

Autonomous Assembly of Alfa Romeo

**Against the state as
boss**

INTRODUCTION

This is the day-to-day account of a struggle carried out by the Alfa Romeo workers from November 1971 to February 1972 on the occasion of contract renewal. The struggles narrated in this document took place in two of the five Alfa Romeo plants in Italy, the Portello and Arese plants, both located in the Milan area. Together, both plants employ 19,000 workers (including office employees), and a new Contract is negotiated every three years. The Portello plant is the older of the two and has few production departments left. Soon most of its operations will be shifted to Arese. The majority of its workers are older people, still bound to trade-unionism by a long tradition of struggle. Arese is the newer plant, still in the process of completion. It houses most of the production departments, and most of its workers are young and without a union tradition. Moreover, 65% of the workers on the assembly lines (as opposed to 25% in the non-production departments) are immigrants from the southern regions of Italy, and this element of the working class has been in the forefront of the struggles since '68. For this reason the level of militancy and mass mobilization was greater at the Arese plant.

The document was produced by a group of militants which calls itself "Autonomous Assembly" (AA) which

defines itself as “a rank-and file organization, born as a communist cell with the aim of becoming a reference point for all the workers within the plant, and of contributing to the building of the future revolutionary party. The goal of the AA during the four months of struggle was to become a permanent political reference point for all the workers, to take away from the union officials and the Italian Communist Party (PCI) the control of the struggles, and in this way to be in a position to “talk to the masses.”

The value of this document lies in the many faceted nature of the struggle it describes. The workers were fighting against a form of state capitalism, in that Alfa Romeo, although officially classified as a corporation with “state participation”, is in reality completely state owned. This point is important because it explains the pressure felt by the PCI to act “responsibly through FIOM (the PCI and Left-wing Social Democrat metal workers’ union) in view of its possible future participation in a new Center-Left coalition in the Government. It also explains the co-optive strategy adopted by the union officials, their attempts to water down the more radical demands advanced by the workers, and in particular, their determination to turn the councils of shop-floor delegates into channels of control over the ranks. The

date of the struggle is of special importance. Taking place less than a year before the renewal of national contracts of 1972, it served as a testing ground for the bosses and the unions to help gauge the level of militancy of the workers and what might be in store during the new wave of struggles only a few months off.

The key objective for the militants at Alfa Romeo was that of mobilizing the workers for an attack against the company's structure of job classification, to force management to alter it to correspond to the objective process of massification occurring in auto production. It also meant attacking the capitalist rationale underlying the whole system of job classification with its built-in mechanisms of selection based not on the actual expertise of the workers (which in any case is being undermined by the massification process), but rather on the workers' submission to managerial authority, goals, and values. (As the AA puts it: "You will be 'selected' not on the basis of what you know or are able to do, but on the basis of your willingness to lick ass.")

The militants proposed, therefore, that the six categories which made up the company's job-classification structure be replaced with four levels of "classification" with automatic passage from one level to another (on the basis of workers' seniority and consent), under the

supervision of the delegates' council. A similar proposal was advanced for the office employees. These demands, as the document shows, were only partially secured. The notion of "levels" was introduced, and automatic passage from the second to the third level was granted, but with management still firmly in control of the process of "promotion". However, even if the actual gains were meager, the struggles around this central demand served to mobilize the mass of workers and carry forward the attack against the capitalist ideology of work. Finally, the value of this document lies in showing the concrete forms of struggle which the workers created from day to day, their ability to anticipate the bosses' and the unions' next move, and their success in analyzing their struggle in terms of its wider political significance.

NOVEMBER 12 (Friday)

The delegates' council decided today on six to seven hours of strike for the coming week. There was a struggle between two lines: that of the unions and that of the militant vanguards. The unions wanted to give the executive the power to decide how many hours to strike and in what way. Though this line was rejected, the unions were able to limit the duration of the strikes to six hours. The line taken by the militant vanguards called for

at least nine or ten hours and a more incisive way of conducting the strikes, such as picket lines, marches inside the factory, and so on. The union line is founded on the conviction that at present the will to struggle on the part of the working class is at a low ebb: "Reality is what it is; we may as well adjust to it, try not to run ahead of ourselves ... (The unions "firemen" have gotten so used to throwing water on the flames that they now throw it even when there is no fire.) We of the Autonomous Assembly are not much more optimistic, but we feel that if reality is indeed what it is we must first of all try to analyze and understand this state of affairs and then try to change it by pushing for a broader and stronger mobilization.

NOVEMBER 15 (Monday)

Today there's a one and a half hour strike.

At the Portello plant, a general assembly is held in the cafeteria. An official of the UILM (the Right-wing Social Democrat metal workers union) speaks for over 45 minutes. No one can figure out what he is trying to say, and he is loudly booed. As the workers begin to rule out an official from the FIOM arrives and makes an announcement that explodes in the assembly like a bomb: "The management," he says, "due to technical

difficulties, was unable to complete the paychecks, and as a result, Instead of receiving a regular bi-weekly check, each worker will receive \$50.” Immediately a comrade seizes the microphone and yells “Let’s go visit the management.” A procession immediately forms and begins making its way toward the building which houses the executive offices. A group marches into the president’s office shouting “Luraghi, you fascist, you’re the first one on the list!” As the word spreads that the strike will continue, the procession makes its way through each department and office, pulling everybody out. Even the workers who usually scab walk off the job when they find out that instead of their usual paychecks they’ll be getting only \$50. Union “firemen” are trying to put out the flames by appealing for a “democratic decision”, but no one is listening. Many departments stay shut all day, and scores of workers go home, including those who arrived for the second shift.

