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## Porto Marghera – the last firebrands

The title of the documentary has various meanings: the Italian word *fuoco* means 'fire', and also a 'shootout'. In this case, the word also means the flames of the petrochemical works that make the industrial zone visible from miles around. Its future is uncertain. The environmental damage that it has caused cannot be overlooked. The hundreds of deaths from cancer can never be undone. The most polluting parts of the industry have since been outsourced to East Asia, but Italy is still among the largest PVC producers.

In the film, the fire in the industrial wasteland where the illegal immigrants warm themselves is a symbol for the new class composition which has turned an emigration country into an immigration one.

But the phrase 'the last firebrands' also refers to the heat waves of class struggles that swept across this industrial zone in the 1950s, 60s and 70s; struggles that characterised the area and left a lasting impact upon it. Sometimes history takes a violent leap: in 1968 inexperienced peasants from the countryside were catapulted into the centre of the worldwide revolution. No working class had previously identified the factory as a trigger of fatal diseases and as a destroyer of life as clearly as they did in this struggle. The union expelled the organisers of the struggles. Those who were expelled found their own organisational forms. Porto Marghera's Autonomous Assembly in the early 1970s not only co-ordinated the struggles in the factories of the industrial zone, but also squatted houses, formed neighbourhood committees, organised price reductions in the supermarkets, and together with thousands of workers burned their electricity bills. The unions and the government could only react.

### **On the DVD you can find ...**

The film Porto Marghera – gli ultimi fuochi, created by Manuela Pellarin in 2004. It was filmed with funding from the Province of Venice, amongst others. It was first screened in Venice and was going to have been screened on *Arte TV*, but then nobody wanted to hear about the film any more. We saw it for the first time in January 2005 at a private screening and were excited because here, speaking in their own words, were the protagonists of the struggles of the 1950s to 70s: the workers.

The production company *ControCampo* was pleased that someone was interested in the film, and gave us the rights to it. So we can now give it out as a free addition to *Wildcat* subscribers. Because we could not afford to buy the rights to use the original music (Johnny Cash ..), we have completely re-done the film's soundtrack: the only music left from the original is the two songs by Gualtiero Bertelli, who accompanied the struggles with his guitar at the time.

We have subtitled the film in German, English, Spanish, Polish, Slovakian, Serbo-Croatian, Romanian, Russian and Turkish. The French subtitles were already there.

As an addition you can find on the DVD a **portrait of Augusto Finzi**, in which he gives a personal resume of his political activities. Manuela Pellarin made this new cut from the existing material and showed it at the presentation of the 'Augusto Finzi' workers archive. We subtitled it in German and English.

### **Precarious work, subcontractors, poisoning**

The old workers talk about the situation in the 1950s and 60s in the booming industrial zone and how they fought against it. The topics they mention are very relevant today:

- Precarious work with four week contracts was the rule in the shipyard.
- Similarly, subcontractors were very common, employing workers who came from far away, for low wages and under bad conditions. The workers from Porto Marghera led a huge, very militant strike against the subcontractors, demanding direct employment and equal treatment for all workers.
- The handling of highly toxic materials is not a matter of the past: right now (autumn

2006), the chemicals industry and the relevant unions are fighting hard against the introduction of a new EC directive for the chemical industry which includes a ban on the usage of toxic material if there is a possible replacement material.

The film juxtaposes various levels:

- The history of the workers struggle in the 1950s and 60s in the industrial zone.
- Environmental damage and disease through the industry.
- Discussions among young workers in 2002 about the closure of their department.
- The new composition of the workers through migration.

### **The hidden history**

Three of the workers interviewed were activists with the radical organisation *Potere Operatio* which aimed at the autonomous organisation of the working class and built up its own structures outside the unions. We have collated material about this on the following pages of this booklet.

At the end, we have reprinted an old text of the Porto Marghera *Workers' Committee* from 1970. You will need to have a little patience here to get used to the language, even more so because it is [a translation of] an old German translation, which copied the pompous Italian language of workerism.

In the following texts the word 'worker' is used without its feminine form [which exists in German], because in Porto Marghera even the office workers were men. If women worked there at all, it was in the canteen. In the Veneto in the 1960s and 70s, housewife status within marriage was still very common. The feminist current that also arose in Veneto outside and against *Potere Operatio* instigated the 'Wages for Housework' campaign as a demand for a political wage for reproductive work.

All the concepts or names printed in *blue and italics* can be found either in the list of people appearing in the film or in the glossary (sorted by topics, not alphabetically) at the end of this booklet. ■

## Presentation of the `Augusto Finzi' workers' archive

Marghera, 9 June 2006

*Until today very little has been documented about the story of the workers' struggle in the 1960s and 70s in Porto Marghera. The violent wave of repression after the 7 April 1979 which landed many comrades from the Workers' Committee in jail for years, also led to most of those involved gathering all the materials they had at home, burning them or hiding them somewhere – and forgetting them.*

*Augusto Finzi, an important organiser in the Petrochimico, donated his entire collection of material to the city council of Venice as the basis for a workers' archive shortly before his death from cancer in 2004. In the last two years, a few more old comrades met and founded the archive. They brought along their materials and recaptured some of the discussions from those times.*

On the 9 June 2006 the workers' archive is officially opened in the Marghera public library. Some of the original newspapers and leaflets are on display, many of which we have previously only heard about. Many of them were copied on a stencil duplicator, as was common in those days.

First the deputy mayor gives a speech, then a lefty sociologist who has written a book about the dangers of *Petrochimico*, then an archivist employed by the state, a young woman who had not been born when it was all happening: the occupation of the railway station, red flags in the trees, the burning barricades on the road dam to Venice.

A hundred people are sitting or standing around the library. One of the old workers interviewed in the documentary

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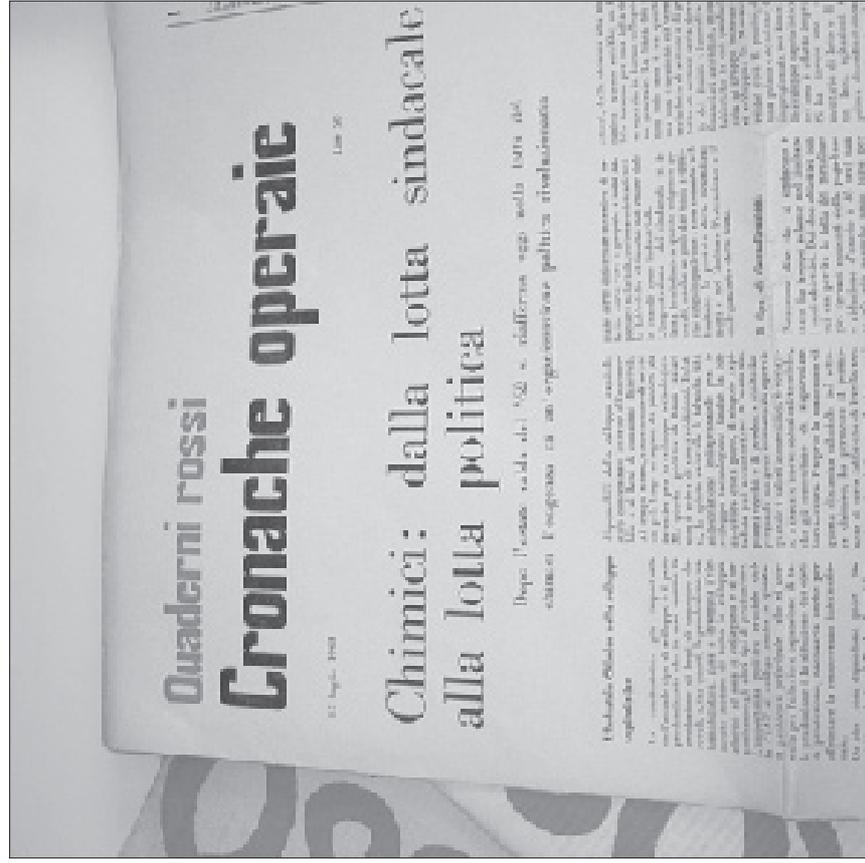
Porto Marghera – Gli ultimi fuochi, Italo Sbragì, gives a talk. He reads out a long presentation\* from his notes, recounting many names. It is gratifying to him today to sit here in this public library in commemoration of Augusto Finzi, who had to sit in jail for several years after the 1979 anti-terror assault in Italy. For him it is gratifying to recount the names of activists who founded this archive after the local press had libelled them so viciously during the late 1970s. And he still has to fight to ensure that their names are not drowned by those of all the professional supporters who decorate themselves with the exhibition and threaten to take it over.

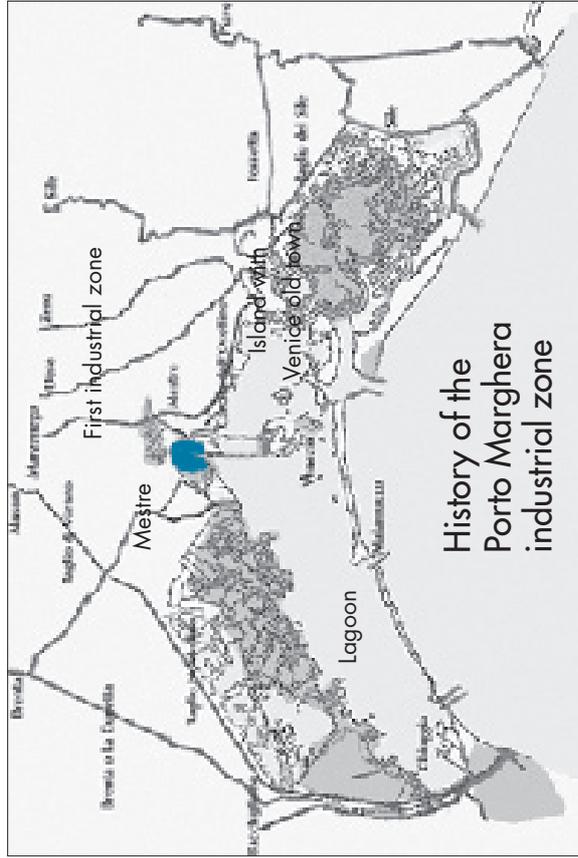
In the room, there are comrades in struggle and supporters and friends: a lawyer who had defended the workers on sick leave, who must be about 90 years old, and the filmmaker of the documentary who shows the newly cut interview with Augusto Finzi. Many of the comrades from those days had to look for some kind of source of income during the barren 1980s, in order to survive: they became travel agents or ran campsites, became reps for some product or other, left the country... Some still managed to

develop a career, while others struggled through for years selling homemade ecological jam.

There are only a few workers in the room. Workers' autonomy was not a church whose members join for life. The explosion of workers' rage in 1968 was spontaneous and momentary, says Finzi in the interview. Life-long political activism was no more of a goal than life-long factory work was. ■

\* A summarised translation of this talk can be found on page 33 of this booklet.





### History of the Porto Marghera industrial zone

Marghera (formally Venezia Porto Marghera) lies on the stretch of mainland within the Venice lagoon. The name comes from Venetian and actually means: where the sea was (Mar gh'era); it is dried up tideland.

### 1920s: The first industrial zone

The industrialisation of the Veneto region began very cautiously in the middle of the 19th century. The liberal ruling class of the region was strongly rooted in agriculture and distrustful of new industry. After 1848 there was a fear of large concentrations of proletarians.

As a result of this fear, although industry grew noticeably in the Veneto after the formation of the Italian state in 1866, it did not affect the region politically or socially very much. The factories were mostly situated along the railway lines, i.e. on the outskirts of the towns. The only large textile factory was in Schio, at the foot of the Alps, called *Lanerossi*. With 8,000 employees, it was the first factory anywhere in Italy and it was run in a semi-feudal manner. The railway bridge to Venice and a new trading port were built, but in contrast to other towns in the Mediterranean area there was no modern industrial zone until the early 1920s.

During the First World War, the industrialists of Venice decided to build an industrial zone in Marghera. So in 1917 a quarter of what was then the Territory of

The defeat of the rural proletariat in Veneto through the formation of the Italian state in 1866 resulted in an emigration wave. Encouraged by the local clergy, they migrated to South and North America and later Australia. The local powers only wanted them somewhere so far away that they would not come back and bring strange new ideas with them. The emigration should be final.

This began to change after 1936 when foreign workers were being recruited by Nazi Germany: In 1935 in the province of Padua alone there were 30,000 unemployed – out of a total population of 400,000.

In 1949-50 the Minister of Work and the local powers sent huge numbers of people over the ocean for the last time – from Friuli, which borders the Veneto. After the expulsion of the Italian population from Yugoslavia, 30,000 Italians migrated to Australia.

the Community of Mestre was expropriated (it became part of Venice in 1926) and given over to the *Società Porto Industria-le di Venezia*. This was supposed to fulfil three aims: an industrial port, the creation of an industrial zone and building a new residential area on the mainland in order to relieve the lagoon area.

During the 1920s and 30s the shipyards were the key industry. In the 1940s, during the war, 35,000 people were already employed there. Most of the workers in this first industrial zone came from the 'urban' working class of Venice, Mestre and Chioggia where there had been railways and shipyards since the 19th century. Here there were communist cores. During the war, the workers hid deserters and other refugees.

With the end of the Second World War the shipyard boom also came to an end, because the ship owners preferred to buy redundant American ships which had been mass produced in the previous years. Waves of redundancies and closures followed. In 1950 the workers at *Breda* successfully fought against the closure of that shipyard. After an armed police attack on workers, these organised a huge demo in Venice. The proletariat in Venice was left wing. The Communist Party (*PC*) was present in the factories, although without waving their political flags around. In the countryside however the Party was absent, rural Veneto was a 'white zone' dominated by the Catholic Church. The only way out of the poverty was to emi-

grate. In the early 1950s the Christian Democrats (*DC*) organised a congress which discussed the problems posed by emigration for the ruling class: If people went to Germany, France, or even Milan, and then came back, then they would want running water, a fridge, and at least a scooter here as well.

