



The Italian Factory Councils and the Anarchists ★

Anarchist Federation (London)

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The Italian Factory Councils and the Anarchists

Introduction

The history of the Italian factory councils of 1920-1921 deserves to be more widely known outside academic circles and revolutionary groups. That's why we have brought out this cheap pamphlet. We believe that the events surrounding the factory councils should be highlighted for a number of reasons.

1] They point to alternative forms of organisation that appear at times of revolutionary ferment. The Italian factory councils are just an example among many of the capacity of the working class to create new forms of organisation of society. We could also cite the Paris Commune of 1871, the factory committees and soviets in Russia in 1905 and 1917, the workers councils in Germany, Hungary, and as far away as Ireland, which sprang up in the aftermath of the 1917 Russian Revolution, the forms of organisation experimented with by workers of the countryside and to a lesser extent of the towns during the Spanish revolution of 1936, the Hungarian workers councils of 1956, and to a lesser extent the factory and student occupation committees in May 1968 in France and the factory committees and councils (cordones) in Chile in the 70s and similar bodies during the Portuguese Revolution of 1974.

2] despite the many criticisms we have of Antonio Gramsci- above all his intellectual weakness in failing to break with the Bolshevik model of organisation- we know that he was a supporter of the factory councils and of working class insurrection. We know what he was NOT- a supporter of reformism and of abandonment of class struggle. The Eurocommunists and the social-democratic left (these days there is little to distinguish between them) have used Gramsci's later prison writings- which were round about and obscure in order to get past the Fascist censors- to justify all their weasel twists and turns.

3] Outside of Turin the movement was predominantly driven by Anarchists and Anarcho-sindicalists- something which our "friends" the Leninists don't want you to know about.

We would like to point out that we do not regard the experience of the Italian factory councils as completely without criticism.

The struggle was too confined to the factories and workshops themselves, and

not enough was done to move mass action to the streets, in spite of the urging of anarchists like Malatesta. The factory councils were an expression of the skilled and semi-skilled industrial working class, they did not represent and vocalise the interests of other sections of the working class, and were therefore an expression of a minority of the class.

Factory councils themselves are only revolutionary in a revolutionary situation. In a non-revolutionary situation within present capitalist society, any factory council would be under pressure to act as a mediator between the workers and the employing class, and so be subject to cooption and recuperation. In a revolutionary situation factory councils have to imply their own withering away as workers' councils into a new society where work as labour will disappear. As well as this, it is not enough to develop a coordination of councils if at the same time it is not linked up to the dismantling of the State apparatus. Another necessity is the development of neighbourhood councils in tandem with those in the workplaces. In these early decades of the 21st century, social life (at least in Europe and North America) has changed considerably. Such a linkage would involve all those sections of the proletariat that would otherwise be disenfranchised if new forms of social organisation were only confined to the workplace. In this way workers on short term contracts, the unemployed, the retired, young people, those doing unwaged work (carers, housewives, househusbands) could be fruitfully associated with a movement of social change. These sections of the proletariat would definitely enrich such a movement and on the political, economic and social level would contribute greatly to a successful outcome. The development of such forces would also have a key role in the distribution of products produced by the workplaces, because without self-organised distribution networks, such production would have no sense. Neither should the workers of the land be ignored. It is true that large occupations of the land occurred in southern Italy at the same time as the factory councils and in fact the well known Italian anarchist Camillo Berneri regarded these as more radical and important than the factory occupations. In Britain this would primarily involve agricultural workers. In other parts of the world, including parts of Europe, if numerically the peasantry has considerably diminished since 1920, its qualitative importance still remains. An urban proletariat cannot be triumphant without the help of its rural equivalent, as the history of previous revolutions has shown.

It is very easy long after an event to dwell on the weaknesses of a movement. But it is important to look at these weaknesses so that the same mistakes are not made again.

The Italian Factory Councils

The First World War had disastrous consequences for Italy, resulting in widespread poverty. At the end of the war the following scenario began to develop. Sections of the ruling class organised in right wing parties began to use combatants returning from the front against the revolutionary movement that was developing in Italy.

From May 1919, the revolutionary syndicalists organised inside the Unione Sindacale Italiana and in other union groupings, the anarchists, and certain Marxists like Gramsci began to advance the idea of factory councils.

The Socialist Party (PSI) and the union central that it controlled, the Confederazione Generale del Lavoro (CGL) worked towards sabotaging any development of any revolutionary movement among the workers. Ludovico D'Aragona and his co-leaders of the CGL were wedded to a gradualism and reformism found within all the social democratic parties throughout Europe, including the British Labour Party. They looked to an institutionalised leadership of the reformist trade unions and of the parliamentarians of the PSI to carry out gradual reforms within capitalism. The CGL had concluded deals with big employers like Pirelli and Fiat before World War One leading on to the development of professional strata of union bureaucrats.

This was aggravated during World War One when workers were subjected to severe labour discipline (for example being forced to stay in the same job with imprisonment as a penalty). The CGL leaders collaborated in this, entering the works committees created by the government to impose this labour discipline. The CGL leaders also collaborated in a commission set up by the government for reconstruction after the war, alongside the employers.

This had triggered resentment among the Italian working class at this blatant collaboration. The Italian Federation of Metal Workers (FIOM), which was a member of the CGL, had played a leading part in this collaboration. In March 1919 metal workers seized advantage of the employers' temporary weakness. These were preparing to move over from war production to civilian production, and in the process were willing to offer concessions on pay and working hours, in return for greater control of production. FIOM agreed to these concessions in return for curbs on immediate strike action and the banning of workers meetings during work hours. This met with fierce opposition among members of the Turin section of FIOM. As a result shop floor organisation in opposition to the FIOM hierarchy began to develop.

