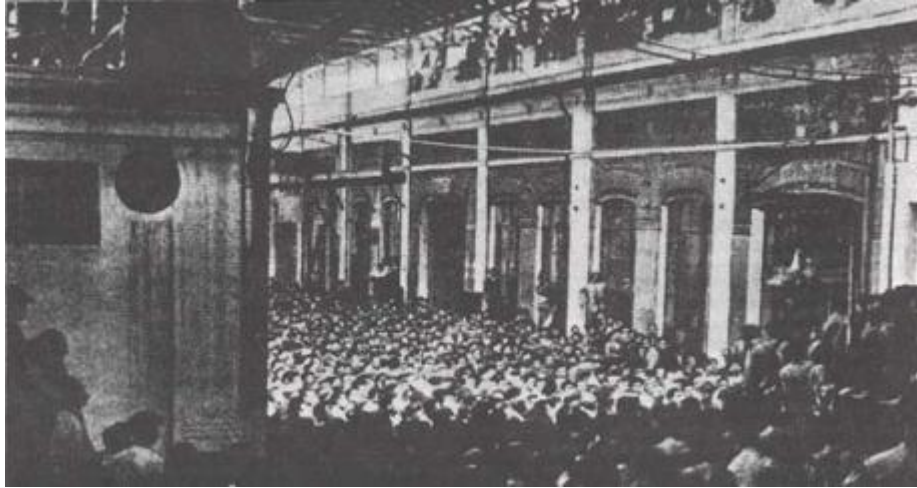


1918-1921: The Italian factory occupations and Biennio Rosso



A brief history of the Italian Biennio Rosso (two red years) and the mass factory occupations of 1920 where half a million workers ran their workplaces for themselves.

The reformist unions then negotiated an end to the conflicts, clearing the path for the fascist reaction - the Biennio Nero (two black years) of 1921-22.

After the First World War, Europe's working class went on a massive radicalisation process. Union membership exploded with strikes, demonstrations and uprisings increasing with it. Italy was no exception. Its workers were angry with the fall-out from the war and were getting increasingly militant. A perfect example of this can be found in the factory occupations of 1920.

The development of radical unionism in Italy started just after the war. In Turin, and all across Italy, a rank 'n' file workers' movement was growing which was based around 'internal commissions'. These were based on a group of people in a workshop with a mandated and recallable shop steward for every 15-20 workers. The shop stewards in one factory would then elect their 'internal commission' which was recallable to them. This was known as the 'factory council'.

By November 1918, these commissions had become a national issue within the trade union movement and by February 1919, the Italian Federation of Metal Workers (FIOM) won a contract to allow the commissions in their workplaces. They then tried to transform these commissions into councils with a managerial function. By May 1919, they "were becoming the dominant force within the metalworking industry and the unions were in danger of becoming marginal administrative units." (Carl Levy, Gramsci and the Anarchists) Though these developments happened largely in Turin, this militancy swept Italy with peasants and workers seizing factories and land. In Liguria, after a breakdown in pay talks, metal and shipbuilding workers occupied and ran their plants for four days.

During this period, the Italian Syndicalist Union (USI) grew to 800,000 members and the influence of the Italian Anarchist Union (20,000 members plus Umanita Nova, its daily

paper) grew accordingly. Welsh Marxist, Gwyn Williams says clearly in his book *Proletarian Order* that the “Anarchists and revolutionary syndicalists were the most consistently...revolutionary group on the left...The syndicalists above all captured militant working-class opinion which the socialist movement was utterly failing to capture.” Anarchists were the first to suggest occupying workplaces. Famous anarchist [Errico Malatesta](#) wrote in *Umanita Nova* in March 1920 “General strikes of protest no longer upset anyone... We put forward an idea: take-over of factories...the method certainly has a future, because it corresponds to the ultimate ends of the workers’ movement”. The same month, during a syndicalist campaign to establish councils in Milan, [the secretary of the USI] also called for mass factory occupations and was soon followed by the Factory Council Commissars.

