

Anarchists in a Workers Uprising

Italy's Biennio Rosso

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Author's note: *The following piece relies heavily on quotations from Malatesta. This is not because of some undue worship of his political insights, but rather that English translations of works by anarchists from the period are few and far between. We also do not mean to overstate the role of anarchists in revolutionary activity. There were many in the PSI engaged in revolutionary struggle, and we recognise the activities of rank and file communists.*

In 1919, a series of strikes in the north of Italy would escalate into rank and file rebellion in the unions, factory occupations, and eventually workers' control of large swathes of production. In the poorer south, peasants occupied their land and formed self-governing committees. Coming perilously close to revolution, the two years of radical workers and peasants activity from 1919–20 became known as the “Biennio Rosso”, or “Two Red Years.” In some places, workers formed councils reminiscent of the Soviets in Russia. In others, the workers elected committees that ‘oversaw’ the capitalists running the factories. In some instances, workers would go as far as to take over the factories and run production themselves (over 500,000 workers were engaged in self-managed production in 1920). Worker run factories flew red and black flags, establishing “Red Guards” to defend the occupations. All of these sites held the potential for class power, but they also lacked coordination.

As the course of events steamrolled ahead, the Italian left struggled to respond. Italy's political left was unique, and every organisation involved would play a decisive role in the movement in their own way. The formal political side of the movement was dominated by the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) which contained a large reformist current, and two radical wings grouped around Antonio Gramsci and Amadeo Bordiga respectively. The main union confederation, the Confederazione Generale del Lavoro (CGIL), was around 800 000 strong, and the radical syndicalist Unione Sindicalista Italiana (USI) stood at about 150,000 members. The USI however would rapidly explode in membership over the two red years to nearly 800 000 itself. The independent Maritime (Federazione Lavatori del Porto) and Railway (Sindacato Ferroviaria Italiana) workers' unions would also play key roles in the movement. These unions, not affiliated to either the CGIL or the USI, were politically dominated by anarchists. Finally, only months before the beginning of the Biennio Rosso the anarchists themselves had formed into the Italian Anarchist Union, a specifically anarchist-communist political organisation. It was a period of time and place where the anarchist movement would play a uniquely strong role in the labour struggle.

Prelude to Revolt

The Biennio Rosso was born from the end of WWI. Italy had been through a tumultuous period of revolt and intrigue leading into their entry into the war. During the war, the civilian population had been mobilised for war production. The unions had grown exponentially, and a rebellion in 1914 known as the Red Week had been launched from the city of Ancona, the then-capital of Italian anarchism. The uprising was a spontaneous response to the shooting of three anti-militarist demonstrators by the police, but the resulting strikes, occupations and riots in particular were driven by the railway workers' union. Large numbers of peasants moved north to work in the factories, and returned soldiers were bitter from their experiences of the war, adding to the shifting class composition of Italy. The volatility of post-War Italy was compounded by the spectre of

communism looming over Europe. The threat to the ruling class was made all the more corporeal by the Russian Revolution, bolstering the revolutionary aspirations of the Italian proletariat.

Throughout the period leading to the Biennio Rosso, the Italian Socialist Party had grown substantially as a result of the anti-war stance it adopted, overtaking the popularity of the Republicans. The PSI was one of the only parties in the Second International not to support their national government during the war. They also played a key role in union organising during a growing labour movement. Like most other revolutionary Marxists in the West, the Italian communists participated inside the mass organisation, the socialist party, as a radical wing. Marxists would persist under the illusion that the PSI represented a revolutionary potential until after the events of the Biennio Rosso. Only after the ultimate failure of the revolution would the Marxists break to form their own Communist party. However, Gramsci and his comrades would still play an important role during the revolt through their journal and its influence on the Turinese labour movement.

Immediately following the war, a radical rank and file movement had begun to develop in the factories of Northern Italy. Militants had returned from London with stories of the shop stewards networks. Inspired by the organisation of British workers, Italian radicals agitated in the workplace to develop 'internal commissions' to the factories. These commissions were small groups of workers who would elect a recallable delegate. These shop stewards would then choose from amongst themselves a smaller group of representatives known as a 'factory council'. The duty of the factory council was to monitor the activity of the bosses and consistently advocate for the workers amongst the administration. With the increasing climate of class struggle, the role of these factory councils would quickly become far more radical.