### 1950s:

#### The second industrial zone

The building of a second industrial zone was intended to secure control over the local proletariat: the construction of a modern chemical plant with an industrial port, the processing of minerals from Sardinia, shipyards etc. were intended to create work and curb emigration. Politically, this was a compromise between the Christian Democrats and the industrial alliance, above all with *Montecatini* and *Edison*, which was to set into motion a controlled development of Veneto – the workers were not to be infected by the disease of the agricultural workers in Emilia or the metal workers in Milan. Padua was also home to a large unit of *Celere* riot police, who had already been deployed against agricultural workers struggles in Ferrara.



The workers for the new factories in the second industrial zone were often recruited from far away villages where the church and the *DC* exercised total control. Many of them owned some land themselves, or farmed as sharecroppers. A recommendation by the village priest was a requirement for getting a job.

#### The Petrochimico

The petrochemical plant originally belonged to the electrical company *Edison*. Following the nationalisation of electricity production and the setting-up of *ENEL* in 1962-63, *Edison* bought *Montecatini* for the money the state had paid for its

town of Mestre without regard for any kind of urban planning, all the more so because the local council was busy concentrating on Venice old town. For a long time the periphery around Mestre was a dormitory town almost entirely without infrastructure.

Today, the islands of Venice have about 70,000 residents, steadily decreasing, while about 270,000 people live in Mestre-Marghera.

Today about 3,000 people work in *Petrolchimico* which refines crude oil and produces Phosgene and MVC. ■

electricity plants and changed its name to *Montedison*. The *Petrolchimico* started operating in 1951. The first departments were Chlorine Sodium Carbonate, TR1 (tetrachloroethylene production), AC2 (acetylene), CV1 (monomeric vinyl chloride – MVC), CV3 (polyvinyl chloride – PVC), and in 1959 the CV6 department. Later on, the plant also started producing sulphuric acid, fluoric acid etc.

The processing equipment at Marghera was initially a copy of the machinery used by *Monsanto* in Missouri and Tennessee. *Monsanto* also sold technically outdated patents to the Italians, outsourcing PVC and phosgene production to this country. In the USA at the time, phosgene was produced in the Arizona desert, whereas in Italy it was being produced two kilometres away from St. Mark's Square in Venice! The industrialisation of Italy took place with total disregard for the environment or workers' health.

In those years, the Porto Marghera *Petrolchimico* was one of the most important chemical complexes in Europe. It reached its largest expansion during the 1960s. The building boom of the 1960s and 70s allowed for the rampant growth of the

## Short Chronology

**1967** A few employees of *Petrolchimico* in Marghera found the group *Potere Operaio* (Workers' Power). They stand as candidates on the CGIL list for the *Commissione interna*, and win a majority. Contact with the student movement. First leaflets and the newspaper *Potere Operaio* – political newspaper of the workers of *Porto Marghera* are distributed.

**1968** February: Students occupy the architecture department in Venice. April: textile workers' strike in Valdagno. 1 August: strike in Porto Marghera for the production bonus with the demand of an additional L 5000 for everyone. Barricades and occupation of the Mestre railway station.

**1969** 'Hot autumn' in Turin. Struggles of the chemical and metal workers in Marghera. Formation of the workers' committee at *Ammi* and election into the newly formed factory council. December: new national collective wage agreement. The response of the right wing and the secret services: the *Strategy of tension*; the left is framed for the Piazza Fontana bombing in Milan.

**1970** The government passes the statute of workers rights. In Marghera the outsourcing to subcontractors slips out of the control of the companies and the peace-keeping out of the control of the political parties and unions. In August the whole of Marghera is shut down by street blockades and clashes with the police, who fire shots and wound some demonstrators.

**1971** In various towns in Italy, including Marghera, *Potere Operaio* and *Il Manifesto* jointly form the Political Committees (*Comitati Politici*), which only function for a few months. The workers' committees organises hard struggles at department level for the reduction of work time.

**1972** Workers' assemblies in *Petrolchimico* and *Châtillon* turn down the chemical workers' collective wage agreement. The 'autonomous assembly of Marghera' (*Assemblea Autonoma di Porto Marghera*) is formed. Its core is workers of the committees from *Petrolchimico* and *Ammi*, worker comrades from *Lotta Continua*, employees from *Petrolchimico* and *Châtillon* as well as metal workers from





## From reconstruction to the Hot Autumn – the class struggles in Italy 1968-1973

In the 1960s the development of industry in Italy lay far behind that of England, France or West Germany. The unions and the *PCI* were active in the partnership undertaking the reconstruction after the war. In the mid 1950s there was an economic miracle which mobilised huge numbers of proletarians to move from the countryside into the new factories. Despite the boom, unemployment in Italy remained high, therefore migration continued, not only from Southern Italy to Northern Italy (two million people between 1955 and 1965), but also to West Germany, France or Switzerland. There was a permanent oversupply of labour power and this was used to lower the wages. There were practically no state benefits for the unemployed.

After a long quiet phase, in 1962 there was the first massive class struggle of the new working class composition in the centres of development, especially in Turin. As an answer to the wage demands

of the workers, capital went into crisis. A deep recession put the breaks on the new struggles.

The next economic boom relied solely on the introduction of new exploitation methods of long work time and a lot of overtime. Work accidents increased sharply. The wages stayed far behind the drastic increase in work intensity.

From 1963 to 1967 the production rose by 26.7 percent, whereas the investment from 1963 to 65 was reduced by one third and the number of employees dropped by 5.3 percent.

The gross domestic product (GDP) of Italy rose by 64 percent in real terms from 1959-1968. Production per employee rose by 73 percent. Industry grew by 64 percent in real terms from 1959-1968 and thereby increased its share of the GDP from 6 to 47.6 percent.

The economic growth in the 1960s was to a large extent based on the expansion of state industries, mainly comprising raw

materials processing industry, iron and steel production, communication and transport (motorways). Private capital was mainly invested overseas – with the exception of the large family firms like *Fiat*, *Pirelli* or *Olivetti*, which expanded massively.

In the 1960s, there was a concentration of many large Italian corporations; the most important production areas were monopolised by a mere two dozen firms. The state had a stake in 11 of the 22 largest firms. The state holding companies *IRI* and *ENI* owned half of *Montedison*. This immediately brought a strong political element into the class confrontation.

However, in overall terms Italian industry was still characterised by small and medium-size companies. There were comparatively few workers in the large firms. The 24 largest concerns employed only 654,000 workers (blue and white collar) in 1996 (*Fiat* 128,000, *Montedison* 119,000 and *Pirelli* 67,000), which amounted to 10 percent of the Italian

working class. This explains many of the particularities of the class struggles in Italy, where the divide between the workers in large companies and those in small and medium size firms posed a significant problem. The wage difference between employees in large and small companies was significantly wider in Italy than the equivalent gap in Germany or France. Pensions were minimal. The wage zone meant lower wages were fixed in the poorer regions.

The migration to the cities had triggered a huge housing problem. There was no adequate health provision. The proportion of indirect tax was higher in Italy than anywhere else in Western Europe, and workers paid a disproportionate part of direct tax. White-collar and office workers enjoyed extensive privileges, their wages were significantly higher than those of the manual workers. The state determined the conditions of exploitation and the social strata.

## 1968-69

However, it wasn't long before the manual workers in Italy began to demand their share of this development. The Italian working class was at the forefront of the worldwide revolt against capitalist exploitation in 1968.

Social mobilisation also began in the universities in Italy, including in Venice, and by the spring of 1968 it already swept into the factories in the Veneto region. For example in Valdagnò at the foot of the Alps, in the *Marzotto* textile factory which had until then been running mainly on the basis of paternalism and boss-friendly unions, 6,000 workers went on strike for weeks against the introduction of a new piece-work system.

When, on the 19th of April, scabs were sneaked into the factory under police protection, the workers toppled the bronze statue of the factory founders from its plinth as a symbol of the firm's despotism and fought with the 1,000-strong police force brought from the whole region. 47 workers were arrested. On the 13th and 14th of July, in the *Petrochimico* factory in Porto Marghera, 4,000 manual and 1,000 white collar workers went on strike for an

increase in the production bonus to 5,000 Lire for everyone. On the 1st of August 1968 Porto Marghera experienced the high point of the strike wave with burning barricades on the access road.

## The 'Hot autumn', 1969

The general strike in France was limited to 13 days in May 1968. In Italy strike waves blocked the increase in productivity for almost two years. The *Hot autumn* in 1969 ranks as one of the most intensive collective mobilisations in the history of class struggle. In 1969 over 300 million hours of were lost due to strikes, 230 million of these in industry.

The struggle over the renewal of the wage agreement in various industries came to a head in the summer, most significantly in the *Fiat* factory in Turin. Against the lock-out of 35,000 *Fiat* workers the unions called for the extension of the strikes. They demanded wage increases of between 15 and 19 percent, a 40-hour week etc. The workers in many factories went on strike spontaneously, often against the negotiation logic of the unions. Their demands were no longer centred around productivity growth,

they demanded equal wage increases for everyone and attacked all forms of performance wages. Innovative organisational forms multiplied, taken on by the workers from the students. Everyone was equally entitled to talk. In Turin a long meeting took place with workers and students, they discussed what had been happening and wrote up leaflets. Out of this came, among other things, the political groups *Lotta Continua* and *Potere Operaio*.

Shortly before Unions vs. workers autonomy Christmas, the metal union managed to settle on a wage agreement, in which all the demands were broadly met, including parity for blue and white collar workers, three weeks a year holiday, abolition of unpaid days and elections for department delegates.

In Porto Marghera there was also an extensive mobilisation by metal and chemical workers. In March the workers at *Châtillon* managed to enforce a 36-hour week. The firm made concessions while the unions were excluding the left activists. The year ended with a political victory for the unions; but the agreement for the chemical works did not offer parity for the blue and white collar workers, and so was seen as a fraud by the workers.

On the 12th of December 1969 the state secret service's *strategy of tension* reached its first climax: killing 16 people and wounding 87 in an explosive attack at Piazza Fontana in Milan.

After 1975 there existed no more advanced form of workers' organisation, either at *Fiat* or in Porto Marghera. The workers had brought production to a total standstill. They had showed that capitalist production also produces death and disease. They had begun self-organisation both inside the factory and in life outside it. But revolution in the sense of a material overthrow of relations did not take place. The reform of the unions and the 'green-washed capitalism' of today is unthinkable without the struggle of these workers.

## Unions vs. workers autonomy

After the Second World War, the union movement in Italy split into politically oriented unions under huge pressure from the USA, in order to isolate the communists. The *PCI* and its *CGIL* union confederation played a part in national reconstruction and spoke in favour of forced industrialisation of the country in order to create modern jobs. They supported the policy of linking income to productivity increases. Due to the restructuring of companies for mass production, the old skilled workers, who were the basis of the *PCI*, lost their central place in the production processes. The newly employed, unskilled workers from the countryside were seen as 'apolitical'. The *CGIL* lost heavily in the works council (*Commissione Inter-na*) elections, especially at *Fiat*.

In 1962 thousands of *Fiat* workers protested in Turin against a separate wage agreement, which the *UIL* union had signed with the company. The workers' protest ended in street fighting lasting for days in Piazza Statuto in Turin, where im-

migrants from southern Italy and young communist cadre fought side by side against the police.

After the years of recession from 1963-1965, the next round of extensive workers' struggles were not until the end of the 1960s.

The years 1968-1973 changed Italian society. The quickest to change with this were the unions. In the confrontations about the new wage agreement in 1969, the unions faced sharp, sustained criticism from the left groups, and above all the criticism of the workers themselves. The unions were being forced to go further than they would actually have wished to, by the ever more self-organised strikes in spring-summer 1969 at *Fiat* in Turin. The three rival unions *CGIL*, *CISL*

and *UIL* agreed upon a much closer cooperation. The economy was booming and the workers could demand what they wanted from the companies. In some departments better conditions were negotia-

ted without the union's involvement; the union saw this as creating divisions within the workforce. While the union defended the pay given to workers after they completed their qualifications, the 'mass workers' were now demanding, for example, equal wage increases for everyone as well as the free election and retraction of department delegates. By taking up these demands, the unions succeeded in negotiating relatively good wage agreements, especially in 1969. While the left radical groups mobilised principally around higher wage demands, in order to confront the production of surplus value directly, the unions were increasingly mobilising around issues outside of production e.g. for cheaper flats or pension reform.

At the beginning of the 1970s, the long discussed statute of workers' rights was passed by parliament. It was set up to strengthen the collective and individual rights of workers in the companies (entitlement to equal treatment, freedom of political expression inside the company,

the right to strike, the right to workers assemblies inside the company, protection against redundancies in companies with over 15 employees, health protection, end of the regional wage zones [*gabbie salariali*] etc.)

The right to vote for (and retract!) the department – and shortly afterwards also the factory council – delegates was inscribed in numerous collective contracts.

The 'union of councils', based on the new councils elected by the shop floor, was supported by many left activists. The main beneficiary was *CGIL* (particularly the metalworkers union), which through this body was able to use the factory councils to restructure and to win over new cadre.

The question of 'delegation' and 'representation', also the representatives' politics, was hotly discussed amongst the left radicals – while *Lotta Continua* took part, *Potere Operaio* criticized the unions and set itself firmly on the side of building up autonomous workers' structures. ■

## Operaiismo

Since the publication of the bestseller *Empire* (2000) by Michael Hardt and Toni Negri the term Operaiismo, derived from the Italian *operaiismo*, has been on everyone's lips in the German-speaking world. However most people seem not to be too clear that the term referred to workers. (operaio = worker, hence also the common English translation 'workerism'.)

At the end of the '50s and the beginning of the '60s a radical left political current emerged in Italy around the journal *Quaderni Rossi* (Red Notes) and later *Classe Operaia* (Working Class). This current rejected the social democracy of the PCI and the PSI and their politics of national reconstruction. They brought theoretical weapons for the radical overturn of relations, contributing hugely to the renewal of Marxism. But above all, they brought a political practice that oriented itself around the actual struggles of the working class. They went to the workers' city of Turin to carry out workers' inquiries in the factories there. In *Fiat* they

found a situation of change and upheaval: old communist workers, who had been politically sidelined, young, discontented skilled workers, and unskilled workers, newly moved from the countryside, mostly from the South, working in the factories, having been farmers before this. In 1962, the first struggle broke out. Starting from their involvement on a practical level, the comrades developed a theoretical basis, radically applying Marxist method to start from the workers' perspective.

