the division of manual and intellectual labour has meant only their emancipation from the materiality of work; for them work has become abstract to a high degree; it has been reduced to mere acceptance of dependence and hierarchical inferiority.

In fact, the “organisational principle” of the way they were mobilised was precisely, the “hierarchy”. Their means of communication (being so “modern” and “private”, it could hardly be otherwise) was the telephone. Rather than moving in the usual “cordon” pattern of workers’ demonstrations – the rectilinear lines – this demonstration moved along as a series of circular areas. It was apparently confusion, but in fact reproduced ordered chains of hierarchy: the organisational schemas of the office and the shop floor. At the centre was the office or section foreman; then, in decreasing levels of power, the other workers, as the outer rings of the circle – the deputy foremen, the blue-eyed workers, the end-points of a long series of links, bonds, pressures and loyalties.

Deep structural processes of change

At the ethical level there is no doubt: those 20,000 represented the “synthesis of our antithesis”. They are characterised by an uncertain rejection of history as “responsibility”; a mechanical belief in hierarchy as a biological fact; a philosophy of “large inertias” which confines subjectivity within the realm of detail. A materialistic and non-dialectical conception of the world allows them to see themselves as the silent, secular wing of a destiny that is sculpted in the unchangeable laws of the universe (i.e. the technical requirements of the economy, or, rather, of company profitability). “There are economic laws which, when broken, have brought about wars, revolutions and catastrophe”, proclaimed Luigi Arisio, [2] outlining the basis elements of this new technocratic credo which reduces history to nature and ethics to technique; this dogma of compatibility and this cult of inert averageness from which they draw a collective strength which is inversely proportional to their lack of individual autonomy.

But what do they represent at the political level? What has been the mechanism that has created this social aggregate? What is it called?

They have been defined as a “component of the labour movement”, a symptom of its break-up; the reasons for their mobilisation have been sought in the forms of struggle adopted by the workers – in particular the “hard-line picketing”. It is

certainly true that the motive for their unleashing has to be sought within the events of this 35-day confrontation. But the basic reasons for this process of activation and aggregation of the “factory tertiary sector”, this “command structure”, have to be sought far beyond contingent factors; their roots are to be found in the very deep structural processes that have developed in recent years at the level of the technological and social organisation of the labour cycle.

The technological assault on white collar workers

The incorporation of electronic technology and the use of computers has been particularly widespread in the auto sector in the past 5 years, transferring part of the functions of command and control from men to machines. This has tended to render increasingly obsolete and worn-out the old figure of the “foreman”. The foreman had a central role under Taylorism, where the mechanical rigidity of the productive apparatus (the long assembly line) required a violent constraint capable of incorporating the varied, unshaped and individualised mass of living labour within the static uniformity of fixed capital. But with the emergence of a new philosophy of production (certainly more “soft”, more flexible, but nonetheless insidious) the foreman has seen his centrality slowly diminishing.

In the new organisation of production, dominated by electronics, the “intelligent machine” is able to recognise the “differentness” (both of product and producer), and is able to reduce this to a mere symbol, and incorporate it and make it functional to the cycle, thereby stripping the foreman of his traditional function as an authority capable of guaranteeing productive normality. Nowadays the worker who slows down production on the assembly line no longer paralyses the entire factory cycle, no longer makes it impossible for the sections upstream and downstream to continue working; he is simply bypassed, outflanked and “nullified” within a system that is no longer linear. Furthermore, it has become virtually impossible for a labour force that is clearly marginalised in relation to the principle lines of the production cycle, to block the unstoppable productive rhythm of the Robogate.

The other aspect of the monitored assembly line relates to the chain of command. On this line each work station has a computer terminal designed to register when an operation is completed, and transmit this to the central computer, which then decides, in real time, and synchronises all the interventions necessary (technical stoppages, replacement of tools, material supplies etc). This tends to strip the previous factory hierarchy of that remaining “professional” component which had survived in the Taylorist factory – namely transmitting information and taking decisions.

[...]

From this derives, on the one hand, the need for new forms of legitimisation of the hierarchy, external to the pure logic of production (and thus purely “political” in nature), and at the same time, the reproduction at the psychological and behavioural level of a widespread insecurity. And it was probably precisely this sense of widespread insecurity, linked to a more or less conscious awareness of the crisis of their own role (obvious among the foreman strata, but also present among the white collar workers, where mechanisation and automation are going to have a far more dramatic effect than among manual workers), which was the determining factor in activating them; and in this regard, the forms of manual workers’ struggles have probably had a simple catalysing effect.

Contrary to the manual working class (which, faced with the erosion of their own identity due to technological innovation, have thus far responded via forms of conflict), this extended “technostructure” has reacted by playing on “one big family” rather than on negotiation. They have proposed to management a sort of surrender treaty, whereby they would offer loyalty in exchange for security. This is the deeper meaning of their street demonstration on October 14th: a frightened mass sees its own role being eliminated, sees its jobs being threatened; it offers management an alliance, a political support in the confrontation with the workers, and hopes to achieve, in exchange for this total loyalty, a respect for its own status; it hopes that management will decide not to carry to its logical extremes the process of rationalisation.

An offer of a temporary alliance

Now, on the other hand, a renewed role for the “foreman” figure can only pass via its re-legitimation (principally political, rather than merely technical) by the employer (with a consequent re-manning of command, which is now posed as mere exhibition of power); and on the other, the “respect” of the white collar mass implies the employer recognising a relative “rigidity” of this sector of labour-power, now absorbed – within the environment of a factory that has been restructured along lines of flexibility – into the ranks of a “politically protected area”...

If this offer of an alliance is accepted by the management (and there is nothing to show that it won't be), it would probably mean a slowing-down of the process of technological innovation and restructuring which, if carried to extremes, would by now have been due to strike at this “tertiary” sector. It is possible that we shall see a decision not to speed-up, rationalise and make functional to development, this sector which, in many respects, has become elephantine; and thus the non-application of criteria of efficiency and productivity among non-manual workers; and the slowing-down of the application of widespread labour-saving technologies compared with the past 5 years. This would probably necessitate the shortfall in the reduction of costs being offloaded onto living labour; therefore productivity and material-saving would possibly be sought – in a tradition by now familiar at FIAT – via a super-exploitation, pure and simple, of the manual workforce.

It is in this sense that the “grey movement” that has, for the first time, shown itself in the streets of Turin during these last few days, is *materially and structurally anti-worker*.

Marco Revelli

Notes

This article was translated by Red Notes with the intention of including it in a forthcoming book – ‘The Book of FIAT’ – which contains extensive material on FIAT workers' struggles from 1900 to the present. The book has a substantial section on the 1980 redundancy struggle.

1. See “The capitalist use of machinery: Marx versus the objectivists”, and “Surplus value and planning: notes on the reading of *Capital*”. [REFERENCE?]

2. Piero Gobetti was a radical Liberal supporter of the workers' council movement in the 1920s. He was clubbed to death by fascists in 1925.

3. Luigi Arisio was the self appointed leader of the “silent majority” of FIAT managers and moderates that marched through Turin on 14 October 1980.

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