For their part anarchists had been agitating in the workplaces for committees of direct action since 1908, in opposition to the PSI/CGL bloc. By 1912, 90,000 workers were involved in these committees. At Modena that year, the *Unione Sindacale Italiana* was created, basing itself on the early practices of the French CGT and the IWW in America, and. By 1914 the USI had 150,000 members. Throughout 1919 the USI had been calling for a revolutionary united front of the grassroots between workers organised within the USI, the CGL and the independent rail and maritime unions.

On May 1st 1919 some activists on the left of the PSI like Angelo Tasca, Antonio Gramsci, Umberto Terracini, and Palmiro Togliatti, set up a magazine called *Ordine Nuovo* (New Order) in Turin. This had links with workers in the metallurgical factories and dedicated itself to the theory and practice of shopfloor organisation among workers. It was willing to open its pages to those outside the PSI and adopted an open attitude.

Militant workers in the Turin factories were occupying themselves with the problems of practical organisation on the shopfloor. This was typically based on a group of workers of between 15 to 20, within a particular workshop or department, and which elected a delegate subject to immediate recall if necessary. The first of these organisations developed in August 1919 at the Fiat works. An assembly of these delegates then elected an internal commission, which reported back to this assembly, now referred to as a factory council.

In October, delegates from 20 workplaces set up a Study Committee for Factory Councils to work on a programme. This was confirmed at a following meeting, which drew in more delegates and spoke for 30 factories. The programme called for re-election of delegates every six months, with frequent referenda on social and technical questions and to call frequent meetings to consult with the main body of workers before making decisions.

For their part the ruling class and State were also preparing. Prime Minister Nitti reorganised and strengthened the police force in late 1919, and created a Royal Guard of 25,000.

In March 1920 many factories were occupied in the industrial centres of Milan and Turin, whilst in the south peasants started occupying the land of the big landowners. The employers created their own organisation *Confindustria* on 7th March 1920 and discussed how they could stop the strikes and destroy the councils.

On 27th March 1920 *Ordine Nuovo* published an appeal from the anarchists in

the UAI to workers and peasants for a national congress of councils. This appeal was counter-signed by the editorial board of Ordine Nuovo, the executive committee of the Turin section of the PSI, the Committee of Study for Factory Councils of Turin, and by the Turin Libertarian Group. However the congress never took place, overtaken as it was by events.

On April 11th the employers demanded that the function of the factory councils should be kept within the limits of the old Internal Commissions.

The PSI and the CGL worked towards sabotaging the situation, offering no support. Meeting on April 19th-20th, the Socialist Party national conference, which had been expressly moved from Turin to Milan, was the occasion to denounce the strikes and occupations and to offer vicious criticism of its Turin Section. As a result, the movement was isolated, and police action led to the return of the factories and the land to their owners from April 23rd.

There was a multiplication of strikes in July-August. The new form of strikes that developed was adopted at a mass level: go-slows and factory occupations. The first factory occupations were in Liguria (Sestri Ponente and Conigliano) at the initiative of the metal workers. On 29th July the following motion was passed at Sestri:

“Considering that the strike is not realisable in present conditions and faced with the attitude of the industrialists whose interest is to dissuade proletarian energies; that obstructionism is faced with great practical difficulties; Considering that to energetically and rapidly face up to the bosses’ resistance one has recourse to all means and ABOVE ALL TO THE SIMULTANEOUS AND GENERAL INVASION OF THE FACTORIES BY THE WORKERS”.

The occupation by the metalworkers who were members of the USI only lasted a few days but had an enormous moral effect on the working class.

An example had been given and factory occupations spread from Liguria to Turin and even as far as Naples. At the moment where the metalworkers of all Italy avoided a defeat of their agitation for collective deals, they turned to the occupation of all the factories (August 1920). More than 500,000 workers were involved in this movement.

The agitation of the metalworkers had endured for a fair while when on 21st August 1920, the FIOM and the national metalworkers union of the USI called for the start of a go-slow. After several weeks with little result the USI launched an appeal to the workers:

“It does not seem to us that this form of struggle is adapted to the gravity of the

moment and to the formidable resistance of the bosses; this form of struggle can be prolonged for ever, tiring the masses, weakening their fighting spirit, exhausting their energies without for all that hitting the industrial class in a decisive fashion. Obstructionism (i.e. the go-slow) can also push the industrialists to a rapid repression with the general or partial lockout which makes more difficult the taking possession by the workers of the workshops when access is hindered with the help of the public forces concentrated in the places willed by the bosses...

We can wait a few days more for the result of the experience of obstructionism, no longer. The struggle must, in our opinion, be of brief duration and must seriously and gravely hit the bosses' interests...

The taking possession of the factories by the workers must be done simultaneously and promptly, before being hit again by the lockout and to defend it with all means and all forces that the organised proletariat disposes of.

...We have decided to make the workers of other industries and of agriculture enter the lists. To other organisations, then, the duty of taking up positions, to hold themselves ready for attack on a war footing”.