### Class Composition...

With their inquiry work at *Fiat* and *Olivetti*, the group around *Quaderni Rossi* wanted to create a new political relation to the working class. The problems and struggles of the working class should once again become the central reference point of revolutionary politics. This meant posing all the questions anew and above all (re)searching the real working class. The deep and drastic changes of the '50s had changed the working class; replacement of coal by oil, expansion of conveyor belt

production, widespread use of cars, huge migration from the countryside etc. The unionists at electronics company *Olivetti* never really saw the new people from the countryside as real workers, and those workers themselves did not see their work as real work, but as 'button pushing'.

The inquiries in 1961 attempted to investigate: the origin of the workers, their previous work experiences, their accommodation problems, what they do in their free time and their perception of the power relations in the factory.

The first 'co'-inquiries focused on the workers as a whole person. This is in total contrast to the 'factoryism' that much later characterised so many of the 'workplace interventions' by the left, i.e. the reduction of the workers to their problems in the workplace, focusing on the questions of wages, work time, breaks, and work organisation.

*Quaderni Rossi* upheld the thesis that a new composition of the working class would emerge, i.e. that the workers would put up a fight against the exploitation in

the new factories. 'Class composition' is more of a fighting slogan than a sociological term; it actually means there is a connection between the mode of production and needs, between work organisation and the organisation of struggle, and between the direct daily activity of the workers and their behaviour or practice.

### ... instead of class consciousness

In a text that was later summarised in the book *Workers and Capital*, Mario Tronti placed 'labour power' and 'working class' in an antagonist relation to one another for the first time. Labour power identified the workers as variable capital, a factor of production to be exploited. Working class on the other hand is the seizing of a collective political power through the refusal of the expenditure of human labour power. This differentiation provided the basis for the methodological differentiation between the technical and political composition of the class.

By starting radically from the position of the workers, Tronti turned the relation

between 'capital and work' around from its orthodox representation: the political class composition is a historical given, that capital has to confront. "The class relation comes before the capital relation". Meaning that the working class precedes the development of capital. And machinery is the capitalist answer. So worker struggle is seen as the aggressive force and not as a reaction to the exploitation suffered. This made Tronti's text immensely attractive. It worked like a drug on the young militants of the 60s and 70s, because it implied the possibility (and feasibility!) of the revolution.

*Class composition* meant the crystallisation of behaviour, needs and the tradition of struggle. It was a material basis that replaced the concept of 'class consciousness' that would have to be brought in from outside of the class. Class composition contained both the technical structure of the class and how it consolidated themselves (politically) in its struggles. But the process by which the labour force turns into the working class, remains contradictory in Tronti's writing: at times he conceived of it as an almost mechanical process, in other places he voluntaristically constructs a new political composition.

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The switching between both interpretations characterised operaismo from the beginning.

As a result of Tronti's distillation of theory (e.g. class struggle as the main driving force of capitalist development), his conclusions became partly arbitrary, turning the biggest defeats into victories (for example seeing passivity as the workers' refusal to struggle). 'Operaismo as philosophy' is not much good for analysis – even less so in defensive situations. However, there is also a methodological problem: if capital's every action is understood as a reaction to class struggle, then, implicitly, the inner connection between class and capital must be abandoned. To see the capital relation as a power relation throws the law of value overboard and ultimately divides economics and politics again. Here we can see the foundations being laid for the ontological derivation of the concept of *Multitude*, as Negri lays them out in *Empire*.

The central subject in the struggles in the factory in the 60s and 70s was the 'mass worker': the unskilled worker, who had to perform the same hand movements over and over again in the assembly halls and

conveyor belts, a far cry from any producer or skilled worker's pride.

When Sergio Bologna first used the term in 1967 in a seminar in Padua, he wanted to use it to argue against reactivated concepts of Leninist organisation and show that the class composition of the mass worker has long superseded this notion. (The first mass workers' struggle took place in the 1930s in the USA). In the hot autumn of 1969 this mass worker theory was confirmed in Italy.

Based on this special figure, a new philosophy of history was created. However, the acceptance of this new idea in turn forced any further inquiry work into a cage or rigid political framework. New formulations emerged such as 'the law of the movement of the working class' or 'a particular technical composition of labour force necessarily corresponds to a typical system of social practice. It has to correspond to a particular political expression...'. The continuation was then to form an organisation that was supposed to unify this working class – which was diametrically opposed to the original thinking behind the workers' inquiries.

## Workers and workerists

In the last few years lots of books have come out in Italy, going over the history of the 60s and 70s. A few are dedicated to the 'workerists', who have given personal interviews for the first time and told their version of history. Hardly any of these books (with the exception of the one by *La Nazione* journalist Aldo Grandi!) had bothered to also interview the workers who were the actual protagonists of this cycle of struggles. For a few years, during the 'workers' inquiries' in the 60s and in the years 1968-1973, there was a collaboration between the left intellectuals searching for the revolutionary subject and the workers in revolt, from which both sides profited: the workers found new instruments for changing the world, the intellectuals gained new insights. After this collaboration came to an end, the first group were still workers and the second still academics. In Italy hardly any of these comrades went into the factories themselves, whereas in Germany for example they sometimes did. ■

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## The organised autonomy of the working class

### The history of Potere Operaio (workers power)

*Potere Operaio* [Workers' Power] was initially the name of a few local groups, who related to the working class independently of the union. Their theoretical point of reference initially came from the newspaper *Classe Operaia* [Working Class], which was founded in 1963 by the interventionist tendency within the *Quaderni Rossi* newspaper. Going beyond their own inquiry work, they aimed their publications directly to the workers. The editorial group in the Veneto reshaped itself around *Toni Negri*, who was then a lecturer at Padua University.

In 1967 the last issue of *Classe Operaia* was published, and shortly after this *Potere Operaio - giornale politico degli operai di Porto Marghera* started up and was published until 1969. The themes of the newspaper were: more money; less work; against piece work; against the intensification of work; against endangering health; against redundancies and short-work; 40

hours weeks, with 48 paid hours; guaranteed minimum wage; equality for all workers; against privilege and against production bonuses. In the same year the first Congress of *Potere Operaio Veneto-Emiliano*, attended by worker-activists, took place in Mestre.

The national organisation *Potere Operaio* emerged in 1969 from the connections of local groups in Genoa, Milan, Turin and the Veneto. These groups had made their relation to the working class and the interventions in the factories as their focal point. Shortly before this, in Turin, the organisation *Lotta Continua* was formed from a tendency of worker and student assemblies, who had agitated at *Fiat* during the whole *Hot Autumn*. Up to this point, *La Lotta Continua* [the struggle is still on] had appeared as a slogan on all the leaflets. In 1969 the first national newspaper *Potere Operaio* appeared.

## The refusal of work and Leninism

'*Cominciamo a dire Lenin*' [Let's start saying Lenin], began an editorial by Franco Piperno in 1969. This replaced the slogan 'every economic struggle is also a political struggle'. Now it was all about building up the organisation in order to reach the economic aim. According to *Negri*, Leninism was the price to be paid for the political new composition of the Italian proletariat. 'Politics' now meant Lenin.

While for the rival organisation *Lotta Continua* everything started from the spontaneity of the workers struggles, *Potere Operaio* emphasised the aspect of organisation. The political programme spoke of a direct transition to communism from the extension of the struggles to insurrection and organised mass insurgency. At its height, about 10,000 activists were involved in *Potere Operaio* (to a greater or lesser extent).

The regional groups also represented the different social compositions: you had the industrial north with its workers groups, then Rome with on the one hand proletarian/sub-proletarian groups and

on the other hand those from the tertiary sector such as local administration or hospitals. The health workers in the clinics were an organisational focal point of *Potere Operaio*. The influx via the student movement changed the composition even more and thereby the political bias of the group.

The cultural difference between the workers' groups and the groups with more students and academics in Florence and Rome was not free of tension.

While the comrades from the latter groups used their time as a group to also go out together or go on holiday and had lots of time for discussions, in Veneto the work in the factory claimed a good part of the time, as did the assemblies after work, distributing leaflets etc. The time for national or regional meetings was pretty tight.

Porto Marghera was 'the' concentration of workers, where *Potere Operaio* really had an influence, but politically the comrades from Porto Marghera were somewhat on the sidelines of the Organisation. At the *Potere Operaio* congress in Florence in January 1970, it came to a confrontation about spontaneity and Leninism. *Finzi* from the *Porto Marghera Workers' Committee*

took up the following position: what the workers do, i.e. hold assemblies in the factory, write leaflets etc, is actually spontaneous organising. The *workers' committee* leads and educates the working class. Revolutionary organising develops within the working class, starting from material needs. The workers' co-ordination is not an information service about struggles, but a political decision making body, a co-ordination of the workers avant-garde. The organisation is merely an instrument for a direct struggle for concrete aims.

It came to a political division between on one hand those who wanted to continue the 'workerist' practice of rank and file work in the factories. And on the other hand those who, after the *Hot Autumn* of 1969 ended due to the new collective contract, felt that the time was right to put all their energy into building up an organisation aimed at political overthrow.

### New alliances

September 1970: attempted fusion into political committees with the group called *Il Manifesto*, which controlled the *il manifesto* newspaper, which *Potere Operaio* would have liked to turn into the daily paper of the political committees, in or-

der to spur on the unity of the vanguard. It was not deemed necessary to report on the struggles of yesterday, but rather to offer guidance today on the struggles of tomorrow.

A joint workers' conference in January 1971 in Milan: 76 workers' groups from *Il Manifesto* and 68 groups from *Potere Operaio* took part. From the content of their speeches, it seemed the two groups had an abyss between them. *Potere Operaio* delegates emphasised that it was all about tearing away the mask of the state, to make visible the violence that ensured its domination over the working class. In the light of the tremendous levels of struggle the party now had to organise and the uprising had to be prepared.

*Il Manifesto* was set on long and drawn out guerrilla tactics, putting forward demands for the attainment of the abolition of piece work, better working hours and a better work environment. To go beyond unionism requires autonomy and a unified organism of the working class: the *political committee* as a preliminary form of a party and as a motor for the emergence of a unified organ of the working class.

While the national leadership had already given up on co-operation, in Porto

Marghera there was a joint intervention in the factories from February to April 1971 with the slogans: "employ more people and give a 36 hour week to everyone", "introduce a fifth shift", "wage increases in inverse proportion to qualifications", "no piecework or work intensification", "no profit-dependent bonus payments".

### Split ...

At the congress in the EUR district of Rome in September 1971, *Potere Operaio* actually split around the question: keep organising the mass workers, or anticipate capitalist development in the terrain of the 'socialised worker' (*operaio sociale*).

In the end, the following position won out: to come out of the factories, to prepare for the insurrection. Many people did not agree with this and left the organisation.

The drive to build up a party, and ever more national congresses, no longer helped the workers in Porto Marghera. Instead, they built up a network of autonomous workers' groups in Milan, Rome and Naples and brought out a joint newspaper.

### ... and break-up

The organisational conference in Rosalina in June 1973 ended without either a solution or a new statute. The local groups transformed into the Organised Autonomy. During the youth movement in 1977 there was an influx of a whole new generation of activists.

After the dissolution of *Potere Operaio*, the 'Negri-ists' met in the summer of 1973 in Padua. They wanted to hold on to the thread of factory struggles. *Finzi* and *Sbragio* represented the Autonomous Assembly. Their attitude was every more rigid: only the shop-floor workers were allowed to represent them to the outside, no 'external' members.

### 'Mass militancy' or armed struggle

After 1969 all the radical left organisations had built up groups of armed 'stewards', who initially safeguarded leafletting actions in front of factories, schools etc. and protected against fascist attacks.

After the dissolution of the organisations, these 'military wings' made themselves independent. One part founded the group *Prima Linea*; the leadership of the stewards of *Potere Operaio* in Rome joined the *Red Brigades*. ■

"The split and break-up of Potere Operaio happened on the basis of the antagonism of three positions:

- a) The project to build up a new party
  - b) Glorification of the spontaneity of the socialised worker and organisation of the vanguards.
  - c) The search for a dialectical relation between new subjects and historical organisations.
- Positions a) and b) shared the belief that the time was ripe for the beginning of the revolutionary process, but they differed fundamentally in their idea of organisation; the first had a late-Leninist idea, while the second wanted to connect with the mass vanguard.

Position c) thought that both of these positions were totally unrealistic and presumptuous. Now that the phase of the political groups was coming to an end, it was seen as more useful to analyse the new social dimensions of the conflicts from within, and thereby to look at how the capitalist response to the crisis creates contradictions within class composition. This position wanted to try to open channels of communication, primarily with the unions, who had proven themselves to be more open to the new reality than the parties were."

(Bianchini/Pergola, foreword to the reprint of 'Potere Operaio - giornale politico degli operai di Porto Marghera', 1967-69), Padua 1980.

## The history of the workers' committee of Porto Marghera

**Talk by Italo Sbrogiò**

Given at the presentation of the 'Augusto Finzi' workers' archive, Marghera, 9 June 2006



In 1952 the first chemicals factory was set up in Porto Marghera, the chlorinated soda department, which was to become the motor of growth for an integrated production cycle with other parts such as: tetrachloroethylene, trichloroethylene, vinyl chloride (from which polyvinyl chloride, PVC, is made by a process of polymerisation).

The workers came from the countryside and therefore had mostly received their skills from self-education, in contrast to the company management, many of whom came from the Fascist tradition.

Amongst the workers there were also PCI members. Employed with the approval and guarantee of the priests, the communists were diligent workers, the PCI had taught them that a good worker = a good communist.

We worked with our heads down, but with a huge will to rebel against all the harassment that we endured on a daily basis.

