

MR

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POTERE OPERAIO

interview with

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Radical America

INTERVIEW

Q. Could you explain how PO intends to deal with the current political repression and to relate that to your specific program of political wages and the rejection of work.

A. 1969 was the year of so-called hot autumn. But the heat in the factories and in the schools did not stop with the ending of 1969. By late 1970 Italian capitalism decided that there will be no more large investments at home until there is industrial peace. The bosses want to prove that they will not invest and expand unless the working class is docile. As the working class has not been docile at all, the State's reaction has been planned recession characterized by high unemployment and inflation. If the working class had responded to this blackmail by trying to "protect jobs", it wouldn't have been able to fight the way it has fought, and they would have already made it by starting expansion again. The minute you fight, capitalist initiative won't feel safe enough to risk their money and material. A partial way out for them would be a devaluation, but with the U.S. vulture on them they will be lucky if they avoid a revaluation. In the meantime, Italian capitalism is performing its second-class imperialistic role quite efficiently by exporting larger and larger amounts of investments to low-wage areas: Latin America, Africa, the Soviet bloc.

We are concerned with mounting an offensive by ^{the} working class just the moment when the bosses are trying their blackmail. In the post-war years the movement in Italy has been able to grow and fight only in periods of economic growth. Among young workers the will to take full responsibility for the capitalist reaction that ~~at~~ their strikes were bound to produce is now much more ~~expressed~~ widespread than at the time of planned recession, unemployment and inflation following the wave of strikes of 1962. One of the slogans they have coined at Fiat says: "We are the crisis". This time we may be able to prevent Italian capitalism from throwing us back into a defensive position as in 1963-64. More forces - both workers and students - than at that time are ~~available~~ now ready to take on the enemy. PO with other groups is trying to find out an effective strategy for an offensive now. The forces that go to the defensive - leftist parties, trade unions, and unfortunately Il Manifesto too, recently - cannot provide an adequate response to the bosses' counterattack, no matter how leftist, vocal and

sincerely they are. In a situation like this, when the democratic institutions are mere gears in the capitalist machine of planned reaction, they still propose to fill those institutions with more leftist people.

Much of our emphasis is on youth and the South. In real wages, working class youth in Italy are much more restricted than in the U.S. They have much less money in their pockets. The paychecks just don't stretch. There is also a heavier workweek. We still don't have full free Saturdays. Not until spring of '72 will there be a 40 hour week in some basic industries. This accounts for the fact that to foreign eyes there appears no counterculture in Italy.

The South has all this plus planned underdevelopment. The younger generation does not identify with their parents or their immediate environment. Their brothers and fathers have migrated to Northern Italy or to Central Europe to get a paycheck. They ~~know~~ do not have the means to satisfy basic needs. They are stuck and they know it. At the same time, they have modern aspirations. They know very well that they are the reserve labor pool of Europe. They have rebelled at the same time as the youth in the North, only more violently and sometime with open insurrections. Particularly in the South, but not only there, we believe that a subversive leap is possible in the immediate future: and we are working for it, not conspiratorially but openly.

Q. You haven't said anything about political wages.

A. Let us say reappropriation first. Reappropriation was born with exploitation. In a regime of hard work and rampant inflation like in Italy now, reappropriation has meant the fight against speed-up, an increase in mass absenteeism and turnover to avoid the heaviest jobs, mass assaults on supermarkets, on shops with exorbitant prices, the commuters' refusal to pay their tickets, mass squatting, etc. When high unemployment is added to hard work and inflation to intimidate the working class into docility, to ask for an anti-poverty program or for a minimum wage to the unemployed is to play into capital's hands. Political wages is becoming a technique of reappropriation at a time of maneuvered recession. Political wages is what a movement is able to tear not merely from the capitalists but from their police and their army. An unchallenged rise in the cost of living could force the working class to accept silently speed-up and

~~WORKING CLASS ARE TAKEN SERIOUSLY AND ENCOURAGED~~
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~~aged - as they increasingly are - they necessarily mean the undoing not merely of wage-labor but also of the factory system as the regimentation of the repression. The movement can challenge such a rise. For instance, two of the workers' lives in a unity of time and place largest Italian corporations, Fiat and Montedison, control the largest chains of supermarkets in the country.~~