The *Sindacato Ferroviaria Italiana* (SFI) was created in 1907. Whilst refusing to join the USI, it had been dominated by libertarian and revolutionary syndicalist elements. Well implanted among conductors, it had organised a victorious general strike in February 1920. The leadership of the SFI decided to call a unitary meeting on 28-29th August 1920 in Bologna in which participated Bonazzi and Malatesta for the UAI and Gigi Damiani for Umanita Nova. Also taking part were the USI, *Federazione Lavatori del Mare* with Giuletti, the CGL with D'Aragona, and the *Federazione Lavatori del Porto* etc. The rail workers proposed a united front and Malatesta gave support in principle. However the Socialists rejected this. Anarchists hoped to win the base of the PSI and the CGL which were won already to unitary theses.

On the 30th-31st August the Alfa-Romeo workers were locked out and the workshops were occupied by the forces of the State. This incident was to spark off the great wave of factory occupations of September.

This involved not just the metal workers of the car plants, steel mills and machine tool factories, but also the workers of the textile industries, the breweries and distilleries, the ports and the railways. In fact the railway workers defied management and used freight trains to supply the occupied factories.

A regional meeting (September 7th 1920) of Ligurian unions convening at Sampierdarena agreed on an occupation of Genoa and all the ports of Liguria and “to follow it up by an occupation of every branch of production”. The USI, meeting a day before in Milan, had dwelt on the need for a simultaneous

occupation of industries, ports, mines, fields and mansions. At the Sampierdarena meeting, the anarchist Garino stopped the call for instant mobilisation by saying that in three days time, the CGL would call for a general occupation and that they should stay their hand until then. In the same way that Gramsci misjudged the ability of the Socialist Party to transform itself in a revolutionary situation, Garino too seems to have misjudged the CGL leadership and its key role in obstructing action by its membership, whose revolutionary élan he thought strong enough to surmount the obstacles of bureaucratic manipulation.

For their part the leaders of the CGL, meeting between 9-11th September refused to support any revolutionary action and were happy to call for the recognition of union control in the workplace. This permitted the bureaucrats to demobilise the struggle and to have a resolution adopted by the councils for a preparation for a return to work in exchange for the unions' right to "economic control" in the workplaces. This was put to a vote and carried by 591,245 votes against 409,596 and 93,623 abstentions. On the 15th September 1920, the Giolitti government, met at Turin with the CGL and other unions to reach an agreement on this. This was signed on the 22nd September and on the 4th October workers gave up their strikes and occupations.

Severe economic crisis hit home in November 1920, leading to heavy unemployment and a collapse of working class morale. Fascist squads began to organise, starting a terror offensive in the rural areas of the north. By December the elections of workshop commissars and internal commissions in Turin attracted only a 15% vote of the workers.

The employers started to pour funds into the fascist movement in January 1921, which began a redoubled offensive, attacking unions, Socialist Party buildings and members, cooperatives, peasant leagues and workers clubs.

The defeat of the councils movement connived at by the leaders of the unions and the Socialist Party had opened the way to savage reaction and the march on Rome in 1922 by Mussolini and his fascist squads leading to the establishment of fascism in Italy and its colonies. The fascists exacted revenge on working class Turin in December of that year, their squads rampaging through the streets. They destroyed the office of L'Ordine Nuovo and the anarchist Pietro Ferrero, one of the inspiring figures of the councils movement, was battered to death on the streets.

Anarchist support of the councils

The art of lying alla Gramsci

"To tell the truth is a communist and revolutionary act". Gramsci, 1919.

Writing on the council movement for the Executive Committee of the International in 1920, Gramsci wrote that: "At the head of the movement to form factory councils were the communists belonging to the socialist section and the trade union organisations". As for the anarchists, they "also took part and tried to oppose their bombastic rhetoric to the clear and precise language of the Marxist communists".

Further in the report Gramsci positively does not tell the truth when he says : "The propoganda of the anarchists and syndicalists against party discipline and the dictatorship of the proletariat had no influence on the masses even when the strike ended in defeat because of the treachery of the leaders".

But in fact outside Turin itself the council movement was of USI and anarchist inspiration.

Ancona was a stronghold of anarchism and the UAI and had initiated the Red Week uprising. In February 1920, just 4 months before Gramsci was writing his report, the UAI had moved its HQ to Milan and began bringing out its paper *Umanita Nova*, edited by Malatesta. It claimed a circulation of 50,000. In fact by summer 1920, the socialist Anna Kuliscioff was to warn that the morning trams in Turin were full of workers reading *Umanita Nova*, and thought that its circulation had reached 100,000 and that "anarchism rules the piazza". In addition the anarchist Luigi Galleani, deported from Italy, also returned and restarted his paper *Cronaca Sovversiva* at the end of January 1920 in Turin.

Malatesta writing in *Umanita Nova* of March 17th, 1920 observed: "the masses were with us; we were called to the factories to speak, to encourage and to advise the workers, and would have needed to be in a thousand places at once to satisfy all their requests. Wherever we went it was the anarchists' speeches which were applauded while the reformists had to withdraw or make themselves scarce.

"The masses were with us because we were the best interpreters of their instincts, their needs and interests".

The USI transferred its paper *Guerra di Classe* (Class War) to Milan in March 1920. This reflects its spectacular growth. In particular it expanded in the small

workshops of the metal industry in Liguria. There were estimated to be 30,000 in the metalworkers union of the USI. It had built strongholds in Sestri Ponente, with 14,000 members and in Savona and La Spezia. It increased its overall membership to 300,000 by 1919, and by 1920 it may have reached a peak of 800,000!