In 1958 there was no CGIL there. It was first created when some communist workers stood for election for the works council, and won a majority. These comrades then formed *Potere Operaio*. They were joined by comrades from the white-collar departments.

Working in the *Petrochimico* was really hard, what with the assaults by the fore-

men and the spying by the factory security; if you were denounced by them for whatever reason you would be punished immediately. The attitude of the company was very varied, ranging from sacking to merciless paternalism. This was supposed to break the workers' unity, which despite all this actually was making progress.

### New Contacts

In 1964 the first so-called intellectuals approached us. I met *Toni Negri* and *Guido Bianchini* who had already made contact with a communist worker in *Vetrocane* by this time, comrade *Pistolato*, who was the chairman of a circle which saw itself as a people's university.

In the time which followed I also met *Massimo Cacciari*, *Francesco dal Co* and other comrades.

At these meetings we learned to do politics by participating in the debates, everyone at the same level.

From the PCI and its centralised politics we were used to obeying orders and this kind of politics which brought us into a vanguard role was new for us.

### Our first leaflet

In 1967 the first leaflet by *Potere Operaio* appeared in Porto Marghera. It was about

the works council elections. The workers already saw us as members of *Potere Operaio* and we were re-elected with a majority. We distributed the first political newspaper by *Potere Operaio* in the factory in March 1967 and the second one in May, with *Francesco Tolin* as officially responsible.

The content of these two first issues was based on reports which workers' autonomy vanguards had collected from across the whole of Italy.

In Porto Marghera (*Petrochimico*) the first repression occurred. Comrade *Bruno Massa* was forcibly transferred to *Bussi* in *Abruzzo* [a region in Central Italy]. *Augusto Finzi* was internally transferred several times. This cruel attack only made us stronger. I too was banished to a punitive department in order to prevent me from having daily contact with workmates.

Once of our first goals was to turn the struggles for our material needs into mass struggles. The group of workers who shared our goals organisationally and in content led up to our first factory congress in September 1967 in the suburbs of *Mestre*. We argued for the strategy that *Potere Operaio* should intervene in all the factories. As members of the works council, we argued for the equality of blue and white collar workers.

### 1968: 5000 Lire for everyone

This phase gave birth to the first workers' committee. When the production bonus was up for renegotiation in June 1968, we demanded 5000 Lire for everyone. The workers understood our egalitarian demands and involved themselves in a hard struggle which enforced the principle and managed to squeeze out 1000 Lire for everyone. The rest would also be paid out equally, but remained tied to the development of productivity. In order to achieve this we had held several demonstrations and occupied the train station in *Mestre*.

### The Hot Autumn

The so-called hot autumn brought workers and students closer together; we participated in common discussion groups and took to the streets together. In January 1969 we agitated all across Italy for the standardisation of the wage agreement. We also suggested rank and file committees in all the factories with the aim of a guaranteed minimum wage of 120,000 Lire (at the time the minimum wage was 55,000 Lire) a 40 hour week with 48 hours paid, holiday and health insurance at equal levels for everyone.

In June 1969, as the workers' committee in Porto Marghera (a few of us were

CGI(L)-members), we fought against the union caving in and organised struggles in production; not the pinpoint strikes that the union was proposing in order to affect production as little as possible. We directed the workers' attention to the 'wage zones' [in the old wage agreement different wage levels were set for different regions of Italy] and to the possibility of converting the production bonuses to a 14th month wage for everyone. We also focused on exposing Montedison's health risks policies; the company only declared seven departments as health risks — an adjustment to the lowest standard when Edjison and Montecatini merged and created Montedison.

In the factory, we did not present ourselves as a fourth union, but rather as an autonomous organisation with the slogan 'less work, more wages'.

In July 1969, as the workers' committee of Porto Marghera, we spoke about focusing our struggles on the abolition of the sub-contractors, whose employees worked with shitty conditions and with many daily work accidents, because they were seen as second-class workers. All workers are exploited, but those employed by the sub-contractors are doubly exploited if they work 10 to 12 hours a day and get paid only 130 to 140 hours per month at a rate of 280 or 300 Lire per hour, which also

covers holiday pay, Christmas bonuses and the like. Another reason then, to fight together for 1000 Lire a day, for a 40 hour week, for a 36 hour week for shift workers, for equal holiday time, equal health insurance and equal pensions for all, blue and white collar workers.

Between May and June 1969 the CGI(L) held its seventh regional congress. In the debates delegates showed concern about the re-election of the *Potere Operaio* representatives in the *Petrolchimico*. In his speech, the regional secretary of the metalworkers' union indicated that the union did not really play the leading role: 'In several cases we were not prepared for the pressure of the workers with their spontaneous organisational forms'.



### Exclusion from the union

Bit by bit the *Potere Operaio* factory group was expelled from the CGI(L). We were accused of not toeing the line. We answered that they were right, we were not in line, because we had always fought against the line of capitulation. More and more workers followed our line: if a worker from the CV5 department (PVC production) was sacked due to false allegations, the union tried to get him back into the factory, but without success. The worker then turned to us at *Potere Operaio* and asked us for help. We then organised a picket line at 6 a.m. without much advance notice and blocked the factory until the worker was reinstated.

In August 1969 the union ordered the dissolution of the works council and organised re-elections. We decided not to participate. When the votes were counted, over 50 percent of the ballot slips were blank.

November 1969. The wage demand by the chemical workers' union was pitiful: 12,000 Lire more per month, a periodic increase of seniority bonuses between 3 and 5 per cent, increase of the minimum bonus from 2 per cent to 5 per cent, a 40 hour week spread over five days and a minimum of 15 days holiday a year. In addition to that the union demanded an in-



dex-based extra payment for health-damaging work [meaning that the more health damaging the work, the more money you get]. In the assemblies, the *Petrolchimico Workers' Committee* and other groups utterly refused these demands. At that time, the *Petrolchimico Workers' Committee*, the Rank-and-file *Committee Montedison Ferrara* and the *Workers' Students' Committee Montedison Mantua* joined forces and fought for common aims: equal wage increases for all, nobody must earn less than 120,000 Lire per month, a 40 hour-week for those on normal shifts, a 36 hour-week for those doing shift work. We wanted everything and we wanted it right away. Because of unemployment, technological development and health damage, and because the factory was more or less like a prison, we wanted to spend as little time as possible inside.

### The centrality of the wage

This is why the wage became the central issue. If the wage is too low, shorter working hours will not be of much use. If we lack money we will always be forced to do overtime and the reduction of working time will be no more than a bluff. Therefore we also demanded equal holidays, equal health insurance and equal wage increases according to seniority for blue collar and white collar workers, starting

right away. Forms of struggle which disrupt production as severely as possible and which force the bosses to their knees: one day we walked out, the next day we didn't.

In late 1969 the employees of *Châtillon* in Porto Marghera announced their demands for the collective contract, which already sound familiar: from working time reduction to equal wage increases for all. The bosses answered with open threats. We immediately distributed a leaflet in the *Petrolchimico* saying that it is in our own interest to join the *Châtillon* workers with effective forms of struggle, meaning the stop-and-go strikes that we were already familiar with.

The struggle became harder and harder and we reduced the emergency staff responsible for the safety of the plant from 125 to 32, which meant the actual stopping of production instead of maintaining a minimum production. The political impact of *Potere Operaio* in the *Petrolchimico* became more and more significant and more and more organised. On 10 October 1969 *Fiat* in Turin was occupied by the workers and there was internal fighting during the hunt for scabs. As *Potere Operaio*, we hailed the occupation: we must not suffer any wage cuts as a result of traditional strikes; we have the power to force the bosses to their knees, we just



have to use it. Our slogan was: 'United with the struggle at *Fiat* we will bring the bosses to their knees'.

### The union of councils

The reformism of the *PCI* developed at high speed; the *CGIL* was the party's transmission belt in its attempt to regain the upper hand over the organising process of the workers. The *Commissioni interne* were actually outdated, so a new union representation was established in the factories, based on a fake representative democracy. The first department delegates were elected directly from the shop-floor level and it was possible to vote for non-union members. This was supposed to make them credible to us. We have to admit that with the factory councils they partly succeeded.

In view of this, we, the vanguard, put our back into it and said that the intervention inside the factories would have to be carried to the outside, to the 'social', as well, broaching the issue of the rise of living costs. Some of us did not agree with putting the intervention inside the factory and its demands and representation in second place. We had a general debate and came to the conclusion that the factory councils were not what they had been proposed to be. Some comrades from

*Potere Operaio* got elected anyway, even into the board of the factory council, because the workers wanted it that way. This had been very difficult to achieve against heavy resistance by the union. Many of us perceived these new representative institutions as another challenge, similar to the process of our emergence from the *Commissioni interne*.

### Uniting factory struggles and social struggles

Let's talk about the social struggles. We called for the auto-reduction of public transport fares, of rent, gas, electricity and food prices. We managed to achieve all that in the *Petrolchimico* and we even managed to drag the union along. The practice of self-reduction then spread in the neighbourhoods including the city of Venice. People lowered rents, occupied empty houses, paid less for their food. We organised all this by establishing local committees in the various parts of town. We even managed to organise a shopping strike which forced some supermarkets (*Ca d'Oro, Coop, Pam*) to cut prices for basic food (you would save about 1,000 Lire out of 8,000). The committees for self-reduction (*Comitati di autoriduzione*) spread as far as Chioggia, where about 2,500 families reduced their bills.

In the province of Venice in total about 15,000 families took part.

The committee organised a big self-reduction demonstration, which started from the bridge in Mestre, heading towards the Piazza Ferretto, where we started a huge fire by burning all the gas and electricity bills which we had reduced. After four months of nationwide protests the government and union signed an agreement which cut the price of electricity. Those involved in the committee said that such a strong bond between the factory and the neighbourhood had never existed before.

### Factory work makes you sick!

Let's talk about the 1970s. The health damage in the factory and in everyday life became worse and worse, unbearable, I'd say. The unions remained silent about what to do about it. Accidents and acute poisoning happened every day. *Potere Operaio* was aware of the problem and picked up the protest of the workers. We said that money cannot compensate for health damage. Workers don't go to work in the factory in order to do inquiries, but because they are forced to. Work isn't a way of life, but the necessity to sell oneself in order to be able to live. And it is this very struggle against work, against having to sell oneself, which attacks all the

rules of this society. We fought against the health hazards by fighting for having to work less, for not having to die of poisoning through work. It damages your health to get up every morning to go to work, to follow the rhythm and movements of production, to work shifts, to bring home a wage which forces you to go back to the factory the next day... all this damages your health.

Strikes kicked off against health damage, tough ones as well. The workers surpassed the absent union, which was contented with the mere fact that now every worker had a health pass. Not only *Potere Operaio*, but also *Lofta Continua* and other groups acted against the apathy of the union, and against the apathy of the left-wing parties. The institutions were nearly absent. Our slogan was: closure of the factory, refurbishment of the plant, and re-opening while *Montedison* continued to pay the wages. The struggles got 'bloody', until nearly the whole factory came to a standstill, including the chemical facilities which *Montedison* had always claimed could not be stopped without causing their destruction.

At this point we were summoned by the health and safety authorities. After the authority had listened to all parties and understood that dozens of poisoned workers had to be sent to hospital due to daily di-



charge of gas, it decided that from now on all workers in Porto Marghera had to wear gas masks. This decision sparked great debates. The union tried to appear more left-wing than us and pointed out that this measure would have to include not only the factories in Porto Marghera, but also those in the adjoining areas. They really made a joke of themselves: in the midst of the strike we organised a crucifixion on the square in front of gate 3 of the *Petrochimico*. We erected a four metre high cross, a puppet wearing a gas mask was attached to it, symbolising Jesus Christ. A sign said: '*Montedison* lets you die a second time.'

We demanded that the company find out the reason for the health damage and eliminate it by closing the plant and the department while continuing to pay wages to the affected workers, re-opening the plant afterwards.

The strike during the collective agreement negotiations also included demos inside the factory, copying the demos at *Fiat Mirafiori*, which for us in Marghera were legendary. It was a form of struggle which expressed the unity of the workers. When they were motivated and angry, the internal demos were a success, otherwise it was better to forget about them. As long as the committee had a network inside the factory we could organise these demos

and even force the union to support them. During the demos we were able to make out the few workers who tried to chicken out. Later on in the canteen we ousted these workers by banging our plates, something which I think is psychologically difficult to bear. In order not to suffer this treatment a lot of potential scabs joined the strike.

### Co-operation with il manifesto

In 1970 and 1971, in Porto Marghera il manifesto and *Potere Operaio* formed the *Political Committee*, which survived for only a few months. We let people know about it through some leaflets and a congress, which I think took place in the department of architecture of the university in Venice. The stuff that was spoken about during the congress was more up our street. I think il manifesto was looking for allies to help them get their daily newspaper going in the Veneto. In Marghera,

they were formed by a few comrades who had left the *PCI*, including only a very few workers. We were closer to *Lofta Continua* than to *Il manifesto*.

### The reform of the union

During the early 1970s the politics of the union was about the 'structural reforms'. After the tax reform the wage tax was deducted directly from the workers' wage; the employer became an auxiliary of the state. The reform introduced the value-

added tax IVA, replacing the old sales tax IGE and leading to a big price hike. Then there was the reform of the health system which turned company doctors and judges into combatants against absenteeism.

We perceived these reforms as an attempt to pull wool over the workers' eyes. We wanted to build an alternative to the political line of the union, regarding the forms of struggle as much as the aims. Our alternatives were demands for major wage increases, for the reduction of

wage categories and for automatic promotion. Against the health hazards there was a precise demand and a mass struggle: closure of dangerous departments - refurbishment and continued payment of wages - with subsequent re-opening. On an individual level we made use of absenteeism. Against the price increases we proposed reappropriation [collective shoplifting: often referred to as *la spesa proletaria* - 'proletarian shopping'], the reduction of housing rents and electricity bills. We also proposed harder forms of struggle, in the factory: strikes that would actually stop production.