The Two Red Years

As for the start of the Biennio Rosso itself, the movement could be said to have begun in March, 1919. FIOM, the metal workers union, was negotiating a new contract with bosses in the northern city of Turin. The leadership negotiated a series of wage increases in return for selling off conditions. Workers could no longer organise on site during work hours, strikes and direct action would be banned, and instead of working a half day on Saturday, workers would work the entire day. The rank and file were furious, and their response was expressed through the factory council movement.

At the same time, a new paper named L'Ordine Nuovo (New Order) was launched in Turin. The journal focused on the issues of the rank and file of the worker's movement in the region, and expressed a radical politics that many have compared to syndicalism. Launched by the most radical Marxists in the PSI, L'Ordine Nuovo was commonly associated with the name of Antonio Gramsci. However the journal was not a purely Marxist affair. Pietro Ferrero, an anarchist who was elected secretary of the Turin FIOM during the later period of the Biennio Rosso, was a strong supporter of the paper and among many other anarchist contributors. The Turin Libertarian group also worked extremely closely with the editors of L'Ordine Nuovo.

While the radical wing of the PSI in Turin moved closer to the organic workers movement that was developing, the party itself applied for affiliation with the Third International. Though a full account of the relationship between the PSI, Italian Communists and the Comintern is beyond

the scope of this article, it is suffice to say that adopting the required conditions of entry would come to have dark consequences for the Marxist wing of the workers movement in Italy.

Within a month, in April, the factory council movement had begun to spread to Milan. USI activists were usually responsible for driving the establishment of factory committees outside Turin. In May, social unrest exploded in the form of riots over the cost of living. Some labour councils expropriated businesses for a period and handed out staples for free. This level of unrest didn't last, however the factory committee movement expanded, laying deeper roots in the industrial north in particular.

In October, 20 factories in Turin sent their FIOM delegates to a congress where they developed a programme expressing the desires of the movement. Within a month they had organised another conference, this time drawing representatives of 50,000 workers. The rank and file factory committee movement effectively declared war on the union bureaucracy (which was largely drawn from the PSI). Delegates were no longer to be limited to members of the CGIL unions, and the syndicalists of the USI were given equal opportunity to be elected. All union officials were to be rotated every six months, and the FIOM was to be totally reorganised. Expressing the radical turn the workers were taking, the Turin section of the FIOM elected Maurizio Garino, an anarchist, as secretary. The crowning glory of the factory committee's programme however was its declared intention to "set in train in Italy a practical exercise in the realization of communist society."

In December, the Turin Labour Council and all the unions affiliated to it fully endorsed the programme of the Factory Committees. Italy's most famous anarchist, Errico Malatesta returned to the country just before Christmas, his immense popularity contributing to the insurrectional atmosphere. Ironically, the workers press hailed him as the "Lenin of Italy," though he rejected the accolade.

The wave of radicalisation continued to sweep through the labour movement.

By early 1920, the bosses had started to fight back against the growing movement. Through their organisation, the Confindustria, they funded fascists attacks on workers' organisations. Fascists would often harass union meetings, beat up activists, break strikes and burn down the meeting halls of radical parties and groups. The Confindustria would lay the groundwork for Mussolini's Blackshirts.

In March, anarchists put forward the idea of factory occupations in *Umanita Nova*, the paper of the UAI. The anarchists were the first to suggest that the rolling waves of strikes and protests needed to be surpassed. The bosses had started locking workers out, and by occupying and running the factories the workers could mitigate the effectiveness of these bosses' lockouts. Soon, the USI General Secretary followed suit with a call to occupations, and the Factory Committees central body endorsed the idea. As Malatesta wrote in the article "This Is Your Stuff";

"Workers must get used to the idea that everything there is, everything that is produced, is theirs, in the hands of thieves today, but to be wrested back tomorrow...Starting right now, the workers should think of themselves as the owners, and start acting like owners. The destruction of stuff is the act of a slave — a rebellious slave but one nonetheless. The workers today do not want and do not have to be slaves any longer."

On the 27th of March, the UAI issued an appeal to the workers and peasants of Italy to organise a national congress of workers and peasants councils. Ironically, the appeal from the UAI was

published in L'Ordine Nuovo, and the editorial board signed on alongside the Turin Libertarian Group and, alone amongst their party, the Turin executive of the PSI. However it was the UAI that held the honour of being the first organisation to try and bring together the peasant and workers struggles, recognising that without national coordination the movement would founder.