At the Arese plant, another FIOM official brings the news of the reduced paychecks, and all hell breaks loose in the general assembly. Amid shouts and jeers and total bedlam the official tries to explain: “Comrades, this is a calculated move on the company’s part; let’s not accept provocation. I propose that a delegation be formed and sent to....” To Management, he no doubt wanted to say;

but we're already on our way, all of us together en masse. To hell with a delegation! The long procession of workers making their way to the executive offices with raised fists gives me the feeling of being in Saint Petersburg during the October Revolution. About 500 of us crowd around one of the executives stating our demand: "We want the money, all of it now." In the meantime, under the window outside, an assembly is being held to decide how to carry on the struggle: "Let's all march to Milan!" "Let's continue the strike all day!" But once again a union (FIOM) proposal passes: "Let's be calm, comrades; the struggle won't end today. Let's show some good sense...." Moral: The strike ends at 1 pm. Luckily this decision is followed only in part. The upholstery and waxing departments strike for the rest of the day, and many workers, even those from the second shift, sit in front of their machines with arms folded. I have been in the factory many years, but I've never seen such good assemblies where everyone feels free to speak and where we're finally beginning to discuss political situations.

NOVEMBER 16 (Tuesday)

At the Portello plant: Internal processions form, and for the first time a group of office personnel (about a

hundred of them) enter all the departments, combing them for scabs. In the engine department some of the workers can't believe their eyes: "How is it possible?" they say. "Now the office personnel come to pull out the workers!" The strong participation of the office employees is one of the most important features of this struggle: Some of them, who until yesterday would leave the factory for the local cafe, are right here beside us in the plant-wide procession. The slow and painstaking work, person by person, is beginning to yield fruit. The first signs of raised consciousness begin to show; even the office employees and technicians begin to understand that they are exploited: They are starting to rebel against their supervisors and bosses; they refuse to put in overtime. In short, they are discovering the class struggle and looking to the workers' vanguard for a reference point. Today, when with great excitement they went to pull out the scabs from each department, a technician approached me and said: "You know, until now I only came in here to see the machines; but today I've understood that there are men in here too. From now on it will be different for me."

At the Arese plant, this morning at 6 am, we of the AA passed out a leaflet about the rent strike in a Milan district where a number of Alfa workers live, then, on

strike between 9:30 and 10:30. Even though one hour is too brief, we didn't pass up the chance for an in-plant procession: We marched along together, pulling out all the scabs. At the Computer Center everyone was working: We forced them all out and started discussing the contract proposals, how to carry on the struggle, how the bosses eat up our salaries outside the factory, and how we must respond, namely with rent strikes, neighborhood struggles, and the like, and not by sitting in front of the TV all night like morons, because this is just what the bosses want. The discussion is prolonged because the workers want to voice their criticisms of the way the struggle is being handled, that is, with only one hour of strike at a time.

NOVEMBER 17 (Wednesday)

We found out that a meeting was held last night by management personnel. All of them are really pissed off because they can't work undisturbed in the factory. Well, we had a meeting too, and decided to form a picket line at the Portello plant until 10 o'clock, and this time the "firemen" could not pull back. The picket line turned out to be really tough. The usual scabs who hang around the entrance are rather pathetic; they just stand there and don't have the guts to come forward, not even to talk.

They form little groups, like bigots outside a church; they whisper, shake their heads, deplore, and so on. But they don't move; they wait for someone else to cross the picket line for them. As always when a picket line is formed, the comrades use the occasion to discuss political questions, to clear up doubts and encourage those who waver. The results of these discussions aren't always immediate, but in the long run they leave their mark; you find people beside you in later struggles that you'd never expect.

At the Arese plant, a strike is on from 9:30 to 11 am. There is no picket line, but a massive procession is held. There are more than 3,000 workers, and they make the rounds and clean out the whole factory. Leading the march is a giant banner with the three metal-worker union names (FIOM, FIM, and UILM) and the phrase underneath "the delegates' council". Leading is also our Armstrong, a comrade who plays the trumpet and can belt out favorite proletarian songs like The Internationale. Suddenly in the distance we hear a deafening noise: A few comrades have managed to open up some vehicles in the last phase of production and are honking all the horns in unison! For the trade unionists the most important thing is that this "long walk" in the factory be "orderly and responsible," but the comrades

don't forget that their duty is to drive out the scabs, and at intervals they leave the procession and, forming separate groups, make their way into the departments.