In Turin itself, there was no USI branch until summer 1920. There anarchists and anarchosyndicalists worked inside FIOM. Pietro Mosso, anarchist and engineer had collaborated on Ordine Nuovo from the beginning and contributed many articles. The Turin Libertarian Group had Maurizio Garino and Pietro Ferrero among its members, and they had enormous influence among metal workers. These were the people Gramsci HAD to collaborate with.

As can be seen from the declarations of both USI and UAI elsewhere in this pamphlet, they both wholeheartedly supported the council movement. The anarchists however, were conscious of the insufficiencies of the movement and worked within it to radicalise it and to attempt to push it towards more revolutionary positions. As Masini noted much later: "The councils half solved the problem of the State: they expropriated from the State its social functions, but they did not infringe on its anti-social functions. They reduced the State to a pleonasm, (that is, a redundant expression. Ed) but they did not eliminate this pleonasm, they emptied the State apparatus of its content but they did not destroy it. But since one cannot defeat the State by ignoring it, by the fact that at all moments it can make its presence felt in putting into play its mechanism of constraint and sanction, this mechanism must be destroyed too. The councils could not accomplish this operation and for that it demands the intervention of an organised political force: the specific movement of the class, which carries through such a mission. Only thus can it be avoided that the bourgeois, thrown out of the door in his industrialist outfit, does not come back through the window disguised as a policeman".

Malatesta again: "The occupation of the factories and the land suited perfectly our programme of action.

"We did all we could, through our papers (Umanita Nova daily and the various anarchist and syndicalist weeklies) and by personal action in the factories, for the movement to grow and spread. We warned the workers of what would happen to them if they abandoned the factories; we helped in the preparation of armed resistance, and explored the possibilities of making the revolution without hardly a shot being fired if only the decision had been taken to use the arms that had been accumulated.

"We did not succeed, and the movement collapsed because there were too few of us and the masses were insufficiently prepared".

“For we anarchists, the movement is very serious and we must do everything we can to channel it towards a massive extension. We must lay down a precise programme which can be realized, completed, perfected in radical action every day; we must foresee today the difficulties and the obstacles of tomorrow, so that the movement does not run aground and break up on the rocks of reformism”.

Gramsci on the anarchists and the councils

An address to the anarchists

This originally appeared in Gramsci's paper Ordine Nuovo on April 3rd 1920 and is excerpted here

“The Italian anarchists are very touchy, as well as arrogant: they have always been convinced of being the repository of revealed revolutionary truth; this conviction has become ‘monstrous’ since the Socialist Party, under the influence of the Russian Revolution and Bolshevik propaganda, has taken over certain fundamental points of Marxist doctrine, and is spreading them in a simple and popular way among the mass of workers and peasants. For a while now the Italian anarchists have been doing nothing but letting off steam with the satisfied observation:

“We have said it all along. We were right!” without ever posing themselves these questions: Why, if we have been right, have we not been followed by the majority of the Italian proletariat? Why has the majority of the Italian proletariat always followed the Socialist Party and the union bodies allied to the Socialist Party? (Why has the Italian proletariat always allowed itself to be ‘fooled by the Socialist Party and by the union bodies allied to the Socialist Party’.) The Italian anarchists could only answer these questions exhaustively after a great gesture of humility and contrition: only after having abandoned the anarchist point of view.”

Gramsci failed to see the profound incompatibility between the factory councils and the Party which spoke of representing the working class. He attempted to defend his position and the anarchists' rejection of the Socialist Party by accusing them of hypocrisy.

He wrote: “In Umanita Nova of 19th August, comrades Ferrero and Garino bitterly complained because the published declaration of our group for the elections to the executive commission of the Turin section contained an “allusion to” the well-known demagogic phraseology of the anarchists and syndicalists”. Garino and Ferrero lost their patience when reading this allusion: they demanded how we could collaborate with *demagogues* on a basis as important as the factory

councils: they reproached us for forgetting that it was with such demagogues that proletarian unity is really made”.

Gramsci declared that the problem of being for or against the Workers' State did not exist, it was a question of the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie or the dictatorship of the proletariat. Those who denied this are “like the charlatan who offers a barley water infusion to a victim of the plague”. He went on to say: “Individually, the question changes: Garino and Ferrero are two workers, two good workers professionally, two sincere militants loyal to the proletarian class; It is unimportant to us that they are anarchists, if their activity is real and concrete. In historical creation, all workers are “libertarians””. Finally Gramsci develops the idea that one must unite to construct the State and that he hopes that the two comrades will be convinced by historic determinism!

Gwyn Williams generously comments:” This was not likely to convince Ferrero and Garino: like Gramsci’s argument on the party, it rests entirely on the *organic* state realizing itself in the crisis of the mode of production, carrying all workers, whatever their personal ideology, into the proletarian dictatorship: and while the distinction between the essentially libertarian mass institutions of the emerging state on the one hand, and the disciplined party on the other offers scope for ‘freedom’, it is less clear how this ‘freedom’ is to be realized after the transition into his communism managed by his communist party- except of course in terms of the kind of libertarianism inherent in Lenin’s *State and Revolution*. In terms of brutal and vulgar reality, this argument makes anarchist comrades in the movement into sick men, whom ‘History’ is curing, at best subordinate comrades on probation”. p. 198 *Proletarian Order*

Gramsci also fell down on his conception of communist society. He could not envisage it other than as one directed from on high, in the same way as capitalist society was and is. “ There is the beginning of a great historic process, where the labouring mass becomes conscious of its indivisible unity based on production, based on the concrete act of work, and it gives an organic form to this consciousness in constructing a hierarchy, a hierarchy which comes from its deepest recesses”.(8th November 1919).