Also they realised the limits of factory committees. The anarchists pointed out that if the struggle did not continue to advance, the factory councils would slide back to co-management with the capitalists. There is nothing inherently 'revolutionary' about workers co-management unless the class struggle is advancing. At the same time, they knew that without confronting the state the movement would be crushed. The workers must prepare their own organisations to confront, overcome and destroy the repressive agencies of the state.

In a resolution passed at a UAI conference on the 4th of July, 1920, the anarchists made the following observation:

“The [factory] 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.”

It was the insight around the limits of the factory committees that separated the anarchists from L'Ordine Nuovo at the time. The glaring failure of the best Marxists around Gramsci was that they put forward no programme for advancement, assuming appropriation of the economic functions of capitalism would be sufficient. Workers councils were also developing into bodies that administered social provisions the state provided in the past. Though encroaching on the social role of the state, they were not yet prepared to meet its armed might. Other revolutionary Marxists grouped around Amadeo Bordiga made no efforts to involve themselves in the factory committees.

The anarchists continued to push the struggle outside the workplaces, encouraging the broader class to take action against their oppressors. So, in June, soldiers, anarchists amongst their ranks, mutinied in Ancona, refusing to depart for a mission in Albania. They took up arms and held the port for two days. Also linked were boycotts and strikes on the ports and in the factories, where the anarchist led unions refused to send arms intended to suppress the Russian Revolution.

Only weeks later, in April, FIOM shop stewards at the Fiat plants in Turin were fired. 80,000 workers respond by going on strike and sitting-in their factories. The bosses called a lockout. In response, the entire labour movement of Turin joined the strike. The first general strike of the Biennio Rosso saw 500,000 workers throw down their tools. Everything stopped. The strike spread across the broader Piedmont region, until eventually the CGIL convinced the workers to return to their factories and farms. But April was only a prelude to the strikes in September.

Approaching the crux of the movement, in August the Sindicato Ferroviaria Italiana (SFI), the anarchist-dominated railway workers' union called a conference where Armando Borghi,

the anarchist secretary of the USI proposed a revolutionary ‘proletarian united front.’ This was proposed to include the PSI, UAI, USI, the Federazione Lavoratori del Porto (the dockworkers’ union) and any other unions willing in the CGIL. The PSI, however rejected the overture, and as they dominated the leadership of the CGIL, the central of the union body rejected the proposal too. The anarchists may not have won the leadership of the CGIL over to the Revolutionary United Front position, but they continued to agitate for unity amongst the rank and file. As Malatesta put it in a short appeal to workers, “When the bosses exploit them [the workers] they pay no heed to party distinctions and starve them all the same; when the carabinieri pepper their chests with the kings lead, they do not bother to ask what sort of membership card they carry in their pockets.”

By the end of the month, a strike amongst workers at the Alfa-Romeo factories in Turin had resulted in a lock-out by the bosses. This sparked the factory occupations in September that became the highpoint of struggle during the Biennio Rosso. Rapidly expanding from Alfa-Romeo to steel mills, tool factories, the railways, transport, agriculture and amongst the peasantry the region around Turin became a hotbed of workers’ activity. Taking heed of the shortcomings of their previous efforts, workers occupied factories and restarted production under their own management. Factories raised red and black flags. Workers armed themselves and formed militias to defend the occupied factories. On the railways, transportation was refused to soldiers sent to suppress the revolt; instead the trains were used to move products for the self-managed factories. Over 500,000 workers and countless peasants were involved in forms of self-management. The pages of *Umanita Nova* observed, “revolution looked imminent.”

While the revolt did spread to other cities and regions, it did not take on the proportions that it reached in Turin. The USI did its best to mobilise workers elsewhere, and considered issuing a public call to general strike and insurrection. However, at a conference called to discuss the uprising, the anarchist Garino advocated they ‘wait three more days’ for the CGIL to hold their respective national congress — believing the other union body would also issue a call to revolution. But the CGIL did not. Some workers had proposed a motion that the CGIL call for revolution. Instead, through the most cynical of political maneuvers, the PSI instructed its layer of CGIL bureaucracy to advocate for an abstract “economic management of the factories by workers” rather than the call for revolution. The reformists motion was carried by 591,245 votes against 409,596.