NOVEMBER 19 (Friday)

At the Portello plant, the office workers strike from 3 pm on. They meet together and decide to comb the entire plant for scabs, because "It isn't right to just go to the same few offices." A number of offices are already empty because the managers, eyes of the boss, are absent. But scabs are not lacking. Those beginning their strike at 4 pm join the procession. To take the scabs by surprise we climb the stairs quietly, and then we open the door with a start, yelling and whistling in unison. The most common thing shouted, distinctly and with feeling, is "Vultures!" In a few offices, hoping to remain hidden, the employees are in the dark, but one blow from our whistles is enough to scatter them like roaches discovered in the light. They congregate in small groups in front of the main door where two police commissioners are standing. We are all singing the "Ballad of Pinelli" (an anarchist murdered by the police in '69) and "Calabresi Assassin" (the police chief accused of killing him).

DECEMBER 5 (Friday)

Yesterday the police attacked the picket line in Milan, and here at Arese the response is slow in coming and inadequate. Today the workers read in the paper that someone at the Portello plant was hit in the face with a police rifle during an attack, and as they enter the plant angered by this news, they see a huge union sign announcing “two hours of strike with a march around the cafeteria”. By now the union has shown clearly that it prefers the in-plant processions to be “just walks” and not “scab hunting,” some tactic! The police are attacking and we’re walking around the cafeteria like asses! At 9 o’clock, when the two-hour strike begins, only two comrades from AA need step out of the procession that more than a hundred workers immediately follow suit and go hunting for scabs in even the smallest and most remote departments in the factory. During the afternoon, a few of us find out that in one of our departments five workers are scabbing. A special issue of Pasquino is prepared identifying the five scabs and promising “Pasquino will strike again!” (Pasquino is a news sheet which appears on the walls all over the plant, in the most unlikely places: the departments, the toilets, the cafeteria, and so on — and always when least expected. No one knows who writes it, but everyone

fears it, and in this struggle it has become like the sign of Zorro.) The Pasquino which named the five scabs had a devastating effect: For two hours they were booed and hissed at, and they didn't even have the guts to walk away; they were overcome with shame.

DECEMBER 9 TO JANUARY 9

As we look over our notes we see that between December 9 and January 9 the struggle remained even but uneventful. Among other things, this month has been full of holidays and the rate of absence in the plant has been very high. During the Christmas holiday, for example, many workers took special leave or sick days. There were days when the plant was operating with only 50% of the employees. The strikes continued at a steady but sluggish pace an hour or an hour and a half almost every day, like a drop in the bucket of the bosses' profits preventing the re-launching of production, but at the same time demoralizing the workers. A number of workers (and not only we of the AA) have understood that to really resist means to break the plans of the State boss, to prevent 'Papa' IRI, the State holding company, from doing as it pleases. These workers were by our side as we hunted down the scabs, as we marched in the picket lines, as we held discussions and denounced the

political line of the unions and the CP, for whom the workers' struggle is only a tool to blackmail the Government. For them, doing politics means telling the assholes in power: "You see, this little flame might become a big fire if we weren't here to control it, so you better give us what we're asking for." We in the plants are on to this little game and have had enough of their bullshit; more and more workers begin to understand and organize.

JANUARY 10 (Monday)

Finally we have a breakthrough, like a reawakening after a long slumber. The in-plant processions at the Portello plant this morning were aggressive and combative. With renewed militance the marchers spilled over into the streets surrounding the plant and blocked traffic for miles. Inside the plant the second shift formed an internal procession to prevent overtime work from 5 pm on, and it too blocked incoming traffic at the factory's Gate Number 3.

At the Arese plant, a general assembly is held at 8:30 am. The union (FIOM) official speaks and proposes the usual two and a half hour strike. The entire company of workers boos and hisses, and he is forced to step down.

Then a comrade from AA takes the mike and calls on the workers to join hands and occupy the plant, urging that the situation is ripe for such action. Everyone applauds enthusiastically while the FIOM official tries in vain to regain control of the assembly. A comrade from the PCIs Communist Youth Federation who has co-operated closely with the AA takes the mike and proposes that the highway used to move the finished products from the plant be blocked until 3 pm. The assembly approves unanimously and as the workers begin filing out to plan the action the FIOM official manages to get hold of the mic. Amid the confusion, he starts his oration to the effect that we must stay within certain limits (Which?) not allow certain minorities to take over the struggle, and so on. But by now over half the workers are gone, and when only a fourth of them are left the “fireman (someone who clamps down on working class self-activity)” re-proposes the limited strike action with an in-plant procession. He asks for a show of hands, and about 30 votes “yes”. Without any further ado he declares that the proposal has been accepted and closes the meeting with a historic phrase: “The workers’ assembly is sovereign!”

In the meantime the workers from the second shift are blocking the highway, proving they don’t give a damn

about the union's directives. There are about 3,000 workers, and the line-up of stopped cars extends for many miles. The FIOM official is going around the plant saying that tomorrow we'll block the factory exits where the products are shipped out. (It's like saying: "Listen, boss, tomorrow I'm going to steal your cows." So he has the time to hide them. In fact during the nightmare, cars will be shipped out from the plant.) He is also saying that the night shift should go on strike, while Management is asking in all the departments who wants to work the night shift, emphasizing the overtime pay. This society leaves hundreds of workers at home, while in both big and small plants those who work are forced to put in overtime, work night shifts, and tolerate speed-ups. It's a society based on profit, and therefore on exploitation. It's nothing new. But let's not just cry over it like the unions; let's get on with demolishing it.

