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**1962-1973: Worker and  
student struggles in  
Italy**

Rising from a period of centre-left coalition that had been marked by a constant failure to bring promised reforms to Italian society, the struggles of the 1960s acted as a pressure gauge for many sections of the Italian working class, one which was to reach its climax during the mass strikes of 1968-1970. Workers had voted en masse in the 1958 elections to bring the moderate left parties to power, and, feeling the failure to achieve reform and often left abandoned by the trade unions, workers were compelled to launch their own struggles to alleviate their situation, independent of parties and unions. Aided by the radicalising effect of an interlapping of the university and factory, a level of militancy unparalleled in Italy for decades emerged.

At the forefront of the need for upheaval was the university, representing for many one of the most archaic institutions in Italy. Compulsory secondary education up to the age of fourteen had been introduced in 1962, and with it many students decided to continue their education up to university level. Thousands flocked into universities, and the student population increased by over 180,000 between 1960 and 1968. Having not been reformed since 1923 and already strained before 1962, the antiquated Italian university was left absolutely ill-

prepared to deal with such a massive sudden influx of new students.

The role of teachers was, on the whole, taken by local professionals who still worked full-time. Required only to provide 52 hours of teaching a year, levels of absenteeism were extremely high, and more often than not students were left to teach themselves. Exams were mostly oral, which provided for an extremely subjective and uncontrollable evaluation system. While students who failed exams were not required to leave the university, drop-out rates soared and by 1968 had reached over 50%. Hardest hit by the nature of the universities were students from working class backgrounds whose families could not afford to pay fees. Often having to work two jobs to keep themselves in education, many 'worker-students' found it impossible to attend regular lectures, and made up the great majority of those dropping out.

The winter of 1967-68 saw a series of rebellions break out in northern universities. Sparked by protests against fee increases and plans put forward by the Minister of Education to reintroduce restricted entry to university education, universities in Milan, Turin and Trento were occupied by students. By early February the occupations had spread out into the provinces and involved dozens of

universities, as well as some secondary schools. Similar to events that were to seize French universities several months later, mass assemblies run along directly democratic lines were set up to coordinate the takeovers.

The occupations were short lived, and by late February the great majority had drawn to a close as police forcefully evicted students from universities across the country. The last occupation was of the faculty of architecture at the Sapienza University of Rome, which was eventually evicted on the 29th. A mass meeting was held by students in the Piazza di Spagna on March 1 and it was resolved that the university should be recaptured. As 4,000 students descended on police, an outright battle ensued. Hundreds of injuries were sustained on both sides, and after repeated baton charges by police the students were forced to pull back. The 'Battle of Valle Giulia', as it came to be known, marked a watershed in the student movement and was the last major event of the winter occupations.

Many prominent politicians and trade union leaders in the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and its union, the Italian General Confederation of Labour (CGIL), were quick to condemn the student movement. Attacking it through their press and attempting to sideline it as

'extremist', this attitude more than likely stemmed from the lack of control the party had been able to exercise over events. PCI members in the universities had been ignored during the occupations, and any attempt to channel the struggle along party lines was met with outright hostility. Accustomed to being firmly in the driving seat of any social movement that had sprung up since the war, the PCI viewed the students movement as a direct threat to its social role.

The early 60s had seen massive agitation in northern factories, reaching a climax in 1962 with two important strikes in Turin. At the beginning of the year workers at the Lancia factory had walked out, demanding an extra third weeks paid holiday and an end to short-term working contracts. The strike was eventually won after a struggle of several weeks and the support of the local population, some of whom had managed to bring their workplaces out in sympathy. A strike at the Michelin factory around the same time had less success, ending after 90 days of often violent scenes at the factory gates.

The success of a large strike in Turin was very much dependent on the 93,000-strong FIAT workforce, and the recent record of strikes in the factory was not a good one. Eleven strikes had occurred in different shops in the FIAT factory in 1959, none of which had been successful.

So when a national walkout was called in June 1962 in support of striking metalworkers, the first port of call for many strikers was the gates of FIAT. Thousands of strikers gathered on the morning of the 13th and watched as every worker clocked in. This continued for nine days, until 7,000 workers at FIAT decided to walk out, and were soon followed by 60,000 more.

Following two weeks of struggle, it was announced that a deal had been struck between management and the FIAT company union ensuring a return to work. Angered by the lack of consultation and unfavorable terms of the deal, thousands of workers immediately descended on the union headquarters in the Piazza Statuto. Met by thick lines of police, the Piazza was soon turned into a virtual battleground as workers fought running battles with police. The fighting lasted for nearly three days, during which time workers armed themselves with sticks and slings to defend against repeated police attacks.

The large influx of southern migrants that the north had seen during the 50s and early 60s can partly be attributed to this upsurge in struggle, and can explain the pre-1962 reluctance of FIAT workers to join strikes.