### A network of shop-floor collectives

In 1972 we intensified contact with other shop-floor based groups which were not tied to political organisations or which were sick of being their 'mass organisation'. These groups were based in Milan (at *Alfa*, *Pirelli* and *Siemens*), in Rome (the *polyclinic*, *ENEL*), in Naples (*Uscri*) and in other factories. Together we published a few issues of the magazine *Il Bollettino degli organismi autonomi operai* (Bulletin of autonomous workers' organisations).

In late 1972, the committee managed to topple the collective agreement for the chemical industry in the company assem-

blies at the *Petrochimico* and at *Châtillon*. Carried by this wave of success and led by the will to organise independently, the *Assemblea Autonoma di Marghera* (Autonomous Assembly of Porto Marghera) was established. The core was made up of workers from the committee, from *Lofta Continua*, workers from the *Petrochimico* and *Châtillon* who had left the union, and metal workers from Ammi and Dimm. The *Assemblea* was formed based on the historic aims of the *Committee*: reduction of the working week to 36 hours at equal wages, because new machines increase the power of dead labour over the workers; wage categories based on seniority rather than formal skills, because the skills which the bosses demand can be obtained after few years in the factory; refusal to work in departments which are hazardous for our health as the most direct way to avoid the damaging consequences; complete equality between blue and white-collar workers in order to be able to fight together effectively. The other central thread of the intervention was the intention of carrying our topics from the factory to the neighbourhoods: prices, rent, electricity, the auto-reduction of bills as a re-appropriation of the wage. The prime intention was bottom-up organising, outside of the union. The *Assemblea Autonoma* aimed at establishing the



department committees as capillary organisations inside the factory. We criticised the political groups, including *Potere Operaio*, for 'fleeing forward'.

### Against 'fleeing forward'

In May 1973 the congress of Rosolina took place. By then the different tendencies and local branches of *Potere Operaio* had only little in common. We from Marighera went to the congress determined to speak for our own practice, that is, to point out all the factory collectives which were constantly being organised outside of the political groups and had demands beyond those of the union and which wanted to organise and coordinate themselves just like we did. There was no space for the Party of insurrection and for escapist moves towards a militarization of the conflict. We thought that it was correct to speak of the socialized worker instead of the mass worker, but we completely disagreed when it came to the question of how to organise the socialized worker and ourselves. At that time, we were utterly rigid. Only people who worked in a factory themselves, no 'externals', were allowed to speak for the *Autonomous Assembly*. We wanted to go back to the basics and return to the times when the vanguard of an organisation would be

formed by those people who, in the material sense, fought the battles in the schools and factories – not by those who only instructed them. We wanted to break with the tendency of delegation where the independent vanguard creates facts and the group then fights over the leadership.

Up to 1974 the workers' committee and later the *Assemblea Autonoma* used the magazines *Potere Operaio* and *Lunedì* and, later on, *Rosso*. We used them in order to substantiate and generalise our own analyses and to communicate with other groups. We then started to publish a little zine of about 30 pages called *Lavoro Zero* (Zero Work). We wrote, printed and distributed it ourselves. It was our response to various needs and was supposed to serve various goals, first of all organising. We wanted to create a reference point and a certain unification amongst the struggles in the departments which became very frequent during this stage and were organised by us. A factory newspaper capable of expressing and combining the interest of all workers, publishing not only leaflets from the struggle but also a general analysis of the situation. For us this level of political practice was already the 'Party': from the struggle in the department towards a general analysis of the situation, in order to

combine the economical and political. On those levels we contributed all we could. On the other levels, though, we either just went along with things, remained passive, or disagreed outright.

During those years living costs sometimes increased by about 15 to 16 per cent a year, although inflation compensation partly cushioned the impact. The bosses claimed that the inflation was itself caused by inflation compensation, and many reformists (political parties and others) shared this position. Back then compensation for inflation was calculated based on the wage category, so that those who earned little also received little compensation. They also told us the fairytale that you must not demand higher wages, because the inflation will swallow them anyway. We thought we should intervene outside of the factories as well in order to make our point of view heard.

Some female comrades and women from the proletarian areas of Mestre tried to combine this struggle with the demand of a wage for housework.

During the following years the committee for struggle against price increases organised the auto-reduction of rent and occupied houses. That was us!

### Our end

In 1976 the political climate was terrible.

Between the 'historic compromise' and 'the politics of sacrifice', the PCI under Berlinguer had lost its track completely. The union, with its leaders Lama, Carniti, and Benvenuto, became the transmission belt for a responsible politics in the face of the severe economical crisis. Inside the factories they enforced the EUR [part of Rome where the union congress had taken place] politics of sacrifice by signing strangling agreements intended to curb wage costs and increase productivity. The sellout of the workers got worse and worse; the division between 'permanent' and 'casual' workers was bearing fruit. We didn't manage to organise struggles with a promising political perspective any longer.

In late 1976 the law to cool down compensation of inflation passed. In January 1977 the employers' association and unions signed an agreement which stipulated amongst other things:

- abolition of automatic compensation for inflation,
- abolition of seven annual holidays,
- the right to relocate workers inside the company if required by shift-schedule and overtime,
- measures against absenteeism.

In addition there was stepped-up state repression [the Cossiga law allowed for nine years of pre-trial confinement], Calogero's

theorem, the collaboration of the PCI, massacres organised by the state ...

On Saturday the 7th of April 1979 Padua's public prosecutor Calogero attacked in a blitz-like action: dozens of people in Milan, Padua and Rome got arrested, all former members of *Potere Operaio* and now militants of the Organised Workers' Autonomy. On Monday the 9th of April, the headline of *Controlavoro* read: 'The election campaign has started', the elections were meant to be held in May. The debates evolving around the arrests dealt with the question of how we should react. We decided to take part in the information campaign concerning the 7th of April by establishing one of the many 7th of April committees, and to carry on with our political work.

On the 21st of December 1979 the next wave of repression took place, with arrests in Milan, Rome, Padua and Venice. This time we were directly affected, *Augusto Finzi* and other comrades got arrested. On the 24th of January the third blitz happened, with arrests in Milan, Novara, Como, Genoa and Venice, our comrade *Gianni Sbrogiò* amongst them. On the 29th of January the *Red Brigades* killed the vice-director of the *Petrochimico* and the entire press linked our arrests with this murder. The same equation was made

some months later when the *Red Brigades* killed the boss of the anti-terrorism department in Venice. The media continued their public trial against us.: *Controlavoro*, *Lavoro Zero* and the COM2 publishing cooperative were accused of being the driving force behind the murders, and the arrested comrades were portrayed as terrorists.

The circle closed. We got crushed between the armed groups and state repression. There was no space for the autonomous struggle of the working class any more.

Nevertheless there could be an extraordinary finale for a story which had begun years earlier. Despite all individual and collective attempts to edge them out of the historical picture, the mass workers — de-skilled, rootless, not respected, responsible for having disorientated the left-wing parties and their political models — constituted the driving force behind the intertwining of a great cycle of struggle for a different life in the factories and in society. ■

## Failure

In the early 1970s an important chapter in the history of class movement was closed; all processes of centralisation and elaboration of a party form which were adequate to the quality of the movement (not just those initiated by Potop) failed. It ought to be stressed that in 1968/69 all these attempts to make a revolutionary tension last were backed by a majority and had mass character. Their failure appears as a loss of social representation of the extra-parliamentary left, as its diaspora: but it is also a backwardness of the entire left in relation to the processes of decomposition of the class driven by capitalist restructuring on a world scale and in the developed centres. The official workers' movement is incapable of consolidating its reform project as a response to capital's initiative.

Bianchini/Pergola, Preface to the reprint of *Potere Operaio* – *Giornale Politico degli operai di Porto Marghera 1967-69*, Padua 1980



## **,The workers should take things into their own hands'**

### **Excerpt from an interview with Gianni Sbrogiò about politics of representation and the attempt to implement the refusal of work inside the factory.**

*One of the most interesting bits in the interview with Augusto Finzi deals with your effort to organise yourselves without a political layer ...*

This has always been our obsession. We managed to put this idea into practice by organising the Assemblée Autonoma. We were always obsessed with refusing representatives. We wanted the workers to refuse to hand over the responsibility to others, to the unions or the political Party. We did not want to hand them over to a structure that was different from us. This was our position, so our big political grief

has always been, whether as Potere Operaio, as the Porto Marghera workers' group or as the Autonomous Assembly of Porto Marghera, that in the end the workers would turn us into delegates. This has always thrown us into crisis because we refused these politics of representation but in the end the workers wanted to see us in this position, as delegates. We wanted

these workers, who agreed on a minimum of debates and demands, to take things into their own hands, from A to Z, from the struggle to the drafting of demands.

*But you did not always agree on this subject. Germano Mariti talks very positively about the department delegates and about the factory council. He perceives them both as a conquest of the workers. Augusto Finzi, on the other hand, sees that the unions were able to use these bodies to regain control over the struggles.*

Yes, we had two hearts beating in our chests. The factory councils were established in Italy in 1969, at the end of a big cycle of struggles. Politically they were the institutional attempt of the unions to contain those struggles which developed outside of their organisation. For many workers who were organised in the unions, the factory councils allowed them to debate with each other democratically.

The establishment of factory councils was a need of the rank-and-file and became a need of the leadership which in some way or the other had to modify the organised level of workers' struggles. Potere Operaio was completely opposed, our position was that the factory council was a structure in the hands of the unions and functional for them. In Marghera intensive debates evolved around this issue. On one hand we saw the establishment of the factory council as an attempt to assimilate the factory struggles. On the other hand we noticed that the workers used it and therefore we accepted this organism in order to say what we had to say, despite the fact that we ourselves had no interest in being inside the factory council. To put it another way: we knew that once we got elected into the factory council (at Ammi Germano got elected as a department delegate and I got elected as a representative of the white-collar workers) everything depended on being organised outside of that body, in order to carry the so-called political line (which had been laid down externally), i.e. the choice of goals, into the council which would then adopt them.

Our political goal was to organise the autonomy of the working class. In the end,

the factory council, which had been formed as a democratic possibility to advance the workers' rank-and-file needs, became more and more an instrument of the union apparatus. Some council members had to be union members, which initially had not been the case. When the three union federations agreed on a common deal an even more restrictive phase begun and the structure became even more bureaucratic. In the end all decisions were made by the council board whose aims rarely differed from the official union line.

### **Refusal of health-damaging work**

*Why did it take such a long time in the Petrochimico for struggles against the health damaging chemical production to erupt? At which point did the workers refuse to accept their fate? What kind of forms of struggle did they come up with?*

We have to distinguish between the metal and the chemical industries. The danger that the metalworker is subjected to is much more visible and more immediate: ranging from dust to noise. For the chemical worker the danger is much more insidious. Here the health hazards were

uncovered later, partly due to the fact that they had been kept secret. A metalworker working in front of a furnace knew what he had to fight against – noise, dirt, heat – and therefore it was possible to organise a struggle against it. Of course, the chemical workers knew something, but caught between the low wage and the union which had adopted the bosses' point of view they accepted the health hazard bonus. We were around during this phase. This is why we said: no, this kind of work is unacceptable! And we tried to express the line of the refusal of work, which came from *Potere Operaio*, this slogan, this project which we thought was indispensable. The worker had to put himself into this contradiction, he had to say: we have to produce, but how, what and when? And with these three questions we started the debate on the refusal of work.

No worker thought of us as idlers or of people who don't want to work, because we said: 'We work even more than you do, we work inside the factory like you do, after the work we go to the assembly for three hours and after that we organise the struggles. We work much more than you!' The work which you are forced to do is one thing, the work which you choose to

do is another. You are forced to work on a low wage in a health-damaging environment, therefore the refusal of work means starting to change the very organisation of work.

Within *Potere Operaio* we were often seen as the 'right-wing', because we talked about the refusal of work in a reformist, rather than a revolutionary way. Because we 'took apart' the refusal of work, because we did not only talk about a struggle which was supposed to topple the system. We were seen as the 'unionists'. Who knows, looking back from today's perspective maybe we would have made good unionists if we had not chosen different paths, but in reality we often functioned as the critical consciousness of the union. We opened the eyes of the workers and demonstrated that it was possible to organise in ways different from the unions.

### **Direct reduction of working time**

*How did you enforce the 36 hours week? Is it true that the workers had to work only six hours but could not go home afterwards, that they had to stay in the plant for another two hours?*

This was in the zinc electrolysis department

This struggle was the attempt to put Potere Operaio's slogan into practice: reduction of the working-time as an expression of the refusal of work and of the struggle against health-damaging work. A demand for the immediate improvement of the quality of life. We thought that the demand would go down best in those situations where work was the most damaging and hard. This was in the zinc electrolysis department, where sheer zinc is produced by electrolysis from zinc oxide dissolved in sulphuric acid. In this department it was very damp, there were electro-magnetic fields and sulphuric acid vapours. The zinc is produced in a system where cells filled with the solution are energised. The sheer zinc accumulates at the aluminium cathodes. Every day, the workers had the six-hour duty to strip the zinc off the cathodes. Afterwards the anodes had to be cleaned from encrustations, which took another hour and a half. We organised a medical check for the workers in these departments in order to show that the work was damaging. It became clear that a lot of workers had developed problems affecting their mouths, noses, throats and ears because they were exposed to sulphuric acid and noise. We organised a struggle for the

reduction of work pressure through the reduction of working hours. We chose very hard forms of struggle together with the workers who stopped stripping the cathodes. The management had to switch off the electricity and the machines stopped producing zinc. If the management had not switched off the electricity more and more zinc would have accumulated and finally destroyed the facility. This is why they were forced to stop the machines. This went on for some days, I think at some point the production lay idle for ten days in a row. We achieved the rule that the workers only had to strip the cathodes for six hours without having to knock off the anodes afterwards.