In An Address to the Anarchists already mentioned above, Gramsci lauds the Socialist Party, contrasting it with the anarchists. “Socialist pessimism has found a terrible confirmation in the recent events: the proletariat has been plunged into the purest abyss of misery and oppression that the mind of man could conceive. The ideologues of anarchism have nothing with which to face such a situation, bar an external and empty pseudorevolutionary language, interwoven with the stalest motifs of a foolish and vulgar optimism. The Socialists bring to bear

energetic action to organise the best and most conscious elements in the working class: the Socialists strive in every way to prepare, through these vanguard elements, the largest masses to conquer for themselves freedom, and the power capable of guaranteeing this same freedom". Events were to prove the opposite of what Gramsci stated. Apart from a minority the Socialist Party, together with the unions it controlled, worked actively towards demobilising and sabotaging the councils movement, whilst the anarchists, whether organised in the UAI or in networks like that around Luigi Galleani, and anarcho-syndicalists and revolutionary syndicalists, whether organised in the USI or within the FIOM etc, did their utmost to put the working class on a war footing.

Gramsci was to persist with the misconception that the PSI could be transformed to as late as 1920, when he delivered a paper- Towards a Renewal of the Socialist Party- to its National Council on April 19th-20th. He admitted that the "Socialist Party is still a merely parliamentary party, immobilised within the narrow limits of bourgeois democracy and pre-occupied solely by the superficial political declarations of the governmental caste. It does not possess the features of party autonomy which should characterise the revolutionary proletariat and the revolutionary proletariat alone". However despite his extremely severe criticisms of the Party, he still believed that it was possible to change it from a "petty bourgeois parliamentary party" to one that represented the revolutionary proletariat. By now he admitted that " in many places anarchist tendencies ...have tried to get the upper hand", and that if "The Party cannot unify and coordinate its efforts, if it reveals itself as a merely bureaucratic institution...the working classmoves over towards those anarchistic tendencies that bitterly and ceaselessly criticise the centralisation and bureaucracy of political parties". Indeed Gramsci approached the position of Lenin and the Bolsheviks and his call for a Party "of the revolutionary proletariat in its struggle for the advent of communist society by way of the workers' State: a homogeneous, cohesive party with its own doctrine, tactics and rigid and implacable discipline". Gramsci began to develop the notion that such a Party must take on some of the functions that he had previously assigned to the councils, that is, as new institutions "in which the historical process of the revolution assumes controllable historical form".

Bordiga

That other great figure of Italian communism, Amadeo Bordiga, was to offer some trenchant observations of the councils and State power. In his paper based in Naples, Il Soviet, as early as September 1919, he pointed to the problem of the State, which would intervene forcefully to break any attempt to construct a new society through such bodies as the councils, if they had not escaped the trap of being incorporated by the bourgeois order. This was a relevant observation, but Bordiga had failed to break with old conceptions; rather

than the destruction of State power, he still looked to its conquest. He could not see that the positive function of the councils in the destruction of the State, as instruments of a revolutionary movement of the working class. For him, the action of the councils was a diversion, and party action was central. He was suspicious of the councils, based as they were on different crafts and on the workplace. Against them he posited the (as yet not existent) soviet, a territorial unit which would voice the political power of the whole working class. Communist groups must be formed within the unions and other working class bodies to eventually lead on to the construction of soviets. The councils could only have a reformist role within capitalist society. For him, the Ordine Nuovo group were subordinating party organisation to the councils.

“Workers, an occasion more favourable than this- to attempt to obtain definitive liberation- has never presented itself up to the present, and we cannot know if and when it will present itself again: don't let it pass in vain. Today you are the force, the impotence of the government against your will is evident”... “Dare again, dare more and victory cannot be lost”.
 Editorial, Umanita Nova, 8th September 1920

Resolution passed at the UAI Congress 1-4 July 1920

The congress, taking account that the factory and section councils have their importance in the measure where they prefigure a revolution in a near future, and could then be technical organs for expropriation and for the necessary and immediate continuation of production, but which continue to exist in present society, submit themselves to the moderating and accommodating influence of this last; retaining the factory councils, organs able to encompass during the revolution all the manual and intellectual producers, right on the place of work and in view of realising anarchist-communist principles; organs that are absolutely anti-statist and possible nuclei of the future control of industrial and agricultural production ;
 Retaining them , outside this, as able to develop among waged workers the consciousness of the producer and as useful for the ends of the revolution in favouring the transformation from discontent of the working and peasant classes into a clear will for expropriation;
 From there to invite comrades to push for the forming of factory councils and to participate actively in their development

Contribution of the anarchists to the theory of the councils

These can be summed up in two essential positions

1. Only in the course of a revolutionary period can the councils have a true efficacy; and constitute themselves as worthwhile means for class struggle and not for class collaboration. In a counter-revolutionary period the councils would

be limited by capitalist organisation because this is not always opposed to moral co-management on the part of the workers. That is why to advance the idea of councils in a counter-revolutionary period means to gravely prejudice even the formula of factory councils as a revolutionary watch-word

2. The councils resolve only a portion of the problem of the State; they empty it of its social functions, but do not eliminate it; they empty the State apparatus of its control without destroying it. But then because one cannot destroy the State by ignoring it, because at any moment it can make its presence felt in putting into motion its mechanisms of repression and sanction, it follows that these mechanisms must be destroyed. The councils cannot accomplish this function, and because of that, the intervention of an organised force is necessary, the specific movement of the class which will carry out such a mission. It is only thus that one can avoid the bourgeoisie, kicked out the door in the garb of the boss, come back through the window disguised as a cop.