Hundreds of thousands of southerners were flowing into the north every year, and the presence of newly-arrived migrants on the shop-floor, many of whom had been

involved in the great peasant movements of the south since the war, could do nothing but have a destabilising effect on the factories. FIAT management remained cautious of this effect and in 1962, unlike the majority of factories in the north, FIAT employed only a small number of southerners.

Owing to technological advances and a major boom in the Italian economy, mechanisation increased dramatically during the mid-60s. These changes affected mostly the younger, unskilled workers, and went hand in hand with a general increase of piece-work in the factories, leading to increased powers for foremen in charge of job allocations.

Union representatives were generally uninterested in the complaints of unskilled workers regarding these changes, and far from enthusiastic about the prospect of creating conflict in the factory because of them. Union internal commissions, mostly in the hands of older, skilled workers unaffected by the changes, remained aloof to the needs of younger workers. In doing this, shop-floor union representatives were unwittingly creating a consciousness amongst younger workers that the only way their problems could be solved was through activity independent of the unions.

With the increase in the availability of further education, thousands of young workers were experiencing the radicalising effect of the universities, and many brought this fresh perspective on their situation back to the factories once their education had finished. This new awareness, coupled with the changing needs of workers in the factories was soon to find expression in the many revolutionary groups that would penetrate the factories and take class struggle in the northern industrial belt to its height. These conditions in the factories perpetuated throughout the mid-60s, until, in 1968, unrest in the northern factories exploded into mass struggle.

Early 1968 saw a series of strikes erupt in northern factories. Initially confined to plants in periphery areas where union influence was minimal, the strikes soon broke out into the cities and came to involve hundreds of thousands of workers. It was during this period that many workers also began to experiment with new forms of struggle, a sign of the influence that newly formed revolutionary groups had begun to exercise in the factories. These methods came to find expression in strikes right through to the autumn of 1969 and well into the 1970s.

The events in France in May 1968 exercised a profound influence on many Italian workers, especially amongst the volatile younger generation. Finding particular resonance in their own experiences with the struggle of the French workers against their trade union bureaucracy, the May events had a radicalising effect on the workforce of many northern factories. Whilst the strikes and occupations in France confirmed too many Italian workers that struggle was most effective when directly controlled by those involved, large sections of the student movement drew conclusions from France that formed a complete antithesis to this logic.

Blaming a lack of effective political leadership, the focus for much of the student movement shifted from the directly democratic structures of the earlier occupation movement to an emphasis on the importance of centralised revolutionary groups. While still chastising the French Communist Party, and hence, its sister organisation the PCI, because of its 'failures' during the May events, a great deal of the newly formed student groups were to emulate many of the party's internal trappings whilst maintaining to be more authentically revolutionary.

Revolutionary groups sprang up across the country throughout the summer of 1968, and many began to join

striking workers on picket lines. This presence, aided by the interlapping of factory and university provided by the "worker-students" led to many groups being able to exert considerable influence in the factories, in some cases even completely supplanting existing shop-floor union organisations. Amongst the most successful were Potere Operaio (Workers Power) and Avanguardia Operaia (Workers Vanguard). While many of these groups operated in a hierarchical manner, the radicalising influence they exercised on the factories influenced many workers to completely reject the unions during disputes and rely on their own capacity for organisation. A typical example of this occurred at the Pirelli Bicocca factory in Milan.

In early 1968 management had decided on a review of contracts in the factory, which saw unions call three days of strikes for higher wages. The strikes, however, never came off, as the unions had accepted a weak pay increase from management soon after entering negotiations. Not prepared to accept a deal, workers at Pirelli Bicocca organised the Comitato Unitario di Base (CUB, United Base Committee), to continue the fight for higher wages independently of the unions. Formed on the initiative of unskilled and office workers, the CUB held regular mass meetings in the plant during which the

unions were denounced for their collaboration with employers. After several strikes and partial stoppages organised by the CUB, workers eventually won their desired increase.

The success of the CUB resonated throughout Milan and through the summer of 1968 base committees were formed at factories across the city. Soon spreading out to the other cities that make up the industrial triangle of northern Italy, Turin and Genoa, they also struck lasting roots in outlying industrial areas. The formation of a base committee in a factory was often followed by a strike; and following the massive popularity of the committees, these struggles became linked together by common demands in a massive wave of industrial action that swept the north in late 1968.

Beginning as a series of strikes aimed at increasing wages, many participating factories soon began to link their demands to include calls for reduced wage differentials on the shop-floor, improvements to conditions, and, giving the strikes a national character, increases in pay for workers in the south, many of whom often received up to a third less pay for doing the same job as a northern worker. Several strikes supporting these demands took place in the south, and, sensing the

widespread enthusiasm for achieving them, the usually stoic trade unions adopted them as their own.