This left Turin isolated and vulnerable to government repression. Workers asked for assistance from around the country, but tragically only the newspapers *Umanita Nova* and *Guerra de Classe* (the paper of the USI) made efforts to propagandise the movement. Anarchists in the UAI and USI smuggled weapons into Turin through their links in the ports and on the railways. The demand for libertarian activists to speak at factory occupations was such that they could not have kept up if every UAI militant in the country came to Turin. Malatesta wrote in *Umanita Nova*:

“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.”

In contrast to the anarchists efforts, L'Ordine Nuovo stopped publishing during the strike and made no attempts to work with their libertarian allies. In the ultimate act of betrayal, the PSI refused to even publicise the revolt. So much for a revolutionary party of the Third International.

By October 4th, the government had Turin surrounded by the military, and soldiers were stationed outside the gates of many factories. The strikes collapsed and the majority of workers gave up their occupations. Turning again to Malatesta, he reflected on the failure of the revolution in September:

“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”

The Italian bourgeoisie now had breathing space to recompose itself. State repression became more fierce, funded by the capitalists and landowners. The Italian government quickly arrested the leadership of both the USI and the UAI. Ironically, few Marxists were arrested, at least not until the establishment of fascism. Errico Malatesta and Armando Borghi would remain the longest in Italian jails. Anarchists around the country attempted to mount a campaign to free their comrades, organising strikes and demonstrations in most cities. They approached the PSI and PCd'I, but were rebuked. It would seem the Italian State identified the anarchist movement as the most intransigent revolutionaries. Fascist violence increased. A tragic example; Pietro Ferrero, the anarchist secretary of the Turin FIOM at the height of the Biennio Rosso was captured in December. He was beaten within an inch of his life, dragged behind a truck then dumped beneath a statue and shot. Italy would become the first country in the world to fall to fascism. Luigi Fabbri wrote in *The Preventative Counter-Revolution*:

“With the [first world] war, there emerged the greatest proletarian unanimity against the ruling class and this led to an extraordinary deepening of the gulf between the classes, with the one regarding the other as its declared enemy. And in particular, the ruling class, seeing its power threatened, lost its head. What disturbed it most, perhaps, was the feeling that it could not defend itself except through recourse to violence and civil war, which, in theory and through its laws, it had always condemned: it was undermining the very foundations and principles upon which the bourgeoisie had been constructing its institutions for upwards of a century.”

Revolutionary Failures

During the Biennio Rosso, Marxist politics — with the exception of those around L'Ordine Nuovo — had completely failed to appreciate the development and potential of the workers' rebellion.

Generations of electoral focus and a banal vision of socialist revolution as a strictly party-guided affair meant the PSI was at best unresponsive, and at worst counter-revolutionary. Meanwhile, anarchists around the country had taken leading roles in pushing the struggle forward, but their tactical decisions ultimately limited their success. As the Italian proletariat strove forward towards revolution, it looked for political direction, and many workers had expected the anarchists to provide it. The anarchist-communists of the UAI had the politics that could fulfil important tasks towards an Italian revolution, but the late formation of their federation meant they were not prepared to play a decisive leading role when the time came. Italian workers had to be prepared to not only run society through the factory councils, but to expand this power to confront the state and smash it.

While hundreds of thousands of anarchist-influenced members in the USI pushed forward through direct struggle, occupation and confrontation with the state and fascists, the USI itself could not lead the entirety of the working class by itself. The limitations of syndicalism were demonstrated in Italy, foreshadowing problems that would face revolutionaries a decade later in Spain. The division of the workers between the CGIL and the USI had dangerous consequences; it involved separating the more politically advanced workers from the broader proletarian mass, and surrendering the leadership of a popular organisation to conservatives and reformists. Not only were the workers divided, they also had legal channels to achieve reform, which lent to the legitimacy of the reformist leaders. The legal status of the Italian union movement meant it existed in a very different context to Spain and Russia, where proletarian demands could not be channelled into reforms, but only explode.

As such, CGIL workers were often under the sway of the leadership and bureaucracy of the PSI; had the USI radicals remained in the CGIL, they may have been in a position to directly challenge the conservatives. To their credit though, the USI never ceased to push for an alliance with the CGIL's rank and file membership. The proposition of the "Revolutionary Proletarian Front" was sound. Malatesta elaborated in "The Limits of Political Co-Existence";

"For us to be divided even where there are grounds for unity, would mean dividing the workers, or rather, cooling off their sympathies, as well as making them less likely to follow the socialistic line common to both socialists and anarchists and which is at the heart of the revolution. It is up to the revolutionaries, especially the anarchists and socialists, to see to this by not exaggerating the differences and paying attention above all to the realities and objectives which can unite us and assist us to draw the greatest possible revolutionary advantage from the [present] situation."