This shows that the question raised in the argument between Ordine Nuovo and Il Soviet cannot be resolved; that of Ordine Nuovo underestimates the problem of the State in the sense that it tends not to concern itself with it; that of Il Soviet overestimating it because they wanted to seize it, whilst the anarchists put it at the centre of their preoccupations to realise its liquidation on the political terrain.

Occasions for discussing these theses were numerous; the first was offered by the national Congress of USI which was held at Parma in December 1919. The councils had joined this union and had sent a representative (the Turin worker, Matta).

Arguments for and against the councils were aired, not always with much knowledge of the subject. All the same, at the end of the debates, an important resolution was approved, which condensed the positive observations of the debates.

It should be emphasised that the USI was not anarchist, as is often thought. The new Secretary of the USI, Armando Borghi, was a committed anarchist communist, and anarchists operated within it. But the USI could not call itself anarchist because of the simple fact that it had no political selection, and only recruited workers to it on the basis of their jobs. When this union central went into struggle, however, it did so on the basis of struggle outside of parliamentary politics, refusing all participation in any committees and other bodies formed to discuss and negotiate with the bosses, and operating always on the principles of direct action. When this happened, it considered itself and was considered, as being inspired by the old ideas of the First International, that it to say of anarchist inspiration.

“Workers! Before abandoning the establishment, think well on everything, SAVE EVERYTHING. Outside, the police wait for you. Don’t surrender with arms and baggage. The saboteurs of the revolution would be too happy”. Editorial, Umanita Nova, 20th September 1920.

INTERVIEW WITH MAURIZIO GARINO

Extract from an interview with Maurizio Garino (active in the Turin Libertarian Group during the factory occupations) by comrades of the OAM (Milanese Anarchist Organisation) which first appeared in A, No. 3 April 1971

“ The councils in our view should represent all the workers and must be grassroots organisms, contrary to the ‘Internal Commissions’ directed by the union leaders, which represent only workers who pay union subs.

In that which concerns the relationships with union organisations, 3 theses were supported- the first wanted the councils to be inside the unions in such a fashion as to cancel out their autonomy. The second supported by Antonio Gramsci and the socialists of Ordine Nuovo was opposed to this insertion and considered the councils as revolutionary organs preparing for the taking of political power. And finally, the third, defended by us, the anarchists, saw in the councils revolutionary organs beyond the unions, capable, not of conquering power, but of smashing it. The councils’ organisations were characterised by immediate revocability on the part of the base, of every duty. Every factory department chose a commissar in the person of a worker, who had to study the complete cycle of production and communicate his knowledge to his comrades of the department, in order to avoid all hierarchy in the functioning of the direction of the heart of the factory.

The factory council was nominated by the Commissions of Departments. Parallel to this, at the national level, we tried to organise a conference to federally link the factory councils and to unseat parties and unions.

The conference was made impossible because it was a few days before the previewed date of the offensive of the reaction. One can affirm that the workers councils were formed embracing the complex structures of the factory and differentiated themselves from the union organisations by producing two new facts

1] Combatting the wage slave mentality in the worker. They brought out in him the consciousness of the producer, with all the psychological and educational consequences that that brought with it.

2] To educate and train the workers for self-management, they let them acquire the necessary knowledge to run the factory.

So the councils, as opposed to the parties and the unions, were not just contractual organisations but were more like natural, necessary, indivisible associations.

Report on the Factory and Workshop Councils

Extracts from report presented by Maurizio Garino at the Congress of the Unione Anarchica Italiana at Bologna on 1-4th July 1920, and published in Umanita Nova on 1st July 1920.

The problem of the factory and workshop councils assumes a particular importance at this moment even in that which concerns the anarchist communist movement. Born from profound social reasons, it has imposed itself on the attention of political and economic organisations of the working class in a short period, appearing as a postulate of the first order. Springing up at the beginning from an industrial centre where the existence of enormous establishments has created very favourable conditions, it has spread through many localities. Now, there are many attempts to create councils, in very different conditions.

Certainly the new organs have opened a way through important obstacles. Even the ambiance of the first experience where it has developed, has offered great facilities, and it has equally offered, for various reasons, stiff resistance. The most important, at the beginning, appeared on the level of the unions, but they were by-passed by the élan of the organised themselves. The bosses of industry put up bitter resistance, after they had the certitude that the councils as we understand them announced revolution and not collaboration; profiting from a situation that was not favourable to us, they launched the assault with the intention of smothering us. Despite all that, the councils have strengthened themselves today, pulling into their orbit many elements that had been opposed to them, gaining more sympathy by the day in the world of the worker.

It is then opportune on our part to examine this important question not only to clarify and make precise our attitude towards it, but perhaps to prepare ourselves to defend the councils against possible deviations that the organisations or men of the right can give a direction to. The conviction that we are finally at the dawn of a social transformation, which, if it does not lead us to the realisation of the most important postulates of the anarchist idea, certainly clears the ground for further conquests, is an indispensable premise before confronting the study of the councils. The need to forge arms better adapted to the revolutionary push, within any contingent possibilities, has made us favour the birth of these new

organs. They are excellent instruments: first of immediate action, then to guarantee continuing production in the insurrectionary period and finally because they can be the grassroots cells of communist control.

