

## **Refuse the false choice “health or jobs”, fight for a guaranteed income! – The example of ILVA in Taranto**

### **THE FACTS**

The ILVA steelworks, in Taranto, a town of 200,000 inhabitants in Apulia, belongs to the RIVA group, and is the biggest steelworks in Italy. Constructed in 1961, it is the oldest one in operation, as well as being the most dangerous and the most polluting. It directly employs 11,500 people and indirectly provides jobs for 9,500 who work for subcontractors in a region where the official unemployment rate is 30%.

It has the capability to transform 20 million tonnes of raw materials into 8 million tonnes of steel per year.

On 26 July, after a long enquiry, the court of Taranto announced the closure of the blast furnaces of the coking plant because of pollution. On the basis of expert reports the magistrates criticised the site for spreading toxic chemical products, such as dioxins<sup>1</sup>. These were products which had increased the rate of cancers in working class neighbourhoods close to the plant. The verdict was final. The plant had to close. Its danger to health was more than proven: more than 386 cancer deaths were identified by bourgeois justice in the course of the last 13 years in its immediate environment and an elevated level of cancers in the close neighbourhoods. On 10 August, the plant was placed under sequestration by the magistrates.

Immediately, there was a unanimous concerted protest uniting the boss, the unions in the plant (and other establishments in the same group in Italy<sup>2</sup>) and the parties of the left: it was necessary to defend jobs and therefore the plant, the heart of the region. This united front called for strike days and demonstrations. In its turn the Riva family mobilised the managerial staff and put coaches at the disposal of the “strikers” so they could protest against the threat of closure. Short of arguments, the boss also held up the threat of closing all his establishments in Italy. And that looked like it would work. Strikes followed and the demonstrations gathered everybody. The defence of capitalist order seemed to triumph totally.

Hegemonic? Nevertheless, in opposition to this proclaimed unanimity, an initially tiny group gathered a few workers from the plant (whose oldest members remembered the golden years of workers’ autonomy), workers from other factories, local residents, young people, unemployed people. It organised and strengthened itself. First of all calling themselves “*Comitato cittadini operai Taranto*” (Committee of worker-residents of Taranto), they distributed a bulletin in which they proclaimed that it is “*up to the state and the Riva family to pay for the consequences of the health disaster that they have created*”<sup>3</sup>. Changing the name to “*Comitato cittadini e lavoratori liberi e pensanti*”<sup>4</sup> (Committee of free and thinking

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<sup>1</sup> The plant has three manufacturing units: the hot phase (steel, coke), the rolling mill and the tube making unit. It is the latter that emitted dioxins during the coating of sheet-metal.

<sup>2</sup> Genoa, Novi Ligure, Racconigi and Patrica.

<sup>3</sup> Bulletin of 01/08/2012.

<sup>4</sup> See the site: <http://www.facebook.com/CittadiniELavoratoriLiberiEPensanti>.

residents and workers), on 31/07/2012, they decided to strike a serious blow during a trade union rally on 2 August to defend their point of view: refuse the blackmail of jobs at the price of health.

They chose as an emblem the Piaggio three-wheeled van (the Ape) and it is behind this vehicle that they entered the trade union meeting, took the stage and explained their position: the refusal of the blackmail “life or jobs”.

This public appearance succeeded, a success which grew to the accompaniment of the hatred of the unions and the parties of the left as much as the right. They denounced the unions which defended the profits of the bosses and not the needs of the workers.

The government entered the scene to pacify the situation on 17 August. It made its own the list of recommendations detailed by the Taranto judge in charge of the preliminary enquiry, Patrizia Todisco, and added a point: not stopping the blast furnaces. In the same spirit of appeasement of an incandescent situation in the town which had become a great subject of national political debate, ILVA announced the same day that it was going to invest 146 million euros to defend the environment. This was a sum added to the 336 million euros put on the table by the state. Yet, to make the site no longer harmful, it would need more like 5 to 8 billion euros... Without counting the billions of euros which would have to be invested to partly remove the damage to the environment and to human beings caused by decades of industrial pollution. In addition, this industrial pollution is not only because of ILVA but also due to the cement works and the arsenal at Taranto.

FIOM, the metalworkers union, engaged in an attempt to recompose the Italian extreme left, began to dissociate itself from the other state unions and tried to reconcile “work and health”. But there was no question for them of immediately stopping the furnaces of the steelworks. “*Steel serves everybody*”, said its general secretary, Maurizio Landini, a former metalworker from Reggio Emilia, bastion of Stalinism in Italy.

The committee met every day in various places: Piazza della Victoria (01/08, 13/08) Piazza Gesu (03/08), Piazza Masaccia (07/08, 10/08). It called demonstrations (02/08, 17/08). Its success grew, notably on 17 August when it gathered more than 2,000 demonstrators, braving the ban on marches imposed by the Prefecture so as not to disturb the visit to Taranto by two high-profile ministers from the Monti government. On 31 August, the committee even assembled a few thousand protesters in the neighbourhood close to the plant. The struggle continues. The crucial point remains the immediate closure of the steelworks and the guarantee of income for workers deprived of jobs.

## **WHAT PERSPECTIVES ?**

For the struggle to be able to carry on it’s necessary to assess the balance of forces. What is the “weight” of the committee? The initial group had 30 people and in the course of a few days it grew, 200, 500, 1,000, 2,000... In the plant itself it could count on the support of around 1,000 workers, which is less than 10% of them; a minority therefore, but one facing a union front which is certainly more numerous but in the process of splitting (see below) and with the majority of workers having a wait-and-see attitude while following the union orders.