The importance for understanding when, and what revolutionary alliances to make is of significant importance. Tragically, it was largely the Socialist movement who failed during the Biennio Rosso. One key aspect of this failure was understanding the potential of the peasantry. Orthodox Marxists of the First and Second International downplayed the revolutionary potential of the peasantry. As expected, the PSI made zero effort to combine the struggles.

When it came to recognising the need to build a revolutionary alliance between workers and peasants, the anarchists were among the first in Italy to recognise the importance of this task. The anarchist tradition had always advocated joint struggle between workers and peasants; Bakunin articulated the strategic importance of such a relationship in his "Letter to a Frenchman". In Italy Camilo Berneri, himself a former member of the PSI, was one of the foremost advocates

of developing the relationship between workers and peasants. He wrote on the topic during the Biennio Rosso, later further refining his thoughts through his engagement with the Spanish Revolution.

But Italian anarchism had not always been so sophisticated; the birth of anarchism in Italy had been marked by a distinct spontaneism and insurrectionism; thankfully, these immature tendencies were mostly abandoned by the early 1900s. The mass organisational, class based focus of Italian anarchists, combined with their intransigent insistence on collective direct action meant they usually had their fingers on the pulse of both the peasantry and the workers. Hence anarchists played significant leading roles in revolts in Rome, Ancona, Sicily, as well as in the general struggle against the Monarchy.

For example, during the Sicilian fasci (not to be confused with the later fascist movement) revolt of 1893–4, the anarchists around Malatesta and Merlino combined with rogue socialist politician Giuseppe De Felice to encourage and spread the rebellion. Sicily had caught the Marxists of Italy flat footed. At the beginning of the movement, pre-eminent Italian socialist Antonio Labriola wrote to Engels describing the fasci as “the illusion of a coming revolt in Sicily”, declaring efforts to organise the peasantry as a “labour of fantasy. Within a few months, he wrote another letter to Engels, this time describing the fasci as “the second great mass movement after that of Rome...”.

While the anarchists and De Felice had thrown themselves into organising and spreading the revolt beyond Sicily and further into Italy, the socialists abstained. The movement was crushed later in 1894, largely due to the inaction of the political socialists; another case of Italian Marxism being hamstrung by its orthodoxy. The Marxists interpreted workers’ self-emancipation to mean that the proletariat’s destiny was to follow the specific programme and leadership of the socialist party. They were seemingly unaware that the working class would throw up its own forms of organisation during struggle. The problems of orthodoxy would continue to dog the socialist response to revolts and revolutions, from the Sicilian fasci to the refusal of the PSI to join the proletarian Revolutionary United Front during the Biennio Rosso. Overall, during the Red Years the PSI was more concerned with maintaining its hold on the union bureaucracy and its seats in parliament than leading an insurrection through factory committees or workers councils.

Political Reflections for Anarchists

Given the key role that the anarchists played during the Biennio Rosso, it is worth reflecting on the political lessons we can draw from the period. There are many, but we will draw out only a few, given the introductory nature of this article.

Firstly, a positive; the strength of the anarchist movement lays in its determined focus on mass direct action. The strategy of a consistent “means and ends” to achieve the goals of the working class keeps anarchism in check with regard to organic developments amongst the proletariat. For example, rather than focusing on the needs of the union bureaucracy or a desire to achieve reform by purely ‘legal means’ or through electoral gains, Italian anarchists concentrated their efforts into expanding strikes, factory committees, militias etc. To anarchists, this process of direct struggle and organisation at the base would create the forms that structure the new society. This effectively confirms the historical status of anarchism as a living philosophy of socialism from below.