The factory council is an organism in itself. It groups together all the manual and intellectual producers in the same workplace. Being built on different stages of production, it guarantees a knowledge of all the productive process and has within it enough qualities to assume its possible management, in shedding the capitalist skin, in rejecting all parasitic elements from the system of production.

Furthermore, the council is perfectly adapted as a means of immediate revolutionary struggle, while it is not influenced by communist elements. It substitutes for the mentality of the wage earner the consciousness of the producer, in giving the workers movement a clear tendency towards expropriation. One of the greatest qualities of the councils as a means of revolutionary struggle is precisely this: it takes the class struggle on to its natural terrain and gives it a great strength.

The ascendancy that the machine has over the worker is immense. In these conditions, the tangible sensation that the machine, at which he passes a great part of his existence and to which he is indissolubly linked, could and should belong to him, is primordial.

The factory council has been confounded with the soviet. It is useful to repeat that whilst the first puts together all the producers in the workplace the second is the political organ by which the authoritarian communists intend to exercise their power.

The council as we understand it must be work freely associated and coordinated to produce the foodstuffs and the necessary objects for the community. Far from us the intention to dictate a priori any fixed norm, which shall organise relations between people tomorrow. We leave that to the social revolution, which will make its way without occupying itself with the schemas of this or that party.

But as we are convinced that production, far from diminishing must augment in the immediate aftermath of the insurrection and as we judge it absurd in present conditions to destroy and disorganise the great industrial complexes, where can be found the most advantageous and quickest systems of production, we are decided to save ourselves from all surprises in constituting from now a free confederation of councils, which, as needs require, will form technical and statistical bureaux, in intending a network of useful relations between different communities which will indisputably have an interest in reaching agreement on a

work of mutual aid.

The struggle of the comrades who are partisans of the councils to make a breach in the old trade union mentality will be difficult.

The victory that they have gained corresponds to the needs of the working masses, weary from now on of a discipline no longer necessary and which aspires to a greater liberty of action. The transformation of these organisations will be the first aim of these partisans of the councils who, through the union, manage to give as a result to develop the councils. Innovation consisted in giving a right of decision in the union to the assembly of commissars who at the start were organised in the union, were elected by all the workers, whether union members or not, indistinctly- with one delegate for 30 workers. It is easy to understand why such a system would be unacceptable for this organisation because the unorganised would have an influence over the directives of the union.

The unionists therefore wanted to limit the nomination of the commissars to sharing out by the workers. However the system that we chose and which merged- during a certain time- the factory council with the union, represented the only modus vivendi which saved the spirit of the factory councils and eliminated during the period of action too serious oppositions between the councils and the union, in providing in this way a united base for decision making.

On the other hand, in excluding the unorganised from the right to vote one added a new appendix to the union. The contrast between the two theses is apparent: the acceptance of the union thesis would have completely changed the nature of the councils.

A second thesis supported by the centrist socialists is the election to the councils by all the producers, who would have the right to elect the commissars. However these commissars would be kept well away from the union leadership and admitted only in as much as consultative organs and charged with certain union tasks in the workshops whilst waiting for the control of the enterprises by the unions. This thesis was equally opposed to the spirit of the councils in as much that it submitted it to organisations to which- whilst having several points of contact- they could not be submitted in any case, because they would take away from the unanimity of the producers their reason for being, which is profoundly different from that which animates the unions.

The accusation that we wanted to kill the unions was unjustly made of us on several occasions. We admit that the action of the unions was partly absorbed by

the council, but we are convinced that the latter exercises a fertile influence on the union, because it brings it in contact with the vibrations of the masses, in putting it in rhythm with closely interpreting their needs. We therefore recognise implicitly that today the unions still have several reasons to exist, to exercise functions that are still necessary. We however reject the possibility that they can go further- in general- than the defence of workers' interests as wage earners and could create – as the council does with relative ease- a clear realisation of communist expropriation.

We recognise however that the council today has a common basis with the unions. These last, in as much as protective organisations for the workers' interests as wage earners, engage in observing pacts and agreements taken in the name of the collectivity, for several factories. The power of the unions therefore extends over vast groupings of factories, and above all today with the tendency to create great industrial unions, organising right up to the smallest categories, penetrates in the factory in as much as control of the applying and respect of work agreements of the councils, made up nearly always of the same members as of the union organisations.

On these grounds the council is obliged in fact to help the union (to say that it cannot do so officially is a sophism) except in the case where this function becomes an objective, which as we have seen, of changing the nature of the council. Too often this function is accepted by the councils reluctantly, giving them as a result the appearance of the old internal commissions. So, this is based on the fact that in certain localities the internal commission carried out important functions of which certain were merged with the industrial unions, that is to say that its structure was identical to...the factory council.

Maurizio Garino 1892-1977

One of the leading anarchist animators of the Italian factory council movement. Maurizio Garino was born in November 1892, the son of Michele and Nicoletta Chigliani in Ploaghe, Sardinia. In 1895 the family moved to Turin and in 1900 to Cassine. After elementary school and a short stay in a religious school Maurizio became an apprentice carpenter and then a pattern-maker mechanic. He returned to Turin in 1906, and in 1908 joined the Turinese Socialist Youth. Adopting an abstentionist position, he moved towards anarchism with the agitation around the case of the Spanish libertarian teacher Francisco Ferrer in autumn 1909. In 1910 he was with Pietro Ferrero one of the founders of the Modern School, modelled on Ferrer's ideas, which was a cultural circle for the political and cultural education of the Turinese working class.