The trade union front cracked a little. The national FIOM, in the framework of its political fight with the CGIL, disowned the statements of the local section at ILVA and asked it to take account of the aspirations expressed by the committee.

The boss could be sure of the support of the government in not closing the plant, a government which cleverly avoided conflict with the magistrates and did everything to make the agitation disappear again. On their part, the magistrates back-peddled on the point of immediately stopping production and confined themselves from then on to setting out concrete measures to take without delay to curb pollution. From then on, the Committee could only count on its own forces. Those who hoped that the judges would do their job right to the end were disappointed.

The committee is a real expression of various sectors of the proletariat: workers from the steel plant and other factories, unemployed, casual workers, pensioners, etc. There were also people who staked everything on the defence of the health of the town, sectors of the middle layer of employees or not, who also joined the committee, while forgetting the fundamental demand for a guaranteed income. Its principal axis of struggle, the courageous refusal of the false choice of “jobs or health” (while the first union demonstrations took place behind the banner of “*rather die of cancer than hunger!*”) is certainly a concrete expression of workers’ autonomy. Going beyond the narrow framework of the factory can only delight all those who, for decades, have seen workers bend in front of various forms of bosses’ blackmail (“better to have redundancies than close the factory” etc.). Obviously, they reaffirm the practice of workers from 40 years ago, in the struggle against redundancies as well as against the monetisation of health, for self-reduction: it is for the boss to pay us if he wants to lay us off, if he has to make the installations conform to standards, etc.

## **THAT WAS YESTERDAY**

Right now is a good time to recall an experience of workers autonomy in Italy, between 1968 and 1980, that of the Workers’ Committee of Montedison in Porto Marghera.<sup>5</sup> How in all the expressions of workers’ autonomy at that time, whatever they were called (Unitary Base Committees, Autonomous Assemblies, Student-Worker Assemblies, Workers’ Committees etc.), the members of the Workers’ Committees put forward the same demands (uniform wage increases, reduction of the spread of wage levels towards a higher level for all, equality of benefits between workers/employees, reduction of the pace of work, integration of those employed by subcontractors etc.) and extolled the same methods of struggle (assemblies in departments and then at the factory level, marches inside the workplace, refusal of delegation, etc.) and also intervened outside the factory, on the questions of transport (struggles of the suburb-dwellers of Chioggia), of housing (occupations, fighting for lower rent), the reduction of electricity bills and the high cost of living (against the rises in prices in bakeries and supermarkets).

But above all, they went on to call into question the toxicity of their work in the factory (notably in the vinyl chloride shop) by refusing, contrary to the unions, to accept that the attack on the health of the workers could be compensated for by bonuses haggled over with the boss.

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<sup>5</sup> See the book which has just come out in French: “Pouvoir Ouvrier à Porto Marghera”, by D.Sacchetto and G.Sbrogiò, published by Les nuits rouges, or the original in Italian “Quando il potere è operaio”, di D.Sacchetto e G.Sbrogiò, edizioni Manifestolibri

On the contrary, they imposed by struggle the principle that if a department was unhealthy they wouldn't work there anymore as long as the boss didn't make it safe and if that didn't happen then the workshop had to close. For sure, at that time, the workers were paid and went into the factory to discuss politics and actions to take. Thus they came to criticise the consequences of production on life in the surrounding region and thus were the first "ecologists" to refuse the deadly aspect of capital and call wage labour into question.

These comrades were operaists and not factory-ists. They understood the factories not as a place of production (while continuing to analyse the cycle of production so as to understand what type of organisation of production requires what form of workers' struggle) but first of all as a place of struggle where workers constitute themselves as a class in itself.

## **AND TOMORROW?**

To do this, it's obviously necessary to have an organisation, in the form of committees, of assemblies, by factory, by neighbourhood, which is centralised at the base.

We are certainly not there yet in Taranto, and it is really too soon to say if the signal sent out by the Committee will be taken up elsewhere. For now, let's look at some weaknesses of the committee:

- Support for Justice,
- A certain localism.

The fight taken up by the judge Patrizia Todisco is remarkable for its obstinacy and its courage in confronting the biggest employer in the town and the region which has benefitted from so many decades of "omertà", of passive and active corruption of politicians and unions officials. Nevertheless, if the result of the first judgement was, this time, favourable to the population, the action of the magistrates was to quickly correct it by pulling back on the immediate halting of production and on the nomination of a commissioner. The former Prefect of Milan, Bruno Ferrante, who was for the first time removed from his function as director of ILVA in Tarento, was firmly re-established on appeal by the Tribunal. The justice system, like all separate bodies produced by class society, makes up part of the enemy camp. The militants of the Committee are experiencing this today. In no case must an appeal to justice replace, or even substitute for, the autonomous activity of the workers fighting for their needs.

The certain amount of success achieved by the committee and the immediate tasks which occupy it, the local aspect of the struggle, risk holding back its political development and its concrete capacity to become a beacon for the exploited of the whole country and beyond. For the moment, there is not, either elsewhere in Italy or crucially in the other ILVA sites, a favourable reaction to the objectives of the Committee. The state, its parties and its unions, and the bosses have achieved a certain success in their attempt to reduce the question of ILVA in Taranto to a simple matter of a deadline for improving the site. "*The committee wants everything right away but change takes time*", they announced in chorus. The demand for an income independent of work put forward by the committee is passed over in silence. Yet this is the point which is politically the most sensitive and central for conscious workers to put forward everywhere when the blackmail of employment becomes more pressing.

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