Previously they had had a break after six hours of work and then cleaned the anodes for another hour and a half, which amounted to eight hours. After the struggle they worked only six hours, then went to catch lunch in the canteen and did not return back to work afterwards. The cleaning of the anodes was done by another group of workers which the employer had to hire for this purpose. We finally put this down in a department level agreement which officially did not exist because the union did not support

## APPENDIX

### 'Processo Petrochimico' – The trial against Montedison and Enichem

*Gabriele Bortolozzo*, born 1934 in Cam-

palto close to Venice, was a chemical worker at the Porto Marghera *Petrochimico* for 35 years. In the 70s he learned of the cancer risk in PVC production and noticed that more and more of his colleagues were dying of cancer. Soon afterwards he started his investigation. In a survey conducted in the department that polymerises MVC (monomethyl vinyl chloride) in autoclaves and so turns it into PVC, he counted 149 workers dead and more than 500 suffering from cancer. From 1985 onwards he worked with the magazine *Medicina Democratica* which published his report on the deaths in the petrochemical industry in 1994. *Bortolozzo* repeatedly took action to point to the deadly threat. He also filed numerous charges.

The chemical trade union *FULC* de-

famed *Bortolozzo* as a spy paid for by overseas competitors to harm the Italian industry with his investigation. *Bortolozzo's* action received committed support from prosecutor Casson, a *PCI* member who had previously investigated the *Gladio* affair. When an announcement was published in Venice's two daily newspapers asking all the sick and the bereaved relatives to get in touch to report medical histories and working conditions, new evidence continued to come to light and 507 people joined the action.

*Bortolozzo* did not live to see the opening of the trial. On the 12 September 1995 he died in a car accident.

The trial of 31 top managers, including the leadership of the Italian chemical industry, began in March 1998. The charge: 'negligent causing of mass mortality' and 'being responsible for an environmental catastrophe' by disposing of dioxin and

the demand. But then the union decided to sign the contract after all and it became official. The union did not want to make the achievement public. We, in contrast, tried to make it known by all means imaginable.

Until 1975 the workers sat in the canteen and played cards, but they were not allowed to leave the factory. Therefore we organised a struggle for the right to leave the factory. The form of struggle was to leave after lunch without punching out. The management posted letters of dismissal, justifying it by the fact that the workers had left their work place before end of shift. At this point the union had to intervene. In the end, the solution was that on bank holidays workers were allowed to leave one hour earlier, on normal working days half an hour earlier. The employer had to hire new workers to clean the anodes. It remained that way as long as I worked in the plant, until I got arrested in 1980. After that they somehow restructured things. ■



other poisonous chemical waste in the waters and surroundings of Venice.

Only a few weeks after beginning of the trial the company bosses admitted partial responsibility and offered a 30 million settlement to the bereaved relatives of the MVC victims. Many accepted the settlement, as they did not want to wait their whole lives for payouts, as in the cases of Vajont and Seveso. Apart from the Italian state, the local authorities, trade unions and associations like the democratic physicians only 15 people continued to pursue their claim, amongst them *Gabriele Bortolozzo's* sons.

In the address by the counsel, the prosecutor found all of the 28 accused convictable of several homicides through negligence and of an outrage against the environment. Casson demanded 12 years imprisonment for each of Eugenio Cefis, former president of *ENI* and *Montedison*, Alberto Grandi, former CEO of *Montedison* and vice president of *Montefibre*, and professor Emilio Bartalini, head of *Montedison's* central health service. He demanded 185 years imprisonment in total for all of the accused.

Against all expectations, the accused were acquitted by the court on the 2nd

of November 2001. The court dismissed all evidence which had been presented and gave as grounds for the verdict that in the early 70s, when the deaths started, the accused could not have known of the production's deadly impact on the workers. Outraged, the joint plaintiffs filed an appeal together with prosecutor Casson.

The second trial commenced in the winter of 2003/04, ending on December 15th with a ruling acquitting the accused of the main points of the prosecution. A few were convicted to a sentence of one and a half years on probation.

In the civil proceedings a few workers managed to receive compensations of various amounts. ■

All facts about the trials:  
<http://www.petrolchimico.it/>

There is a documentary feature about Bortolozzo's struggle against Montedison:

**Porto Marghera -  
un inganno letale**  
(Porto Marghera - a deadly deceit)

## The production process of PVC

Monomeric vinyl chloride was polymerised into PVC in autoclaves. At Porto Marghera, obsolete working methods exposed the workers to cancer risk. Whoever had to clean MVC residues off the sealable air-and-steam-tight production vats and then fill the MVC into bags would feel, as though walking on clouds, for several days afterwards. On some days the concentration of chlorine gas was so high that the workers, who already had a sweet taste in their mouths from the gas, could only break the windows of the department. Despite this, no money was invested in less dangerous equipment, and there was even an instruction to maintain the old, decrepit machines, as little as possible, so as not to disturb production.

The individual chemical companies arranged amongst themselves to hush up the MVC risk. The organisation of work must not be challenged. Thus the affected workers were diagnosed wrongly with contagious diseases and left in the dark about the danger inherent in the objects they were working with. Numerous tumourous afflictions and deaths were the consequence.

## The contamination of the lagoon

During the trial, the excesses of the past came to the surface, the harmful production process, clouds of toxic gas, illegal toxic-waste dumps and transports, the discharge of toxic sewage into the lagoon, the contamination of the ground water. 500,000 tons of a poisonous cocktail of dioxin, lead, mercury, and arsenic have destroyed one of the most beautiful lagoons in Europe. 80 million cubic metres of industrial waste, equivalent to twice the capacity of the lagoon, was simply dumped into the sea. Another five million cubic metres of waste was dumped on the land. When toxic dumps were discovered on the factory premises twelve years ago, the company proceeded to limit the damage by simply levelling a dump and covering it with ash. Subsequently a helicopter airfield for then-manager Raul Gardini was built on top of it. ■

Information about the lagoon:  
<http://www.salve.it/uk/eco/default.htm>

### The dioxin cloud over Seveso

Saturday, 10th of July 1976, *Seveso*, on the outskirts of Milan. The chemical factory *Imesa* with 153 employees is a subsidiary company of the Swiss chemical company *Hoffmann-La Roche*. A reactor producing trichlorophenol heats up, and large quantities of dioxin escape. Only a few maintenance and temporary workers are inside the factory. The toxic cloud disseminates invisibly.

Production continued for 10 days afterwards until management admitted that a very dangerous substance had leaked from the reactor and that the surroundings might be contaminated. During these days animals of all kinds died in large numbers. The dioxin caused breathing difficulties and then chlorine acne in the inhabitants of the surrounding municipalities. Eventually a wide area was closed off and a large part of the population was evacuated. Some of the incompetent authorities' emergency measures even increased the damage done to nature and to humans. In the end, pregnant women were allowed to abort; back then abortion was still strictly forbidden in Italy. The workers' group of the neighbouring *Montedison* factory in Castellanza contacted the workers in Seveso immediately. A people's committee was established, in order to reveal the causes of the accident and to call those responsible to account. The magazine *Sapere* published an extensive report that same year. All the experts were excluded from the state's crisis management. The *Imesa* trial dragged on for years, ending in 1987 with acquittal on almost all counts. The incidents of *Seveso* made clear the recklessness of chemical factories' production and that the workers have to take the struggle against health damage into their own hands.

### Ludwigshafen-Oppau

Large chemical accidents also occurred in Germany – for example the long-forgotten explosion of a *BASF* factory in Ludwigshafen-Oppau on the 21st of September 1921, which cost 561 lives and erased an entire district.

## The new chemicals industry directive and the German unions

“The German Trade Union Federation and the chemical union *IGBCE* protested against a tightening of EU chemicals legislation. In a letter to all German members of the EU parliament they advocate the implementation of the compromise reached in parliament and the dismissal of further-reaching attempts by the environmental commission. The unions said the commission's approach diverged greatly from the agreed compromises and would endanger jobs in the chemical industry.

The criticism was levelled for example at the intention to ban and replace dangerous substances. According to the letter this was not always possible or necessary, as some of these substances could be handled safely and without danger. Furthermore, they would go on to exist on the EU market through the importation of ready-made products from non-EU countries.”  
(*Frankfurter Rundschau*, 2 Nov. 2006)

The EU parliament is currently (November 2006) debating a stricter standard for the chemicals industry, because the risks of many of the 30 000 chemical substances which have been used in the EU for many years are largely unknown. Last year the chemicals industry prevailed, imposing a 'compromise between economic efficiency and environmentalism'. According to these terms the standard should become less bureaucratic and most importantly it should not burden the European industry unduly in the international competition. The environmental commission in the meantime has made the draft a target for attack. Especially controversial is the banning of dangerous chemicals for which alternatives exist, even where cost to the industry is increased.

The environmental commission has dismissed exceptions for Airbus, which fireproofs its passenger seats with chemical substances. The leader of the *CDU/EPP* parliamentary group fears a 'disaster' if Airbus will have to test these products time-consumingly and then possibly have to do without them.

(cf. *Stuttgarter Zeitung*, 11 October 06) ■

## The struggle is worth it!

Speech by Gianni Sbrogiò in March 2006 at the University of Padua as part of a seminar on the workers' fight against death caused by asbestos. Workers from Porto Marghera and Sesto San Giovanni were present on the podium. In Italy the use of asbestos was only prohibited from 1992 (Germany: 1993, U.K.: 1985 outlawing of amphibole asbestos). Workers' deaths from the malignant tumor mesothelioma, which grows in the pleura, peritonea or pericardium, continue. Cases are expected to peak between 2010 and 2015. It is hard to diagnose this illness early and it almost always ends fatally. The workers concerned were working with asbestos mostly in the '70s: at Eternit, Breda (shipping), in train construction and at the Petrolchimico.

I want to read to you a few sentences from the flyers we made back then.

November 1972, analysis of the working conditions at the factory:  
"It emerges from the new meetings of the new departments at Petrolchimico 2 that



the conditions when compared to the already dramatically bad situation at the old plant are terrible. Everything is there: health hazard, huge workloads, noise and authoritarian conditions. A brief overview over the work conditions in the new departments:

*TDI (phosgene production): already 150 poisoned workers at the end of 1972.*

*At the CR department the noise and vibrations caused by the huge compressors are unbearable. After eight hours of work, the workers lose their sense of balance.*

*At the DL department, where perchloroethylene is produced, 70 people have already been poisoned. In August, a cloud of chloride from the CS department,*

*where chloride and caustic soda are produced by electrolysis, covered all of Porto Marghera."*

The autonomous assembly of Porto Marghera wrote in 1974: "The workers do not go to the factory to conduct inquiry but because they are forced to. Work is not a way of life, but the necessity of selling oneself so as to survive. By fighting against work, against the coercion to sell ourselves, we offend against all rules of society. And by fighting for less work, so as not to die of poisoning through work any more, we fight against health hazards. Because it damages one's health to get up every morning and go to work, it is harmful to keep to the work cycles, to the methods of production, it is harmful to do shift work, it is harmful to go home with a wage that forces you to go back to the factory the next day."

And then, in March 1975 the collective against health-damaging production wrote a pamphlet and printed it together with other factory groups, in which they notified the population and workers of the constant, i.e. 24/7, emission of vinyl chloride, a cancer-causing gas all over the areas of Marghera, Mestre and Venice. At the time, 4000 kilogrammes daily were emitted, that's 3000 kilogrammes per in-

habitant per year in the municipality of Venice.

In this situation the union asked for more money for the workers – it wanted to solve this problem by means of hazard pay only. The hazard was already obvious back then and it still is now, as in many factories it has by no means been solved. We said it can't be done like that. You can't just take a little bit more money and leave everything as it was. We invented slogans, aiming to ask how work in the factory could be organised differently from the way we have to endure it now. We said: an end to health hazard pay and we tried independently to find out how we could organise in order to spend less time at the factory.

At the Petrolchimico the workers organised for themselves different working hours in an obstinate, precise and concrete manner outside of and without the union. The work at the Petrolchimico was organised in shifts, just like today. And in order to spend less time at the factory the workers made a shift plan as a form of struggle, consisting of five instead of four shifts. So that one only had to work 36, rather than 40 hours. Thus the contractor had to find other workers during the week, in order to fill the remaining jobs. This struggle went on for a good while, then it receded. In

other factories we were able to win the reduction of working hours permanently. At Ammi the workers in zinc production had organised themselves and pushed through to work six, rather than eight hours a day, with the same pay, of course.

### **Absenteeism**

Another thing we wanted to defend was the workers' very spontaneous work attitude back then – but I think it still exists today: absenteeism. In order to protect oneself against intensification of labour, the hours, the endangering of health and against this unbearable organisation of work, the workers stayed at home and used illness as a spontaneous form of defence against the hazardous nature of work. As the Autonomous Assembly we published a small pamphlet explaining how we needed to organise so that the absentee worker could not be punished. The contractor and the health insurances would send examining doctors to check whether the worker was really ill. And we organised a kind of 'red aid', as a way of pre-empting the bosses' repressive action against this spontaneous struggle. We were supported in this by a few lawyer comrades, who defended any sacked absentee workers for free. Obviously these were very defensive forms of struggle

against the endangering of health. It was more important to avoid the health hazard of the factory completely. That's why, via a departmental committee, we contacted work medicine in Padua. Doctor comrades from there then undertook investigations in the factory for their research and we used the doctors to inform the workers of all kinds of problems they had at work. Our demand: closure of the plant, sanitation according to the technical-scientific state-of-the-art, re-opening of the plant. Wages were to be guaranteed during the whole closure time.

My question is now: is the situation today really so different from the one back then? Yes, the developed countries have made sure that all noxious work is outsourced to the underdeveloped countries. At the same time, capital has made use of precarious and illegal employment in many working conditions backwards in many sectors. Therefore not all that much has changed. But it seems to me that the will to struggle has diminished. A lot of people think the working class' problems can be solved in other ways, but you young people can experience for yourselves how work is getting more and more precarious – if there is any – and how conditions have worsened. Wage rises don't even cover inflation any more.