He was involved in the agitation against the war in Tripoli. He took part in the strike in 1912 against the withdrawal of privileges and union derecognition in exchange for the "English Saturday". He joined the new union SUM (United Metalworkers Union) created by revolutionary syndicalists. The strike led to a serious defeat after two months. The negative experience of the defeat led him and Ferrero to argue for staying in the FIOM union, after the founding of the USI in November 1912. The great strike in the car industry in spring 1913 led to a victory for the FIOM and the eclipse of the SUM, with a Turinese section of the USI, under the leadership of Ilario Margarita, going over to the FIOM.

In June 1914 Maurizio had a major role in the strikes during the Red Week. Arrested for violence, threats and carrying of arms, he managed to be released. During the war he defended anti-interventionist positions. These anti-war positions meant a constant changing of jobs. He avoided the draft because of his classification as a skilled worker in a key industry.

Between one lay-off and another, he was in the front line of the agitation in the workplaces and took part in the movements in the factories in August 1917.

Within the Turinese section of the FIOM, he and Ferrero organised a Libertarian Group. The main fear of the reformist socialists was an alliance between the Libertarian Group and the Maximalist current within the Socialist party. In fact, at the beginning of 1919, that started to happen. Maurizio took a leading part in the factory council movement. As a member of the Turinese group, he attended the founding conference of the Unione Comunisti Anarchici Italiana (UCAI) at Florence in 1919 along with Malatesta. The UCAI later became the Unione Anarchici Italiana (UAI).

In December of the same year he participated in the extraordinary congress of the CDL at Turin putting forward a motion in favour of the factory councils. In May 1920 at the national convention of the FIOM in Genoa, he condemned the lack of solidarity with the Turinese metalworkers.

The following June together with Ferrero he took part in the Conference of the Piedmontese anarchist movement. The following month he attended the Bologna Congress of the UAI where he formulated anarchist positions on the factory councils.

In 1921 he started work in a cooperative. This was later turned into a joint-stock company in order to avoid fascistisation. During the fascist period, he was constantly arrested and persecuted. His close comrade Ferrero was murdered during the fascist attack on Turin on 18th December 1922. After 18th September

1943 he started re-organising the Turinese anarchist movement and set up the Circle of Social Studies. He took part in the fighting against the Nazi-Fascists. Arrested in October 1944, he was released thanks to an exchange of prisoners.

After the liberation he continued to take part in the activities of the Piedmontese anarchist movement, and restarted the Modern School, and was also involved in intense cultural activity with the organisation of various conferences on many topics. However, these various cultural activities had far less effect on the Turinese working class than they had in the past.

He died in Turin in 1977.

Pietro Ferrero 1892- 1922

With Garino, one of the anarchists at the head of the factory councils movement in Turin.

Pietro Ferrero was born at Grugliasco in Turin on 12th May 1892. In 1910 he was among the first members of the Centro di Studi Sociali della Milano, a working class quarter of Turin, which transformed itself into a Modern School along the principles developed by the Spanish libertarian Francisco Ferrer and he became its secretary in 1911, alongside its director Maurizio Garino. The school was to have an important political and cultural influence on many Turin workers. In 1918 he began working in the Fiat factories.

During World War One, Pietro was active against the reformist leadership in Fiom with his friend and comrade Garino. In 1917, with the anarchists of the Milano quarter he participated in the movement in Turin against the bosses and the war. In 1919 he was elected secretary of the Turin Fiom. He was involved in much workplace agitation and many strikes, including those of April 1920 against the unilateral decision of Fiat to bring in legal summer time in the factories, and in the factory occupations. In Luglio where the first occupation took place, he chaired an assembly of the internal commission of the factory councils which stated that the Turin masses were ready for anything and called on the Fiom to join with the USI in the revolutionary struggle.

He was among the most active and intransigent militants during the factory occupations and he was totally opposed to the reformist D'Aragona-Giolitti agreement which led to the end of the occupations. As Malatesta prophesied, the defeat of the movement would lead to the counter-revolution. This duly came in the form of fascism and Pietro was to pay with his life for the defeat that he had tried so hard to avoid.

He was brutally murdered by the fascist squads led by Brandimarte (this thug was reintegrated into the Italian Army after World War Two and received full military honours) on 18th December 1922, after dreadful beatings. His body was dragged behind a truck, and he was dumped still living at the foot of the statue of Vittorio Emanuele, where he was finished off. Twenty one other workers were murdered in this fascist attack on the Turin working class. The fascist intimidation meant that, as Garino testified, only 15 people attended the funeral of Pietro, who had organised 20,000 workers in the FIOM.

Gwyn Williams dedicated Proletarian Order, his book on the factory occupations, to Pietro in 1975.

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Glossary

CGL

Confederazione Generale del Lavoro- General Confederation of Labour. Main trade union central controlled by the Socialist Party

FIOM

Federazione Impiegati Operai Metallurgici -Italian Federation of Metal Workers. Metalworkers union strongest in Milan and Turin and affiliated to CGL

PSI

Partito Socialista Italiana- Italian Socialist Party

SFI

Sindacato Ferroviaria Italiana –Italian Rail Workers Union

UAI

Unione Anarchica Italiana- Italian Anarchist Union (20,000 members and a daily paper Umanita Nova)

USI

Unione Sindicale Italiana -Italian Syndicalist Union - it had a membership of 800,000 at its height. Its weekly paper was Guerra di Classe (Class War)

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