JANUARY 12 (Wednesday)

While at the Arese plant the blocking of all plant exits continues to prevent finished cars from leaving the production areas, at the Portello plant an assembly is called for 9 am in the cafeteria. The level of participation is high, not to say total. There are 2500 to 3,000 workers, and the level of militance is high. As soon as the FIOM

official takes the mic, the hissing indicates that the workers want two things: the in-plant procession and the blocking of the highway traffic. The official tries to stall for time, proposing a simple strike until 11 am, but the hissing gets louder. He tries to explain that blocking traffic is a way of giving in to provocation, but they won't let him go on. Next he proposes a strike until 12, but the assembly shouts that that isn't long enough. At that point another FIOM official takes the mic and says that the nature of the strike action was decided yesterday by the executive: until 12 pm and with no outside procession, but if the assembly feels it is necessary, a brief march outside the plant can be held.

A huge procession forms, and after cleaning out the whole factory marches out the factory gates on to Viale Scarampo, one of the most deserted streets of Milan. As it moves along, already considerably dampened by the "fire men", it passes in front of the hospital for the terminally ill, where a funeral procession is forming. At that point the pace of the workers' march really slows down and looks like part of the funeral. As the procession cuts through a side street, the banner of the delegates' council which had been leading ends up in the rear. As we reach Via Trevino the police are waiting in a scissor formation. The workers begin chanting "Fascists, sellouts,

servants of the boss!” while the scissor breaks in two under the impact of the forward-pressing procession. The police are forced to retreat as the workers continue shouting, while the trade unionists form a cordon to protect the police from the workers! A few punches fly between the more combative elements in the workers’ ranks and the union “firemen” who accuse them of wanting confrontation and acting as provocateurs. (As if the police, parked in front of the factory gates every day, aren’t a permanent provocation.) At any rate, the police get back on their trucks and the procession returns to the plant. Having forced the police to retreat is a major victory. And the unions have shown their true colors: The useless assembly which lasted over one hour, the procession at the rear of the factory, the fear of confrontation with the police as if the workers were the kamikaze attack against the vanguards, the constant appeal to the executive as the only seat of decision making power, the class struggle waged in white gloves, all these are different forms of the same coin, of the same old union tactic. It ignites the struggle just enough to maintain credibility, but is always ready to throw water on it as soon as the pressure from the base threatens to undermine its control of the situation.

JANUARY 14 (Friday)

During the evening we receive news that Frank Atzeni, a comrade from AA, has been suspended indefinitely, and as usual the accusations against him have been brought by a certain Calabritto of the personnel office. Frank is one of the more active and dedicated comrades in the AA, and he has struggled hard in the past few days against the problem of the night shift. As soon as the word starts spreading that he has been suspended, his fellow workers spontaneously put down their tools. Later in the evening, a meeting is held in the office of the FIM (the Christian Democrat metal workers' union), and a new orientation for the struggle emerges: occupation of the factory.

JANUARY 15 (Saturday)

Even though it is Saturday and we're not working today, picket lines form from 6 am on at both the Arese and Portello plants to prevent overtime work. At Arese, the 6 am picketers relieve those who have been there throughout the night making sure no finished vehicles leave the production area. Later in the morning we of the AA meet to examine the situation, and we decide to

support the occupation proposal because of several new factors:

(1) During the past week the struggle has been more aggressive and incisive. Even though the union has been trying to “put out the fire”, several things have shown the willingness of the workers to fight: the clash with the police, the spontaneous strikes around the problem of the night shift initiated and conducted by the workers themselves, the immediate response to every attempt aimed at dividing the ranks. After two and a half months of struggle, the working class is very definitely off its knees.

(2) The union has had to recognize that it can't impose light or diluted strikes, and that at this point we must take the bull by the horns. It is significant, for example, that the union (FIOM) official who has always clashed with Frank Atzeni is now openly in favor of the occupation.

(3) The struggle has shifted, now more than ever before, from the level of mere demands (the contract) to a more political level (the repression of “Papa” IRI and the renewed attempt to align those companies having partial State ownership with the Right—wing forces in power).

The occupation of the factory would function as a reference point for other struggles. Since 1947, there has been no occupations of major plants except in instances where bankruptcy was shutting them down. The union knows that in the face of badly stalled negotiations and the suspension of Frank Atzeni, the working class will act forcefully and autonomously. It therefore decides to take charge of the situation if only to avoid the embarrassment of being sidestepped. In fact, in the afternoon meeting of the executive, when the occupation is formally proposed, the FIOM official immediately comes out in support of it and urges a series of actions such as open dialogues with the democratic parties and other popular forces, meetings with municipal authorities, dialogues with other delegates' councils and factories, and so on. Any decisions, however, are postponed until tomorrow, when the full factory executive will meet.