### **The struggle is worth it!**

I think one of the main reasons for today's situation is that they somehow managed to persuade us that struggling doesn't pay off! But I think the contrary is true: struggling does pay off! I want to emphasise another thing: capital has developed because there was a workers' struggle. In reality, each form of struggle, each demand by the workers leads to a jump in the development of capital, clearly accompanied by an improvement of the workers' living conditions. There is always the other side of the coin: in a certain way the boss succeeds in capturing the workers' struggle in order to increase his power or somehow to keep hold of it, and the working class – even if the term is a bit out of fashion today – succeeds by struggling to improve its living conditions. Surely our living conditions are not only a quantitative but also a qualitative issue. I am convinced that it can only be improved by joining forces, establishing aims and forms of struggle through which power can be taken from the bosses. ■



## The refusal of work

Porto Marghera  
Workers' Committee

(1970)



In 1973, Merve Publishers in Berlin published Toni Negri's small book *Die Krise des Plan-Staats. Kommunismus und revolutionäre Organisation*. Its appendix contains texts by Ferruccio Gambino (*Gegen den Fabrikismus, für politischen Lohn*), by the *Porto Marghera Workers' Committee* and by *Augusto Finzi*.

We are reprinting the text by the *Workers' Committee* because here workers formulate the central claims of *operismo*:

- workers' struggle is immediately political struggle, i.e. a struggle for power;
- workers are forced to work in order to control them;
- workers are a special force and stand against society in its entirety.

We did not have space here for *Augusto Finzi's* text from 1972 in which he argues for the formation of *Political Committees* and which served as material for the debate on the nation congress of *Potere Operaio*. You can read it [in German] at [wildcat-www.de](http://wildcat-www.de). If you have read it you will understand better what *Augusto Finzi* had in mind with his self-critique of 'sectarianism' in the long interview which is in the DVD as a special feature.

What does it mean to destroy the power of the bosses? Who are the bosses and what do they want? These questions seem stupid but really they are fundamental if we want to lay down our political line against work. First of all we have to say that the common sense claim that the bosses exploit the workers in order to enrich themselves is wrong. Of course this is true but the wealth of the bosses is in no proportion to their power. Agnelli for example would have to walk around dressed in gold in proportion to the cars he produces, but instead he settles for a boat and a private aeroplane, something the boss of a much more modest factory than Fiat could also afford. What Agnelli wants is to keep and develop his power, and this coincides with the development and growth of capitalism. Capitalism is an impersonal force and capitalists act as its functionaries. Actually, capitalism does not even need capitalists any more. In Russia, for example, there is capitalism although there are no capitalists. The existence of capitalism in Russia is revealed by the existence of profit. It is probably distributed "more justly" but the communist revolution does not aim at making the distribution of social profit more just, it aims at overturning the very capitalist relations of production which create profit. A social system that ensures that people

are forced to work must be overturned. In this sense the experiences of the Chinese and Cuban revolutions have to be taken into account as well.

More than anything it is in the nature of capitalism to try to conserve this power relation against the working class and to use its development to strengthen this power more and more. This means that all the machines, the technological innovations, the development of industries, just as the underdevelopment of certain areas, are used to control the working class politically. By now, there are classical examples of this capitalist behaviour; the introduction of the conveyor belt in the 1920s, for example, was a response to the revolutionary wave which shook the world in the years immediately after the First World War. They wanted to get rid of the kind of skilled working class which had made the Russian revolution of 1917 and the factory councils movement all over Europe possible. The conveyor belt deskilled all workers, pushing back the revolutionary wave and even changing the appearance of class struggle; in many countries, all this led to a definite political defeat because there in the absence of any political organisation able to adapt its intervention to the new type of workers' behaviour.

Now however, this technical structure has turned against capital by producing a massification of wage demands, and one of the main reasons for that is the flat structure of the cycle of production. Capital is therefore revolutionising this structure, and in the meantime it tries to get rid of workers and to create much wider wage differentials than currently exist, by introducing automation literally as a political attack on the working class.

In the United States, this manoeuvre has already taken place, and the only reason the bosses haven't repeated it in Italy is that they aren't sure they can control the workers' response to the attack. This shows that progress, the development much flaunted by the bosses, is nothing but an ongoing attempt to adapt the organisation of collective capital to working class attack. Technological progress is never neutral or inevitable, as the bosses and the unions have told us it is every time there is talk of redundancies caused by the introduction of new machines. Exactly because they believe in the fairytale of the neutrality of science, the unions limit those struggles to the defence of jobs and never approach the problem from the point of view of the reduction of the working day. They believe or pretend to believe that the bosses are telling the truth: that the introduction of some machine in some

department means that there is work for only let's say 100 out of 200 workers and that the rest will have to go as victims of an inevitable progress.

But the workers have a completely different logic: according to them, the introduction of the aforementioned machine could mean that instead of 100 people working 8 hours there might very well be 200 people working 4 hours. Apart from making it more bearable to remain in the factory this logic would also solve the problem of unemployment. Thus the workers are not against the machines but against those who use the machines to impose work on them. Some people say that work is necessary. We reply that the sheer amount of accumulated science (see for example the missions to the moon) is such that work can immediately be reduced to a merely peripheral aspect of human life, rather being conceived as the "very reason of human existence". Some people say that man has always worked. We reply that according to the Bible the earth is flat and the sun revolves around it. Before Galilei, this was reality, it had always been like this, it was the scientific point of view. But rather than giving scientific demonstrations the problem is revolutionising the current social order and asserting the interest of those who have materially created the conditions which make a better

society than the currently existing one possible.

Therefore the workers need to create an organisation which is capable of fighting back against the bosses' political control, capable of taking all the power necessary to make class interests triumph. Right now everything is useful for the bosses and their mechanisms of power, from science to workers' struggle itself if it does not really aim at destroying the relations of production, that is, at escaping from the political control of the bosses.

The bosses are even willing to spend money to control the workers politically and keep their power. In America, they are the ones who are going against 'progress'. For example, some factories where worker numbers had been reduced through automation were forced to return to old productive systems to re-employ workers, under massive pressure from the struggles in led mostly in America by the black unemployed. Obviously this doesn't mean the black unemployed had aimed for this result, but it shows how the bosses are using science to exercise political control over the working class. The bosses' behaviour shows two things: firstly, that progress is not neutral at all, that it is decided exclusively from the point of view of politically controlling the forces that might

curtail capitalist power; secondly, that this control is exercised mainly through work; in fact there was no way the bosses of these American factories would have reduced the working day for all in order to give work to the newly employed. They kept up the old working day even at the price of going back to working conditions which had existed before the automation of the plant. Thus capital is willing to go back, to build technically superseded machinery just to control the workers politically: to this end it is even willing to pay people whose work is completely void.

This is where the question of the refusal of work becomes central. With the current development of machines, it is possible to work much less, provided that the machines invented by modern science do not become the exclusive monopoly of the United States and the Soviet Union as currently happens, but are instead available for use throughout the world. We need to impose the workers' logic according to which many machines should be invented in order to reduce the working day more and more, tendentially making it disappear. The workers' needs are communist needs.

At this point we cannot speak of socialism any more. Socialism is what exists in the Soviet Union, a new organisation of work, but this is not what the workers

want. The workers want to work less and less until anything which effectively means coercion to work disappears.

It is not true that in this society we are free. We are free to get up to go to work every morning. „If you don't work you don't eat!“ Is this freedom? There is one thing which restricts our freedom: work. In reality, we are forced to work. The saying according to which work ennobles is an invention of the bosses. When all people are free from the need to work because there is enough for them to eat, dress and satisfy their primary desires, then there will be real freedom! We claim that already now, with the existing machines, it would be possible to realise many of those things which seem like science fiction when we talk about them like this. In the CV 16 department, for instance, during the last „collective agreement“ strikes of 1969, management kept the autoclaves running by using new instruments for the automatic operation of the facilities. The workers were at home and the facilities kept producing. On that occasion, the bosses wanted to show they were stronger, so they didn't care if they delegitimised all their talk about the need for human labour. In the Montedison nitrate plant they are using an electronic computer which automatically runs the ammonia production facilities: there too they are

trying to raise productivity without any thought of reducing the working day. In plants like these it is much easier to show that the interest of the system is in using work as a form of political control over the workers. As a matter of fact, there are very few manual operations and very little psychological stress involved; all that is left is the physical presence of the worker next to the machine, the capitalist violence which wants humans to be conditioned to and enslaved by the machine.

But which are the means to abolish all this? The goal is to break the control mechanism which capital has subordinated workers to. Workers are against society in its entirety, they are different from all the others because society in its entirety is structured against them and has even perfected itself as an answer to the movements of the working class. As we have seen, the struggle of the working class is actually the most important driving force for the development of capitalism. Think of the French May where the small factories fell into crisis: this crisis contributed to the concentration of capital and to the development of monopolies. Think of the USSR where the 1917 revolution has accelerated capitalist development so much that a backward country like czarist Russia could become one of the strongest capitalist countries in the world. Thus, ca-

pital is a power which reproduces itself independently of the volition of single individuals; therefore, abolishing capital does not mean abolishing private property but destroying the relation of production itself, it means to destroy the need to work.

Nobody can say what concrete effects this revolution will entail. Even less can we answer the question of those who ask us with what we want to replace that which we want to destroy. This is not the problem. In none of the great revolutions in history did people know beforehand what they were going to replace that which they were about to tear down, because in revolutionary times the characters of people, the relationships between the classes change so radically that it is impossible to establish any historical hypothesis.

In order to abolish capitalism, the workers will have to change human history much more profoundly and radically than the French revolution, therefore it is impossible to predict what will happen afterwards. Rather, what is important now is to see how we can destroy the existing. ■



## Participants in the events

### Augusto Finzi

Born 1941 in Venice to Jewish parents who took him to safety in a refugee camp in Switzerland after the armistice on the 8th of September 1943, when the Nazis expanded Jewish deportation policies to Italy. After the liberation he returned to Venice. He graduated as a technician in 1960 from the *Institute Pacinotti* in Mestre. He then worked for 18 years as technician at the Petrolchimico, also at the department for PVC production CV6. Initially he sympathised with the *PSIUP* and was a member of the *CGIL*.

In 1967 he discovered at the company's library an article published in *Chemical Abstracts*, which confirmed that the production of MVC had been classified as cancer-causing in Russia in 1946. Thus began his lifelong campaign against death caused by the chemicals industry and the senselessness of capitalism. During the conflict about the "harmonized" labour agreement after *Edison's* takeover of *Montecatini*, *Finzi* went from being a lone critical lone thinker to being a workers' lead-



er and organiser. After his expulsion from the trade union he helped build *Potere Operatio* in Marghera. In 1972 he played a decisive role in the temporary fusion of *Potere Operatio* and *Il Manifesto* in *Political committees*. Later again he was involved in the fusion of *Lotta Continua* and the workers' co-ordination in the *Autonomous Assembly of Porto Marghera*. He was aiming for a new form of workers' organisation without separate political leadership.

*Finzi* was co-publisher of the workers' newspapers *Lavoro Zero* and *Controlavoro*. He left the *Petrolchimico* in 1978 with no other work lined up. On the 21st of December 1979 he was arrested in the course of the *7th of April* investigations. He was held on remand for two years and eight months. He was eventually convicted, and a day-release prisoner for a few months after the trial.

From the 80s onwards, *Finzi* had been increasingly interested in herbal medicine and healthy food. He founded the club *Aminia* – friends of nature – in 1997. He gave talks and held courses on herbal medicine.

*Finzi* took part in the court cases against the *Petrolchimico*. After 10 years of court proceedings, it was established on the 7th of April 2004 that he had been made ill by asbestos, but the company was not held responsible for the deadly tumour which killed *Finzi* in June 2004. He left behind numerous pamphlets from back then as well as his own notes on the workers' organisation in Porto Marghera, which now form the basis for the 'workers'-archive' which has been named after him.

### Italo Sbrogiò

Born 1934 in Favaro on the Venetian 'mainland'. He started to work in the Porto Marghera industrial zone in the 50s and later worked for *Petrolchimico*. Member of the *PCI*. He was voted into the *Commissione Interna* in 1960 via the *CGIL*. Later he took a *PCI* seat on the city council of Venice, where he was the only worker. The party even talked of sending him into parliament in Rome.

In 1964 he first came into contact with intellectuals in Veneto (*Negri*, *Cacciari*, *Bianchini*), who introduced a new kind of debate, diametrically opposed to the *PCI*'s, where the apparatus passed the political line downwards, expecting obedience. *Sbrogiò* left the *PCI* in 1967 and started building the group *Potere Operatio* at *Petrolchimico*, together with *Finzi* and *Massa*. In 1967 they published their first flyer and their first newspaper. He was expelled from the union in June 1969.

Within *Potere Operatio* he was a strict exponent of the workers' line. In 1995 he published a book about his history and Porto Marghera. As part of the *7th of April* he was investigated for several years, but finally acquitted during the trial. He is one of the founders of the *Augusto Finzi*' workers' archive.





### **Germano Mariti**

Born 1936 in Venice. His father ran a grocery store, where he helped out. He "escaped" from a carpenter's apprenticeship into the zinc factory at the age of 19; initially this was liberating compared to his previous personal dependencies. He worked in the electroplating shop. In 1969 *Gianni Sbrogiò* started working as an accountant at the same company; he was already a member of the *political committee of Potere Operaio* at this time. As a non-union member, Mariti was elected to the first factory council at *Ammi* in 1970. Activist at the *Autonomous Assembly of Porto Marghera*. When his comrades were already in prison he continued to publish *ControLavoro* until 1981. In the course of the *7th of April* he was being investigated for many years, and it was only in 1993

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that he was finally fully acquitted. Today he is active in the rent struggle and in *Solo l'inizio*, an association that runs a food co-op and organises political events. He is a co-founder of the '*Augusto Finzi*' workers' archive.

### **Gianni Sbrogiò**

Born 1946 in Favaro in the Venetian hinterland. Higher education was out of reach and he enrolled in the business school, so as at least to be able to become a white collar employee rather than a blue collar worker. In 1962 he was employed by the *COIN* department store group chain. In 1964, when he was 19, he was made manager of a sewing department with women – a role which soon made him feel uncomfortable. He started attending evening school in 1966 and gained an accountancy degree in 1967. He was a member of the *PCI* in his hometown, where his brother Lino led the division. He experienced the student movement of 1968 mostly through reading *L'Unità* and through the debates in the local *PCI* section, where slogans such as "be wary of provocations" were spread. He joined his brother Italo's group in Porto Marghera late. He felt close to the struggling wor-



kers and no longer wanted to stand "on the outside". There was also a strike at *COIN* in 1969 – he was the only white collar employee to take part and the workers called him "the foreman who was also on strike" from then on. He left the *PCI* after its national congress in 1969. At the end of the same year he was employed by *Ammi* (formerly *Montepioni Montevecchio*). Together with *Germano Mariti* they built their own factory committee. Produced flyers against health-damaging work.