Obviously, this militancy was going to provoke a reaction from the bosses. Bosses organisations denounced factory councils for encouraging “indiscipline” amongst workers and asked the government to intervene. The state backed the bosses (surprised?) who began to enforce existing industrial regulations. The contract won by the FIOM in 1919 meant that internal commissions were banned from shop floors and restricted to non-working hours. As such, stopping work to hold shop steward elections (amongst other things) was in violation of contract. The movement was only kept alive through mass disobedience and the bosses used stricter factory controls to combat them.

The big showdown, however, was in April. When several shop stewards were sacked at Fiat, the workers staged a sit-in strike. The bosses responded with a lockout which the government supported by deploying troops and placing mounted machine gun posts outside the factory. After two weeks on strike, the workers decided to surrender. The employers then responded with the demands that the FIOM contract should be re-imposed along with managerial control. These demands were aimed at destroying the factory council system and the workers of Turin responded with a general strike in defence of it. The strike was solid in Turin and even spread to Piedmont, involving 500,000 workers at its height. The Turin workers called for the CGL trade union and the Socialist Party (PSI) to help them spread the strike nationally. Both the CGL and PSI rejected the call. The anarcho-syndicalist influenced unions “were the only ones to move.” (Williams, *Proletarian Order*) Railway workers in Pisa and Florence refused to transport troops to Turin. Dock workers, and other industries which the USI had influence, held strike round Genoa. Williams notes that though “abandoned by the whole socialist movement,” the Turin strikers “still found popular support” with “actions... either directly led or indirectly inspired by anarcho-syndicalists.” And in Turin, the anarcho-syndicalists were threatening to make Gramsci and co. an irrelevance within the council movement.

Eventually the CGL leadership settled the strike on the employers’ terms i.e. limiting the shop stewards’ councils to non-working hours. The anarchists “criticised what they believed was a false sense of discipline that had bound socialists to their own cowardly leadership. They contrasted the discipline that placed every movement under the ‘calculations, fears, mistakes and possible betrayals of the leaders’ to the other discipline of the workers of Sestri Ponente who struck in solidarity with Turin, the discipline of the railway workers who refused to transport security forces to Turin and the anarchists and members of the *Unione Sindacale* who forgot considerations of party and sect to put themselves at the disposition of the Torinesi.” (Carl Levy, *Gramsci and the Anarchists*)

Responding to wage cuts and lockouts, September saw massive stay-in strikes. In mid-August, USI called for co-operation with the CGL to occupy the factories before they were locked out. The USI saw these occupations as being critical to the workers' struggle which must be defended by any means necessary and called for support from other industries. Strikes quickly spread to engineering factories, railways and road transport with peasants seizing land. As well as occupy, strikers placed them under workers' control and soon 500,000 strikers were producing for themselves. Self-managed factories continued to pay workers' wages and there were armed patrols to protect against attack. Self-managed factories established close solidarity with produce being pooled and shared out by the workers. Italy was "paralysed, with half a million workers occupying their factories and raising red and black flags over them." The movement spread up and down Italy with USI militants at the forefront. Railway workers again refused to transport troops, peasants occupied land and workers went on strike against the orders of reformist unions.

But after over a month, the workers were once again betrayed by the PSI and the CGL. They opposed the movement and promised the state a return to 'normality' in exchange for legalised workers' control alongside the bosses. Of course, the workers' control never materialised.

Because the workers still relied on the CGL bureaucrats for information on what was going on in other cities, they were never able to be fully independent. As such, the union used this power to isolate factories from each other. Though the anarchists opposed the return to work, they were still a minority (a large minority, but a minority nonetheless) and without CGL backing, they were unable to extend the strike.

After the workers left the factories, the government arrested prominent members of the USI and UAI. The socialists ignored this persecution of libertarian activists and continued to until spring 1921 when anarchists, including Malatesta, began a hunger strike from inside prison.

With workers' militancy dampened, big businesses turned en masse to the fascist movement to comprehensively crush the powerful working class, which they did temporarily, but not without meeting [stiff resistance](#).