JANUARY 16 (Sunday)

The delegation returns from Rome, where the negotiations between the Government, the unions, and the company have been stalled for some time. It explains in an "open" executive meeting that there have been no further negotiations, but only a "series of meetings"

which apparently haven't resolved a thing. The company insists that the proposed automatic passage from category to category would injure the workers in the higher categories, and will only agree to automatic passage from Category 1 to Category 2 in order to eliminate the most glaring cases of discrimination. On this point the company is intransigent. In Rome, therefore, nothing worth mentioning has happened, but the delegation insists that there hasn't been a breakdown in negotiations, just a "postponement". What, pray tell, is the difference, with the negotiations "postponed" now for over two months?

The problem remains about what to say and what to do in the factory tomorrow. As soon as the local FIOM official begins to summarize the consensus which emerged from yesterday's executive meeting (occupation of the factory), the regional representative of the FIOM, who is higher up in the hierarchy, says: "The occupation of a factory is a serious thing not to be taken lightly. We can't just improvise and risk falling into adventurism. We must be disciplined." (Any discipline, it seems, is the responsibility of the working class.) "If we occupy, many of the workers who do not favor automatic passage will go home. Beware of spontaneism. We have no right to decide." (False democratism, since when the base push for something in the delegates' council, they are told that

the final decision belongs to the executive.) “We must move gradually. Tomorrow we can begin with an extra few hours of strike, and then we’ll convene the delegates’ council, and after that, other meetings with the democratic parties, telegrams to. . . (etc., etc).” This is a typical “fireman’s operation” from beginning to end. There is even one official from the FIOM who pretends not to know what the word “occupation” means. According to him, we’re all supposed to remain in the plant and work to show the bosses that we can work without them. Incredible! The local FIOM official who had come out in favor of the occupation does an about—face. The problem for the union is clearly not that of giving a militant outlet to the struggle, but rather that of holding it back so that it doesn’t explode and make a mess. What prevails, then, in the executive, is the idea of having a general assembly tomorrow morning, maybe an all day strike; then, Tuesday, the delegates’ council meeting, then the meetings with other factories with possible demonstrations, then maybe a quick trip to Rome with a lot of fanfare, then a demonstration in front of the mayor’s office, et cetera, et cetera. In short, there is just so much “political tourism.” At this point, however, we must simply wait and see what the workers think of it tomorrow.

JANUARY 19 (Wednesday)

Today, with strikes between 9 and 11 am, several in-plant assemblies have been called for the office personnel at the Portello plant. In one of these, at which I am present, a comrade from AA takes the floor and insists on two themes which we consider crucial: the suspension of Frank Atzeni, and the occupation of the factory. Atzeni must be re-instated, says the comrade, because he has always been in the forefront of the struggles. By striking him the company has struck all of us in the front lines. (Something a line comrade of Frank told me about him comes to mind: "Frank is worth more to us than a good agreement, and not just for reasons of friendship. We know that with him in the plant we've won; without him even the best agreement would be a defeat, because we would be more vulnerable: The bosses could strike us too the minute we raise our heads.") The comrade then touches on the idea of the occupation as a "political moment which unites". The occupation would help us feel more united and part of the same struggle. It would allow us to discuss general political questions, to meet with militants from other plants and hear about their own struggles firsthand. This assembly with the office personnel was really instructive. It showed that there are many people who are

uninformed and never discuss political matters, but who as soon as they begin to form clear ideas, are right there with you in the struggles.

JANUARY 31 (Monday)

The unions have been systematically downplaying the idea of an occupation, saying that at the most we should have a “symbolic” one which lasts only one day.

Meanwhile Frank Atzeni has been re-instated, and this is no doubt a significant retreat for the company and is greeted by the workers as a great victory. This morning the AA distributed a leaflet at both the Portello and Arese plants. It tries to clarify the nature and importance of the proposed occupation, and celebrates the re-instatement of Frank Atzeni.

At the Arese plant the workers are really pissed off when they learn that there will be only one hour of strike to hold the general assembly. The assembly begins at 9 am, and there are tons of participants. When the FIOM official begins to speak you can sense the tension among the workers: The assembly feels like a bomb ready to burst. The official is explaining in minutest detail the negotiations in Rome; he obviously wants the whole hour to go by without giving the workers a chance to take the

floor. But after half an hour a restless murmur can be heard which gets louder by the minute, and someone yells out that the meeting should be prolonged till 11. The official agrees, but rather haphazardly and with little conviction in his voice.

The workers insist that the meeting be officially prolonged, and as the official continues repeating himself, stalling for time, a comrade from the AA suddenly jumps up on the platform and yanks the mic away from the trade unionist. The bureaucrats immediately turn down the volume so no one can hear a thing. Hell breaks loose as the workers begin to boo and hiss and yell out insults. Another FIOM official intervenes and tries to throw water on the flames, but almost immediately a few comrades from the AA take the floor and the occupation proposal is accepted by the assembly. It will be discussed again tomorrow in the delegates' council, but the occupation looks like a sure thing at this point.