The Biennio Rosso also shows that anarchists are correct in recognising the need to destroy the bourgeois state. Unlike the revolutionary Marxists of L'Ordine Nuovo, anarchists didn't fall into the trap of thinking the economic 'expropriation' of the state was enough, nor that the state must be captured in order to begin the restructuring of society. Occupying a more dialectical middle ground, Italian anarchism would avoid the ultra-leftism of the soon to be founded Communist Party. Founded in January, 1921 the PCdI would most famously abstain from the anti-fascist military organisation the Artidi del Popolo (not that there were not criticisms to make, but that abstention would be the greater mistake). This was not only a mistake of the 'ultra-left' like Bordiga, even Gramsci would make the same erroneous judgement. The historic tasks that Marxists believed were solely the duty of the Communist Party left them blind to the agency of the working class. Italian Communists believed that through the party alone the working class could remake society; hence that their task was the establishing the Communist Party in a position of state power. The identification of the advance section of the class with a particular political label is a mistake that obscures the content of any workers rebellion. The advanced section of any class develops through the organic development of the class struggle. It is not a self-proclaimed vanguard dictated by its ideological position. In Italy, the proletarian advance guard was largely located in the anarchist movement.

However, that is not to say ideas do not also shape content; where the anarchist movement most obviously failed was on the question of forms of organisation. In particular, the syndicalist mistake of forming separate 'radical' unions resulted in splitting the labour movement. Firstly, it is important to clarify that the USI itself was not an 'anarchist' organisation — it was a union based on more radical structures and methods, but still contained a variety of perspectives. It was nevertheless founded largely by anarchists, and its secretary throughout the Biennio Rosso was a committed Anarchist-Communist. So while the USI was initially formed with the best intentions, it separated more radical, effective activists and workplace leaders from the larger mass of workers in the CGIL. The rank and file of the CGIL unions were left to contend with the manoeuvres of the bureaucracy without the extra bolster of numbers and radical politics that the USI members could have provided. The mistaken position of forming "revolutionary" unions in opposition to mass ones was scrutinised first by Malatesta in 1907 (and again in 1925), and then by Lenin in *Left-Wing Communism* (1921).

In contrast to the USI, the Maritime and Railway unions avoided this mistake. Remaining popular mass unions (relevant to their industry) the anarchists helped steer them towards direct action and political independence. Anarchists employed the 'militant minority' strategy inside these unions, meaning that they stayed with the mass of workers and struggled to influence them with anarchist ideas and methods, rather than splitting off into 'radical unions.' This came to fruition throughout many periods of struggle in the early 20th Century. The most applicable example in the Italian context; during the Red Week of the Ancona uprising, the dockworkers and railway workers played key roles. Again, under significant anarchist influence these unions were extremely important during the Biennio Rosso.

The other side of the failure of anarchism to address the question of political organisation lies with the UAI. Firstly, a little context on the organisation; in Italy, much as in Germany, the Marxist movement was deeply constrained by reformist practice. This created space for revolutionary anarchism as the ideology that represented proletarian aspirations. Contrary to the nonsense accusations from Marxists that anarchists were 'petty bourgeois', or represented a peasant ideology, the Italian movement was overwhelmingly (indeed, almost completely) composed

of industrial workers. The intransigent revolutionary positions of the anarchists synthesised with the revolutionary demands of the proletariat, but anarchists were unprepared to find themselves in such a position. The anarchists took far too long to form an organisation capable of leading and coordinating struggle. The UAI had been founded under the name of the Union of Anarchist Communists (UAC) in only 1919, merely months before the explosion of the Biennio Rosso called the anarchists to leadership roles.

Looking back, the UAI's political lines during the Biennio Rosso were probably the 'most correct' of all the forces on the left. Generally, the organisation handled its task well, considering the circumstances. According to the socialist Anna Kuliscioff, the UAI's paper *Umanita Nova* was immensely popular. Its weekly circulation was "over 100,000". She also warned her fellow socialists that "anarchism rules the piazza." The anarchists' propaganda was "overtaking [...] socialist and Marxists papers in various regions". Always advocating for pushing the struggle forward amongst the factory occupations and committees, UAI militants played leading roles and were amongst the very first to agitate for the (proletarian) United Front (which the PSI would reject).

Malatesta and Merlino had proposed the Anarchist Socialist Revolutionary Party as early as 1889. It was founded in 1891, however the project had remained effectively stillborn for years under the blows of state repression. The movement came closer to developing coherency at various points, but continual repression from the Italian State and the dogged reactionary influence of individualism nipped at the heels of anarchist-communist organisation in Italy. Even during the 1920 May Day demonstration in Turin, individualists would set off bombs attempting to spark insurrection. Countless militants fled abroad during the various waves of Italian anarchism, often founding organisations across the globe. Their influence can be particularly seen in Argentina, where emigrants founded the country's very first trade unions. If Italian anarchism had managed to build a consistent revolutionary organisation that continued from the 1890s through to the Biennio Rosso, we could only imagine the role they could have played in coordinating struggle inside the unions, councils and the rebellion of the peasantry in the south.