As to work, in the 50's and 60's, the old skilled worker who was the backbone of the CP was slowly being phased out through the "Detroit automation" and the introduction of a more rigid assembly line. Whoever has a skill can take some reward of pride from his work. The more "capitalistic" work becomes, the more regimented his/her work. Alienation from work is not a wound inflicted on a victim. It is the spring of rebellion. The rise in the neglect for the quality of the product, in the fight to gain time between one operation and another in order to communicate with the workmates, in being late at work, in absenteeism and in turnover has been a self-feeding process in these last few years in Italy. If the parties and the unions that want to "correct" these sins are drastically weakened, if these trends within the working class are taken seriously and encouraged - as they increasingly are - they necessarily mean the undoing not merely of wage-labor but also of the factory system as the regimentation of the workers' lives in a unity of time and place; one that the exploitative cooperation embodied in machinery dictates. They mean also a struggle to undo the social fabric - from household work to the school system - by which the factory system is maintained. And they mean a struggle against the State as the general "compeller" to work. The first article of the Italian constitution says the State is founded on work, and they mean it.

The struggles of '68-'70 could be summed up into a slogan: More wages, less work, both at the same time. Workers proved they did not give a damn about this ~~main~~ factory, this work, the general interest of society. They wanted to disengage pay from productivity whether the form was piecework or hourly rate, just as the unemployed now want to disassociate full pay from work. The young workers went around saying they didn't want to be stuck in a factory for 30 years. In fact, in order to keep them in a factory for more than a couple of years, the State has had to organize a massive recession, and even that does not work any longer, apparently. Older layers of the working class and the unions ask the bosses to solve the problems of the most repetitive and boring jobs. But merging physical and mental labor does not end exploitation. It may even intensify it. Il Manifesto

for instance has asked for "4 hours of work - ~~four~~ 4 hours of school". The extra-~~parliamentary~~ action of intelligence would flow into capitalist production more efficiently. This is like saying that only industrialization will save America. In any case, such requests may produce a patch, but they can hardly work on a large scale, basically because working class people don't want to be pushed around that way. We do not propose any solution. Solutions would necessarily have to put the present working class struggles to the background. In that respect we are one-sided and narrow. As long as people have to sell segments of their lives to survive, there won't be anything but war. It may be a maneuvered war and not a blitzkrieg, but the fact ~~remains~~ remains that a wage relation cannot but command these jobs. The present struggles are saying no to this command. The kind of activity is what people want to change completely. That's at least what the movement has expressed in Italy in these last few years. At the present stage of development, revolution here means no work.

Q. If Your basic demands, your day-to-day demands are putting you in direct confrontation with the State.

A. Yes, that's what is happening. The bosses want now 1) to discipline the working class, employed and unemployed, and 2) to eliminate the extra-parliamentary groups. They would tolerate our formal survival in a civil liberties sense but they cannot tolerate our effective political survival. In 1970, PO has had 36 arrests, 726 charges filed against as many members, 56 seriously wounded people. Yet, ~~in spite~~ these figures may hide the fact that in the economy of what we have been doing we can safely say we have protected our human resources. We have grown. Today, we have a network of PO sections running throughout Italy and active contacts among people who have migrated to Central Europe. What should be understood is that the rise of working class-based groups around the papers of Quaderni Rossi (1962-65) and Classe Operaia (1964-67) preceded the explosion of the student movement. These groups had a theory and practice within the working class which they brought to the students. The stage of meaningless slogans like Student Power passed very quickly. There was a fusion of the "old" working class-based groups and the new student activists. During '68-'70, groups like PO and Lotta Continua could expand, even mushroom. A lot of activities were self-organizing. Now, the problem is how

to fight the anti-working class recession, and how to expand in the face of mounting repression.

We think the best way to achieve this is a homogeneous set of interests, of ideas, a homogeneous style of work among all the units in our group. We feel there is little time left ~~in~~ for us to do this basic work. It is quite possible that communications will be cut off, that heavy repression will occur in many places, especially where the rise in unemployment is massive. The local groups must be able not only to survive but to take action. They must be able to anticipate what the center decision would have been. We believe that the movement has to alter its practice of turnover of personnel, its shifting from periods of intense struggle to periods of little struggle. The movement has to be prepared for work that goes on for years; it's no short struggle. People have to be filtered through political experiences. Membership has to mean something. We will not compromise on this to gain numbers. This does not mean that we have the old idea of democracy in the liberal sense but that each member must have the tools and the ability to carry on autonomously with ~~their~~ his/her group. We have a center for making decisions and for collecting political debate from all the local units. We have a central organizational machinery. In that respect, it is important in times of repression that local groups understand what to do without waiting for this central machinery to act. The more homogeneous a group is in expressing specific class interests and in fighting for those class interests, the more the group as a whole is able to grasp these interests and be those interests and work out effective action. This kind of relationship comes from a common analysis and common decisions. It means there are certain basic interests of the working class or sections of it on which everybody agrees and works for.