Also at the Portello plant the general assembly is very stormy. At 9 am, as I enter the cafeteria, people are bargaining on the table with their silverware, shouting and jeering. Many have read the morning papers and know that the negotiations are still stalled. As soon as the union official starts talking about the Rome

negotiations, the assembly explodes and everyone starts yelling "Occupation, occupation!" The official is losing his temper, but tries to regain control of the situation by proposing a regional strike, or even a national one, of all the metal workers, with a train ride to Rome, but the hissing continues, and he finally agrees to an occupation, but "just for one day". The reaction of the workers, who immediately answer "two, two, three, three..." makes him realize that he's fast losing his grip on things and losing face besides. He then says that meetings will be held in each department to consider the occupation further, with the results to be made known at the delegates' council meeting tomorrow. At 10:15, an assembly is held which includes around 200 office workers, among whom are many habitual scabs. An FIOM official reviews the results of the Rome negotiations. A comrade from AA takes the occasion to clarify once again the strategic significance of the occupation: more militant struggle and a completely open factory. At 1:30 people are gathering in front of the cafeteria and talking about the way the meetings went in the departments. All the comrades are elated, on all the separate assemblies, including those of the office personnel; the occupation proposal has been accepted, in many cases unanimously. It seems that the idea has really caught fire, and everyone is discussing it as if it

were an accomplished fact. Organizational details are being considered, such as constant vigilance against fascist reprisals, coordination of initiatives inside and outside the plant, and so on. It almost seems like something too big and too good to be true, but if the union tries again tomorrow to pull back it will be completely discredited in the eyes of the workers.

FEBRUARY 2 (Wednesday)

At the Portello plant picket lines are set up from 7 to 10 am. At Arese strikes are on from 2:30 to 4:30. People are talking about the occupation as if it were starting today. Since 7:30 the commission nominated yesterday at the Portello plant has been meeting to study the details of the occupation. As soon as the discussion focuses on the length of the occupation there is immediate polarization: on one hand the bureaucracy of the CP and the unions who fear the difficulties which might arise if the “day of struggle” is prolonged throughout the night, and therefore propose that it run from 7 am to 11 pm; on the other hand the comrades from AA, other comrades, and the FIM, who want the occupation to begin today and end at 9 am the day after tomorrow. The discussion gets rather heated; the FIOM is even afraid of the word “occupation” and prefers to refer to the event as “a

permanent assembly in control of the factory”. When one of the comrades says something about the workers becoming “owners of the factory”, the bureaucrats jump on him with words like “extremist” and “provocateur”. The FIOM insists that the occupation can’t begin today because it would give the company a pretext for a lockout. In reality, it wants to keep itself within the rules of the Union-boss game; it only trusts top-level negotiations, and does not want to present itself at the bargaining table in Rome tomorrow with the factory already occupied. By 11:30 word arrives that many workers in the departments and offices want to occupy immediately! In many offices, the managers are going around asking the personnel to take holiday time or special leave for tomorrow. They also announce that all services in the plant will be suspended. The commission finally reaches a compromise, and the occupation is scheduled to begin at 9 am tomorrow and last a full 24 hours. At 2:30, an assembly is held at the Arese plant to inform the workers of the decision. The FIOM official chooses his words with such skill that his climb up the union ladder is virtually assured. He says that the decisions of the delegates’ council must be respected (the assembly is no longer sovereign) and that caution must be exercised not to allow lapses into spontaneism, adventurism, extremism, and so on. A comrade tries to

interrupt, but the bureaucrats from the CP who are guarding the microphones say “Let him be; he’s the usual extremist; a minority of one.”

At the Arese plant, the FIOM official clarifies to the assembly that we are having not an “occupation” (God forbid!), but rather a “permanent assembly”. Occupation or no occupation, the strong picket lines continue at the point of finished production, the most vulnerable place for the boss. The workers know what they’re doing. In the evening the company advises the union brass that since they have behaved so “responsibly”, tomorrow will be considered a regular work day and everyone will get paid. The game is fully within the rules: “I could kill you if I wanted to, but I’ll only hurt you a little, and in return, boss, you’ll give me a little something.” This is the union, the champion of the march in reverse! It is so good at balancing the accelerator and the brakes that it always finds an “authorized parking” space. Born from the factory vanguards, the idea of the occupation was at first snubbed by the union, then fought against, and finally, because the mass of workers wanted it, approved, but only in order to immobilize it.

FEBRUARY 3-4 (Thursday and Friday)

Portello: There is a general assembly at 9 am, and absolutely everyone is present, even those who have never been on strike before. It is the highest point of the struggle so far. Those participating in the assembly include politicians, trade unionists, and various political groups. There is even the CP, which as usual expresses its solidarity, leaves a \$160 check (disgusting!), and splits. Even a representative from the Italian Socialist Party arrives, says a few words, and leaves without even sitting down, a formality like cutting an inaugural ribbon. If this goes on much longer the assembly is going to become a nice little stage on which everyone, from revisionists to bosses, can parade before the workers.

At the gates there are workers who “guard the factory”. In reality, all gates have been shut down except Gate 5, which the workers have blocked with huge metal barrels, and Gate 1, because the union said the executives have to come and go unmolested. The militants decide who enters and who leaves. The bureaucrats from the CP and the FIOM union try to let in only the people and the groups, they approve of, but we do exactly the same. As far as the students are concerned, the CP had tried to limit their participation to only three delegates from the

student movement of Milan State University. We forced them, however, to admit three delegates from each factory. The morning is fast coming to an end, and we're getting fed up with all the big shots that speak and then leave. We propose that the assembly break up into smaller groups which can study specific issues more carefully, and proceed to form a group of about a hundred which sets up its own agenda. A few minutes later, a few bureaucrats arrive and with great alarm announce that all the executives have left the plant (isn't that what we wanted?), that Alfa had discontinued all services (cafeteria, guards, and so on), and that we must ask all students to leave immediately.