As we can see from Malatesta's "*The Anarchists Line Within the Trade Union Movement*", a report drafted for the International Anarchist Congress in 1923, the UAI still had not cohered a proper strategy around its intervention into the union movement. Every activist and group in the federation followed its own instincts, which while it has the positive effect of responding to local conditions, also meant that a national strategy was lacking the force it could have had if implemented. Of course, even had the UAI and the USI held hegemonic positions in the revolutionary movement, this would not have guaranteed a socialist revolution. The masses alone make the revolution, and anarchist organisation only exists to help clear the social ground of repressive institutions so that the masses can freely develop their own, new, socialist society.

Nonetheless, the role of the anarchists in the Biennio Rosso shows the virtue of developing specific anarchist organisations that fight for a political line in proletarian struggle. It is no coincidence that the grasping of Italian anarchists towards solving the question of organisation occurred in tandem with the attempts of the Ukrainian anarchists and their federation, the Nabat. The first wave of workers revolution threw anarchists to the fore in various countries and demanded they take a leading role. The organisations they developed reflected their attempts to meet the needs of the moment and overcome the contradictions that had not yet been ironed out of anarchist ideology.

Only a few years after the Russian revolution and the Biennio Rosso, in Bulgaria and Korea, specific anarchist-communist groups were established that would play leading roles during rev-

olutionary struggle. By the end of the 20s the Spanish anarchists had developed the Federación Anarquista Ibérica (FAI), but the shortcomings of their model would also become apparent by the time of the Spanish revolution. In 1937, the Friends of Durruti attempted too late to resolve some of the mistakes the Spanish movement had made and restart the revolutionary process.

All of these organisations were born in the throws of a revolutionary uprising. Though the lessons drawn respectively differed, the obvious conclusion for anarchists was the need for anarchists to be equally engaged in developing organisation on two levels.

On the first level, the mass organisations that give expression to the advanced demands of the working class remain the most vital. Thrown up by different circumstances through history these are both the unions in the building period, and in the revolutionary period have taken the form of factory committees, workers councils, Soviets etc. To remain aloof from these and fail to endow them with revolutionary fervour only aids to render the proletariat's revolutionary aspirations ineffective.

On the second level, anarchists require a specific political organisation that helps coordinate their efforts, refine their theory, and act as the collective memory of the movement. The social force of anarchists can only be amplified tenfold by co-operation and refinement of both activity and theory.

Today, at a distance, we can reflect on the valiant efforts of anarchists' past to play a leading role in revolutionary uprisings. The Biennio Rosso and the struggles of Italian anarchists offer us some of the best examples of anarchism as an effective force for social revolution. The history of the tumultuous Red Years allows us to analyse both correct actions and failures, the virtues and limits of various political alliances, and the question of forms of struggle. The task at hand, however, is to take these lessons and use them to build both the mass and specific organisations required for the revolutionary struggles of the future.

Recommended reading

Carl Levy – Gramsci and the Anarchists

Davide Turcato – Making Sense of Anarchism, Malatestas Experiments With Anarchism

Errico Malatesta – The Method of Freedom – [Anthology edited by Davide Turcato]

Gwyn A. Williams – Proletarian Order: Antonio Gramsci, Factory Councils and the Origins of Communism in Italy 1911–1921

Luigi Fabbri – The Preventative Counter-Revolution

Ian McKay – The Irresistible Correctness of Anarchism [A review of Tom Behan of the SWP's book on Italian Anti-fascism. As the reader will discover, Behan wrote an entire book covering the BR without even mentioning that the UAI existed. He also asserts that Italian anarchism was based on the peasantry.]

Vernon Richards – Life and Ideas of Errico Malatesta

Stormy Petrel – Italian Factory Committees and the Anarchists

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Tommy Lawson
Anarchists in a Workers Uprising
Italy's Biennio Rosso
March 7, 2021

Retrieved on 4th November 2021 from libcom.org
An article tracing the development of the Italian Biennio Rosso and the anarchist movement's role. Largely focusing on the Italian Anarchist Union (UAI) and Italian Syndicalist Union (USI).

theanarchistlibrary.org