In the course of the investigations of the *7th of April* he was arrested on the 24th of January 1980, charged with "forming an armed gang" and "attempted robbery" at *Ammi*.

In the nick he met lots of old comrades. Together with non-political prisoners they fought for better conditions in the prison.

In 1983 he took part in the initiative for dissociation from the armed struggle and was relocated to Rebibbia (Rome). He was sentenced to a long period of imprisonment in 1984, but because of the long time he'd already been on remand the sentence was finally halved. Only by means of a hunger strike was he finally able to bring about his release on bail after four and a half years of imprisonment.

### **Bruno Massa**

Technician at *Petrolchimico*, member of the *Workers' committee of Potere Operaio*. After the struggles of 1968 he was punished with transferral to a factory in Abruzzo. He resigned and worked as librarian at the university of Venice. He joined the *PSIUP*, an organisation close to *il manifesto*, and later the *PCI*. Died 2003.

### **Guido Bianchini**

Born 1926 in Verona, he was one of Italy's youngest partisans. He lived in Ferrara and Padua. At the end of the 50s he was a member of the *PSI*, where he met *Negri* and *Quadermi Rossi*. Co-founder of the *Potere Operaio Veneto Classe Operaia* editorial group. He was involved in *operismo* from the earliest beginnings and earned

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his money as pharmaceuticals salesman for a long time, until he found a job as a technician at the university of Padua; simultaneously, he did workers' inquiries in Veneto and Emilia-Romagna. He was one of the people already distributing flyers outside the *Petrolchimico* in 1964. In the early 1970s, in *Quaderni del Progetto*, he introduced things like the *diffuse factory* and the socialized worker (*operaio sociale*) into the discussion. He was arrested in the course of the *7th of April 1979* and 1980. While in prison he graduated in chemistry. He was acquitted in the trial. *Bianchini* died in 1998 in Padua.

#### **Antonio Negri**

Born 1933. Became a member of the *PSI*-left in Padua, edited its weekly paper *Il Progresso Veneto*. In the editorial groups of *Quaderni Rossi*, *Classe Operaia*, and *Potere Operaio*. Temporary chairman of the national organisation of *Potere Operaio*.

In 1967 he became professor at the Institute of Political Science in Padua. Arrested on the *7th of April 1979* and charged with forming an armed gang and high treason. Released after being elected to parliament on the *Radical Party* list. Escaped to Paris, where he was tolerated

by the Socialist government, along with many other exiles from Italy, and worked as lecturer at the university. In 1997 he returned to Italy and was arrested again. Spent some time in prison and then lived freely in Rome. Today he lives in Venice. Numerous publications, including many available in English. Today he is well-known mostly because of the book *Empire*, which he wrote with Michael Hardt.

#### **Massimo Cacciari**

Born 1944 in Venice. Philosopher and currently mayor of Venice. He was a member of *Potere Operaio* and then joined the *PCI*. In the 70s he was in charge of the industry commission of the *PCI* in Venice. Between 1976 and 1983 a member of parliament in Rome, and also member of the industry committee. After the death of *PCI* leader Berlinguer, Cacciari left the party and joined more moderate currents of the centre-left-coalition. Politically he now belongs to the *Margherita* (Daisy) alliance of parties. Mayor of Venice from 1993 until 2000 and again since 2005.

In the 1970s he became known in the German-speaking world for his essay *Qualifikation und Klassenbewusstsein*, published in 1970 by *Verlag Neue Kritik*



#### **Ferruccio Brugnaro**

Born in 1936 in Mestre, worked in Porto Marghera since the 1950s. Active in the factory council. In 1965 started distributing poems as leaflets to the workers. Bertelli made songs out of some of them.

#### **Gabriele Bortolozzo**

Born 1934. Employed at the *Petrolchimico* for 32 years. An activist against the deadly work in the factory since the 1970s. He set in motion the legal case against the management of the *Petrolchimico*. He died in a car accident in 1995. The court opened the case in 1998.

#### **Nerone Piccolo**

Worker at *Breda*, member of *CGIL* and *PCI*.

#### **Giorgio Brazzolotto**

Worker at the *SAVA* aluminium factory. Member of the *CGIL*.



**The young workers** discussing over the kitchen table, fought (in vain) against the closure of their department, *CAPROLATTAME* in *Petrolchimico*. They are unionists and members of left parties.

## Glossary

**DC** – Democrazia Cristiana. Christian Democratic Party.

**PCI** – Partito Comunista Italiano. Italian Communist Party. Today DS – Democratici di Sinistra (left Democrats).

**PSI** – Partito Socialista Italiano, Socialist Party.

**PSIUP** – Partito Socialista Italiano d'Unità Proletaria, Italian Socialist Party of Proletarian Unity, left splinter group of the **PSI**. Existed from 1964 until 1972 and played an important role in the workers struggles 1968/69 in Valdarno and at Fiat.

**CGIL** – Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro. Formerly communist union confederation.

**CISL** – Confederazione Italiana Sindacati Lavoratori. Christian union confederation.

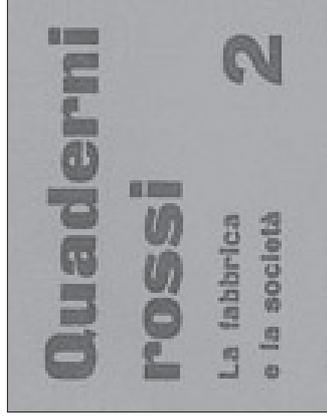
**UIL** – Unione Italiana del Lavoro. Right wing, social democratic union confederation.

**FIOM** – Federazione Italiana Operai Metallmeccanici. Metal workers union of the CGIL.

**CISNAL** – Confederazione Italiana Sindacati Nazionali dei Lavoratori. Union confederation close to the fascist **MSI** party. Today renamed to **UGL**.

**Commissione Interna** – Internal Commission. Union shop stewards in the company, elected by all employees. Re-introduced in 1943 with the legal right to sign collective contracts with individual companies; which they then lost in 1947. At the end of the 1960s they were replaced by the department representatives and the factory councils.

**Consiglio di Fabbrica** – Factory Council. The election (and retraction) of department representatives which was practiced during the 1969/69 struggles was then taken up by the unions to create a new



representation structure in the company, which replaced the *Commissione Interna*. The workers statute of 1970 gave the right to union representation in the workplace (**RSA**), but does not dictate a particular form: this is left up to the union itself. In 1993 the three union confederations united over the election of 'unified union representation' (**RSU**). Two thirds of the members were voted directly from a list, one third of the places were allocated to the unions, who had signed the collective contract.

**Il Manifesto** – The Manifesto. Oppositional group inside the **PCI** around Rossana Rossanda and Lucio Magri, who were also members of parliament. In June 1969 the first edition of their newspaper **Il Manifesto** appeared, in December 1969 they



were thrown out of the party. Since 1971 **Il Manifesto** has been published as a daily paper. In 1974 they merged with the Party of Proletarian Unity **PdUP**. **Il Manifesto's** 1970 'Theses on communism' were also discussed widely in West Germany.

**Lotta Continua** – Permanent Struggle. Biggest extra-parliamentary group of the radical left, founded in 1969 from a split in the worker-student movement in Turin, which had massively supported the strike at Fiat. **LC** did neighbourhood work under the slogan 'let's take the city'. Dissolved in 1976. Published a daily newspaper of the same name that ran until 1982.

**Classe Operaia** – Working class. Political newspaper, formed by the 'interventionist' wing of the **Quaderni Rossi**. Published from 1964 to 1967.

**Quaderni Rossi** – Red Notebooks. A newspaper stated in Turin in 1961 by Panzieri, who had taken part in the workers inquiry. The operaism tendency came out of this paper.

**Comitato Operaio di Porto Marghera** – Porto Marghera Workers' Committee. Formed by the **Potere Operaio** group in Venice, i.e. those workers who had taken up contact with the intellectuals from **Potere**

Operaio, in order to bring Potop's political line into the factories. There were also other workers in the Committee, some of them belonged to the workers groups in the *Petrochimico* or at *Ammi*. They never went to Potop's national meetings, but they knew that there was this connection. The Committee had its own meeting place, which was open to the public after the shift. The discussions were about concrete struggles and demands. In the beginning the discussions were open to 'externals': those who were not directly involved in the struggles, but rather sympathized with Potop and had other jobs. In those times there was a more movement like atmosphere. The actual responsible work however remained on the shoulders of about 15 people. With Potop's crisis in 1972 the workers wanted to limit participation to workers and exclude externals, who were seen to only want to debate political lines and armed actions. Against the basic line of Potop, this eventually led to a split between economic and political struggle, i.e. between a union struggle and a political-military one. In this situation the Workers Committee sought contact to other 'autonomous' workers' groups in other cities at *Alfa*, *Pirelli*, *Siemens* etc. Only comrades who worked in factories themselves were allowed to take part at their joint meetings. After three years ho-

wever the same problems came up again, as some people brought up the organisational question and pushed the Coordination towards the *Autonomia Operaia Organizzata*. The Workers Committee did not get involved with that.

*Assemblea Autonoma di Porto Marghera* – Autonomous Assembly of Porto Marghera. Formed in 1972 in the reorientation



phase when the chemical workers rejected the new collective contract. The Workers Committee, together with workers from *Lotta Continua* and other workers who had left the union, tried to organize this discontent. To be an Autonomous Assembly meant to be autonomous from political groups, from the unions and from political parties. It was supposed to be both a mass organization and a political organization. It was an attempt to build another structure based on all the experiences of the previous years instead of starting from scratch again, and to expand from there. They used the old meeting point of the Workers Committee, but also the Social Centres in Marghera. Many workers who took part did not belong to any political group. The Autonomous Assembly functioned until 1975 when the phase of the *Autonomia Operaia Organizzata*.

*Autonomia Operaia Organizzata* – Organised Workers Autonomy. A party project after 1975. An attempt by various groups within the *Autonomia* to organize the countercultural Movement of 1977.

*Comitati Politici* – Political Committees. Attempt to merge *Potere Operaio* with *Il Manifesto* in common *Political Committees*, which only lasted a few months. Pushed ahead by Finzi in particular.

*Potere Operaio Veneto-Emiliano* – Newspaper published by the local editorial group of *Classe Operaia*, it ran for three years and then merged into the national *Potere Operaio* newspaper.

*Prima Linea* – First Row. Armed group formed in 1976 by former *Lotta Continua* and *Potere Operaio* members. Its members refused to go underground, in order to remain present within the movement. Disbanded in 1981.

*Brigate Rosse* – Red Brigades. Formed in 1970. Largest armed group in Italy. The first actions were directed against foremen and company executives in factories. Later they strategy aimed at the 'heart of the state', including the kidnapping of Aldo Moro, the head of the DC.

*Autoriduzione* – Self reduction of rent, electricity and gas bills, food prices. Collective form of struggle in the early 1970s.

*Scala mobile* – literally: Escalator; official Italian name: *contingenza*. Automatic cost of living bonus on top of the wage using a points system. Abolished in 1977. Due to the high inflation rates in the 1970s, the bonus part of the wage formed an increasingly large part of the wage. For

this reason the wages of all wage workers increasingly converged.

**Strategy of tension** – From 1969 to 1984 members of the Italian military secret service SISMI (previously called SID), neo-fascists and parts of the *Gladio* network began a swathe of terror attacks and murders in Italy killing more than 200 people and injuring about 600. The two most spectacular attacks marked the beginning and the end of this phase: Piazza Fontana in Milan in 1969 (16 dead) and the train station in Bologna in 1980. Through the dissemination of false information and falsified evidence, a secret service network ensured that the left were blamed for these crimes.

**Historical Compromise** – from the 1973 military coup in Chile, PCI head Berlinguer drew the conclusion that the PCI could not come to power through elections without risking right-wing attempts of authoritarian infiltration. His strategic line was to cooperate with the democratic parties, in order to reach a consensus of reformist politics. Parts of the PCI and the DC left hoped for a coalition government which never came about. In practice, the historical compromise meant the three union confederations' 'politics of sacrifice' since 1976 and support for Andreotti's DC government of

'national solidarity' in 1978 for restoring the Italian state. When parliament were due to discuss the government programme on the 16th March 1978 (when the PCI had just won the majority for the first time) the *Red Brigades* kidnapped DC head Aldo Moro, the most important mediating figure of this alliance. In the ensuing repression against the radical left, PCI politicians took the hardest stance of all.

7. April 1979 – On this day the wave of arrests against the members of *Autonomia* began.

**Movement of 1977** – Cultural and youth movement which started in Bologna in the spring of 1977 and grew quickly mainly in the university towns. It did not really have roots in the previous movements and clearly had a different social base, which marked them apart from the movements of 1968 and 1973. They refused the political elites, including those of 1968, criticised the groups such as *Lotta Continua* and *Autonomia Organizzata* and broke with the unions. Many activists later ended up in armed groups, many of them were wrecked by the systematic influx of Heroin into the movement.

### Further Reading:

#### Operaismo Dossier

[http://www.wildcat-www.de/dossiers/operaismus/operaismus\\_dossier.htm](http://www.wildcat-www.de/dossiers/operaismus/operaismus_dossier.htm)

A collection of texts and interviews around *operaismo* in German (not only) from *Wildcat*. This includes out-of-print texts by Alquati, Panzieri, Tronti and others.

Books:

*Steve Wright: Storming Heaven.*

A theoretical history of Operatism, Pluto Press, 2002



Title page of the Rosso newspaper 1977:  
You have paid dearly,  
You have not paid it all!