What is really bothering them is that many have by now left the general assembly to join small discussion groups. There is real mass participation on the part of workers and office personnel, and it is really an occupation now that all the executives have abandoned ship and the factory is in the hands of the workers, who are guarding the gates vigilantly to prevent any fascist attacks. Contrary to the bureaucrats' expectations, everyone has remained in the factory, preferring to participate in group discussions and aware that this new form of struggle is a demonstration of the strength of the working class. After a short break to grab a sandwich, the

general assembly and the discussion groups reconvene for the afternoon. On the lower floor of the cafeteria a study group with about a hundred people is formed. Several issues are tackled from the special problems of office personnel to the repression inside and outside the plant to the line of the CP and the current move to the Right by the Government. This was a lesson for the CP and the unions which tried to de-emphasize the political value of the occupation and had brought in only those people they approved of. (In the morning, for example, they had refused to give the floor to a group of militants from "Il Manifesto".) Around 7 pm the union wants to close the plant to all outsiders, but the decision is made to allow workers from other factories to enter until 10 pm. Many people have gone home for the night, and the few hundred who remain are organizing the roster for guard duty throughout the night. While all the main gates continue to be picketed, inside the plant there is constant surveillance in all the departments, and outside there are groups of militants in cars controlling all people who look suspicious. At one point, two men in a car are stopped and asked for their IDs. They really look suspect, and turn out to be two cops who hang around the area until 5 am. A few of us go to sleep on desks, while others, better organized, have brought their sleeping bags. Even the back seat of a car is fine enough when you're really

sleepy, and we're all dead tired and very cold. At the gates huge bonfires are burning to keep those outside warm.

Arese: The day of occupation of the factory: The security arrangements are handed over to an FIOM official who is careful not to give us of the AA the red armbands identifying all those involved in keeping order. With or without armbands, we're on the picket lines. There is a happy atmosphere because the plant is in the hands of the workers, who are singing songs of struggle as they make the rounds in the various departments. Throughout the morning delegations from political parties, municipal governments, other factories, and student groups enter the plant. The cafeteria is not in service, and by 2 pm we're all starving. Many have left to have lunch at home or at a nearby restaurant, and will return later in the afternoon. The militants from "Red Rescue" bring some wine, and around 2:30 some 3,000 sandwiches arrive, compliments of various neighborhood co-operatives.

One of the most exciting parts of the day was the performance given by Dario Fo's La Comune, a radical theatre group. The mimic, Vidal, showed the alienation that workers undergo in capitalist society, and did a mimic drama about the demise of the present society. The show was widely understood and enthusiastically

applauded by the workers. We sang songs of struggle led by Paul Ciarchi (also of La Comune) until 1:30 am. When revisionism was attacked throughout the evening, you could see the bureaucrats squirming in discomfort. Finally some of us went to sleep and others went to picket the finished-products gate. If asked for a general assessment of today's occupation, we would have to say that it wasn't all we had hoped it would be, but at the same time it did contain some very positive things. Above all it was a victory snatched from the unions by the workers at the base, and even in the way it was conducted, the unions were prevented from turning it into a platform for political parties and "big shots". We were successful in bringing into the plant workers from other factories, students from many schools, and militants from a variety of political groups dealing with the unions from a position of power.

FEBRUARY 12-13 (Saturday and Sunday)

Thursday night a few workers tore out the train tracks running through part of the factory grounds to prevent a train with 250 finished cars from leaving. The union issued a communiqué which was picked up by Saturday charging that forces "external" to the factory were responsible for this "typically fascist" action. It was the

union's way of attacking the workers who insist that the picket against the finished products must continue at all costs because it is the only form of struggle which is hitting the company in the guts. (The dealers, both domestic and foreign, are pressuring for cars.) Already, a few days ago, a contingent of 200 police managed to get eight trucks (carrying about 60 new cars) safely out of the plant gates, and the union said not a word. This evening (Saturday), while we of the AA are in a meeting, a few comrades arrive from Arese and explain that police reinforcements are on their way to the finished products picket area and are planning to help the train get by the picket lines, since the tracks have been repaired. We leave immediately for the Arese plant, where on arrival we find over 1,000 policemen. We're not sure whether they'll try to get the train out or whether they'll use the trucks.

About 1:00 am, 30 trucks appear outside the gates. (At 7 pm about a dozen of them had entered through another gate, and the police themselves had loaded the cars onto them!) We start talking to the truck drivers: "Our struggle," we say, "is your struggle too. You are exploited just like we are. If you go in, all our sacrifices to maintain the picket of the finished products day and night will go up in smoke. After more than an hour of discussion, they

are persuaded, and refuse to enter the gates. A squad of policemen, stationed inside, went to the gates and tried to get rid of a group of comrades who are seated on the ground near the gates. They shout "Rauss just like the Nazis." They say their job is to ensure respect for the law and the right to work, and that if we don't move they will drag us away. One of them, who is asked by a comrade if he has the proper authorization, answers that he doesn't give a damn about authorization, and that they themselves are the only necessary authority. They bellow orders to the truck drivers to come forward, but the drivers don't move. The officers are foaming with anger as the drivers openly defy them. After 10 minutes they retreat into the plant, closing the gates behind them.