Q. How does pO present itself to workers.

A. We present ourselves as workers and students that have got things by sticking together. In some ~~sections~~ of our sections, like in Porto Marghera (Venice harbor), we have been working for more than ten years, and we have expanded thanks to our uncompromising action against the bosses and our uncompromising break with the unions. We want to prove that we are an instrument by which workers gain and not lose. We don't fight to be martyrs, but to gain advantage.

Our success to date has been on the basis of our being able to do this with some credibility. We think success in the near future depends on our being an instrument of the new offensive by the whole working class, employed and unemployed, Northerners and ~~South~~ Southerners, men and women, youth. We need to wage an attack on the blackmail of the bosses. That can really help the rise of an organization of the whole proletariat in ~~France~~ Southern Europe and elsewhere. PO does not want to be the party. It wants to be part of such a rise. Our two reference points in these last few years have been the Black movement in the U.S., and - as far as Europe is concerned - the Irish movement. They have partially broken down the isolation we felt in the early 60's. On the other hand, we feel a special responsibility for an expansion of class activity where class ~~initiative~~ initiative is weakest, Switzerland and Germany in particular.

Q. You mentioned women as part of the working class. In the past two years or so women's liberation has gotten started in Italy. Could you relate that movement to the general movement?

A. The confinement of women to household work is worse in Italy than in most industrial countries. Less than 20% of the working force is female. Low paying jobs, and discriminatory wages for the same jobs are common practice in spite of the bills outlawing them. Because of the higher percentage of women confined in the home in Italy, male wages command a higher proportion than elsewhere of female services in the home. In other words, capitalism in Italy more than in other countries has "liberated" man from these services so that he is "free" to be totally at the disposal of direct exploitation. The point is that within the camp of wage-labor the services performed in the household by the women are essential to exploitation in the factory, and viceversa. In the home, Italian working class women are the workers's servants. The situation in the South is complicated by higher unemployment, emigration, confinement of women to backward industries, and the phenomenon of "white widows", women whose men have gone elsewhere to work and only return once a year to make a new baby.

When women get jobs they regain some leverage in society. Then their militancy emerges for the politically blind to see. But with recessions like the 1963-64 and the present ones, women cannot wait for jobs in order to fight. The women's liberation groups are beginning to relate to this situation. They are also mak-

ing specific projects in the South. That is going to be a major battle-field.

Q. What is the nature of the women's liberation groups.

A. There is developing a difference in the style of work between the extra-parliamentary groups and the women's groups. This is not the first time something like this ^{has} happened. A similar phenomenon developed between the working class-based groups and the student movement in '68. But whereas the student movement had to move through the groups to get to the working class, a large mass of the women are working class. The women's movement has to force somebody else to acknowledge them as working class. That's the root of the difference, but that does not mean the women's groups consider women who are not working class as people outside the range of their activity.

The income differentials in Italy within the layers of the population that have fought hardest against capital in these last few years have not been so high as in the U.S. or in the United Kingdom. This has made the identification of students with the working class easier. It may make the identification of ~~students with~~ ^{easier} the Northern women with the Southern women for instance, and of the male workers with the women's lot. Whereas there are many students in women's liberation, there is no division of interests between students and worker members.

Every major city has at least one major group and each one responds to different needs. They work autonomously in respect to the extra-parliamentary groups, but they didn't have to throw the extra-parliamentary left away in order to form a movement. On the contrary, they have been able to utilize the Italian extra-parliamentary left's focus on the working class and the sense of offensive that it has spread in Europe. The women who participate also in the activity of these groups participate in male-dominated activity but activity that is opening all sorts of possibilities for women's liberation to explode as long as the autonomous women's movement is a force and a center of decision-making in itself. The sexual question is beginning to be dealt with by the women's liberation groups - in a society permeated by the Catholic church.

Recession or no recession - women are not going to allow themselves to be blackmailed sexually or economically.

Interview - Oct. '71 / Interviewer - Dan Georgakas / Interviewees - some comrades

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Every major city has at least one major group and each one responds to different needs. They work autonomously in respect to the extra-parliamentary groups. Some women participated or continue to participate also to the political activity of these groups: it is a problematic situation that at this moment is completely on the personal responsibility of these women to deal with. ~~It is women of the women's liberation movement in Italy.~~ All sorts of possibilities for women's movement to explode lies in the complete autonomy of the movement as force and center of decisionmaking in itself. The sexual question more and more is dealt with by the women's liberation groups - this is a crucial point in a society where the Catholic church is a pervasive real articulation of power.

Recession or no recession - women are not going to allow themselves to be blackmailed sexually or economically.