It was during this period that unrest at FIAT again flared up. Following a series of wildcat strikes for higher wages initiated by plant base committees, a one-day general strike of all FIAT workers in Turin was called by the unions in early July. With many regarding the strike as a token gesture from the unions, workers and base committees organised a march in support of their demands on July 3. The march began in early morning as thousands of workers set off from the Mirafiori plant shouting; "What do we want? Everything!" Joined by trade union officials carrying banners asking the government for reductions to the cost of living, the contrast between militant FIAT workers and the cautious trade officials could not have been more stark. Closely followed by police, the march soon turned violent. Echoing events of 1962, workers built barricades along the Corso Traiano and fought well into the next day. Mass assemblies were held during the next week, and strikes continued to be a common feature at FIAT plants throughout the year.

Most of the strikes of 1968 began as wildcats, even if unions were eventually forced to recognise them to save

face, and a great proportion, especially those with base committees present, were run along directly democratic lines. In line with this logic, the idea of delegating responsibility to union officials was thoroughly rejected. As well as the formation of base committees in many factories, the strikes saw use of several other new forms of struggle. 'Hiccup' strikes, the idea of alternating intermittently between stoppages and work were used for the first time, as were 'chessboard' strikes, where different sections of the factory stop work at different times.

Strikes continued throughout 1969 and eventually came to a head during the autumn of that year. Kick-started by a massive strike of metalworkers throughout the country to back up their demands for a new contract, the "Hot Autumn" saw over one and a half million workers on strike at one time or another. However, the autumn strikes not only saw the culmination of the struggles of previous years, but a new sense of awareness within union ranks of how to reclaim their influence in the workplace. Coupled with political maneuvering by union leaders, this eventually led to the large-scale recuperation of the factory struggle by the unions, and the beginning of the eclipse of the autonomous workers movement in Italy.

Realising the effectiveness of co-opting strikes back into traditional union channels instead of pursuing a course of outright hostility to worker demands in the factories, the idea of "riding the tiger" of worker militancy was used by unions to bring workers back to the union fold. The "extremist" demands of yesteryear were now presented as the official union line.

Unions began to distance themselves from the political parties they adhered to, which, after twenty years of governmental wrangling and failed coalitions, had proven themselves utterly ineffective at reinforcing working class demands. In contrast to which, the trade unions, although discredited, still held a semblance of loyalty from many workers. This was fully recognised, and claiming some degree of autonomy, real or not, from the parties was integral to increasing confidence in the unions in the eyes of workers. Significantly, the CGIL, although still deeply interconnected with the PCI at every level, announced that it no longer needed party consultation on factory matters. Similar steps were taken by other unions. By presenting themselves as committed to militant struggle and tactics, the unions succeeded in bringing hundreds of thousands of workers out on union-called strikes during the autumn, and eventually, in

pressuring employers enough to win a new "national contract" in December 1969.

The national contract included the forty hour week, equal wage increases for all, the right of trade unions to organise assemblies during the workday, and increased pay for apprentices. Their influence greatly reduced, the revolutionary groups which had exercised such power in the factories over the previous years could do nothing but hark of a "sell-out" from the sidelines.

Strikes continued throughout the early 70s, and following successful action by chemical and building workers the struggle for improved conditions and trade union representation flowed out of the manufacturing sector and into areas less famed for their workplace militancy. Civil servants, hospital workers, postmen, bar workers, hotel workers and shop workers all launched into successful strikes of their own. Greater emphasis on shop-floor agreements as opposed to national agreements found particular resonance with workers, who saw themselves as having greater control over their workplaces than before. This was topped off by the introduction of "workplace councils", to which delegates were elected by workers. Greatly resisted by employers, the councils functioned, in trade union terms, to "increase workplace democracy", and, "elaborate the

trade union strategy". The revolutionary groups also opposed the workplace councils, on the basis that they would act as a stopper on militant struggle.

1973 saw the greatest amount of workers on strike since 1969, over six million, and trade union membership increased rapidly throughout the early 70s. By 1975, membership of the two main unions had increased by over two and a half million in seven years. The year also saw a successful occupation of the FIAT Mirafiori plant in protest at the hardline approach employers had taken to the renewal of a metalworkers contract.

The militant struggles of the 60s and early 70s saw great material gains for the Italian working class. New forms of struggle employed and attempts at collective decision making in the factories had reaped great benefits, and made many Italian workers conscious of the power that can be wielded in the workplace. Still more significant for the Italian worker were the early attempts to break away from the confines of the shop-floor union. The formation of workplace groups, such as the base committees, which launched strikes independent of the unions, represented a real revolutionary alternative to reformism, one which could have gone far beyond the restrictive traditional demands of the unions. The recuperation of this movement in the factories represented a victory for the

trade unions over workers. By playing the part of the militant, union officials had succeeded in bringing workers back to the "traditional representatives of the working class", and in doing so, leading them back down the path of failed political reformism which has characterised Italian politics since the end of World War II.