Meanwhile, other comrades arrive after being notified of the emergency situation. (Even a CP senator showed up, but after looking around a few minutes, he left.) A comrade from Quarto Oggiaro had phoned everyone from his home phone, and by some strange coincidence the police blocked all the roads leaving Quarto Oggiaro. His phone was clearly being tapped. But our chief pre-occupation is the train: Now that the tracks are in good repair, it won't be so easy to stop it. At about 3:30 am all the police take their positions, and after opening the gates they let out 10 trucks carrying about 75 cars. The

police are brandishing their rifles and using them to keep back the workers who are pressing forward and yelling “Fascists, fascists!” to the passing truck drivers. A few of the cops look stoned and unsteady, and their faces are angry and full of hate. There are too few of us to resist effectively, but we manage to put it over on the pigs anyway. While a large group of us create an incident to cause commotion and keep the police busy, a smaller group quietly sneak over to an area where the trucks will be passing to leave the grounds. They succeed in damaging nearly all the cars on the last five trucks by throwing stones. The police are really embarrassed, and the truck drivers who had remained outside now realize that it would be impossible to drive out with undamaged cars for the rest of the night. The policemen who escorted the truck drivers out of the factory gates are now clashing with a group of comrades near the exit. They wait for one of the trucks to barely inch forward, and then charge the workers. We return to the drivers to warn them that if they don't clear out, the responsibility for what might happen will be on their shoulders. After about five minutes they leave, and not long after the police leave also. With 30 trucks and a train, they could have carried off about 500 vehicles. As things turned out, they took out only 75, and more than half of them were damaged. Despite the grand display of police power, out

of all proportion to our meager numbers, we managed to win a victory (a) because we were able to persuade the truck drivers to come over to our side, and (b) because the police never thought that we could get so many comrades over to the Arese plant on such short notice.

FEBRUARY 18 (Friday)

Portello: This morning the delegates' council held a meeting at which the FIOM official explained the text of the agreement finally reached this week in Rome. The "automatic passage" is there, but in name only. Strong limitations are built into it: There are more than four levels, because within the first level there are those who never go on to the second, and within the second and third there are discriminatory criteria between workers, not to mention the fourth level, which retains a coefficient amounting to another level.

For the office employees, there is precious little of what they wanted. The union talks about "areas to be delimited" in connection with passage from the second to the third, perhaps with the help of a special commission which, when translated, as we all know, means: postpone the problem until there is no more mass mobilization, so that the company has a chance to maneuver however and whenever it wishes. The only

new thing: a \$72 bonus for everyone, including the scabs. The PCI, with a triumphant tone, celebrates the contract by declaring it “a great victory”, but then someone points out that the automatic passage is a farce, that the levels are more than four, and that the office employees have gained nothing. There is an air of general dissatisfaction, but the unions are saying that we can’t go on with the struggle, that the working class is tired, and that therefore the agreement should be accepted as it stands. Even we of the AA know very well that after 150 hours of strike the struggle has come to an end, but we are not afraid to say that the agreement, far from being a great victory, is a bitter disappointment, especially for the office personnel.

FEBRUARY 21 (Monday)

Portello: There is a general assembly in the cafeteria from 10 to 11 am. Everyone is there; workers, office employees, about 3,000 people. The FIM official goes over the main points of the agreement. He goes on and on for over half an hour and soon mumbling and restless whispering can be heard all over the hall. Finally he says: “Now we will vote, a mere formality, but let’s see: Who’s In favor of the agreement?” About 60% raise their hands amid shouts and jeers. People are yelling “Sellouts,

clowns...” For a further demonstration of support the union official asks slyly: “Those who favor continuing the struggle raise your hands.” Despite this formulation (many of course object to the agreement but prefer not to continue the strike) about 40% raise their hands. The shouting grows more insistent, but the official declares with a perfectly straight face “The overwhelming majority approves of ending the struggle!” and then makes a quick exit. The shouting and hissing continues as members of the CP brass stand there at a loss for words. They don’t have the courage to engage the workers in conversation as the assembly breaks up into smaller groups to discuss the agreement and the manner in which the assembly was held. Many ask why no separate department meetings were held. Others say that if the automatic passage isn’t reached with this agreement, the struggle will go on and set off a chain of wildcats in every department. These who are talking are not from the ranks of the vanguards, but just ordinary workers from the base. Especially among the office employees dissatisfaction is high, and it will be important to avoid a swing to the right. We’ll have to push hard for autonomous organizing at the level of the base. After the meeting is closed, a group of office employees come over and ask if they can join the AA because they’ve decided not to renew their union membership. We explain that

the AA has no formal membership, but that they are welcome to the AA meetings any time.

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