

The repression in Italy

Anarchist Communist Federation

1999

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In Organise! 48, readers will have seen that the ACF was involved in an informational picket of the Italian State Tourist Office in London, drawing attention to the repression recently suffered by sections of the anarchist movement in Italy. This article attempts to offer a history of the repression and attempts to put in context the response of the anarchist movement.

Anarchism has a long history in Italy and deep roots in certain working class communities. Prior to the Fascist take-over of 1922, the anarchists constituted a major force in the Italian workers' movement, particularly through the mass *Unione Sindicale Italiana* and the specific anarchist organisation *Unione Anarchica Italiana*. Anarchists were at the forefront during the factory occupations of 1919 and in the physical opposition to the Blackshirts of Fascism. Anarchism experienced a revival following the 'democratisation' of Italy in 1945 but seemed to lose its way during the 50s and 60s. Post-1968 the movement began to re-organise and anarchists played a part in the fierce social struggles of the 1970s. Anarchism, to some extent, however, seemed overshadowed by autonomism, which had its roots in a form of Marxist-Leninism that was different to both traditional Stalinism and Trotskyism and appeared to emphasise the need for workers' self-organisation. Some anarchist groups orientated towards the 'autonomous' movement but the majority continued to follow more 'traditional' paths, anarcho-syndicalism, platformism and synthesisism. Today these currents are represented by the Italian Syndicalist Union 'the Federation of Communist Anarchists and the Italian Anarchist Federation (FAI). Outside of these organisations there are other currents and many independent local groups.

Amongst these other currents are the so-called 'Insurrectionists'. The outstanding example of this current is the group around the magazine *Anarchismo*, edited by the anarchist theorist Alfredo Bonnano. Another magazine in the 'Insurrectionist' mould was the now defunct 'Cane Nero' (Black Dog). 'Anarchismo' rejected the path taken by syndicalists, platformists and the Italian Anarchist Federation alike, in that it rejected all permanent organisation and looked to the temporary, autonomous, affinity group and to individual acts of rebellion. These ideas had a certain influence upon many anarchists who remained outside of the organisations, particularly the militant squatters of Turin.

THE TURIN ANARCHIST SQUATTERS

Turin is unusual in Italy as its squats are almost exclusively anarchist, rather than autonomist or of the 'revolutionary left'. Most anarchist squatters reject any compromise which might 'legalise' squatted social centres, which has been a tactic used by the local state in Italy for several years. The relationship with the authorities has long been acutely antagonistic and the Turin anarchists bore much of the brunt of the initial harassment and repression which began with raids and arrests from the end of 1995, climaxing on September 17th, 1996. On this date Italian special police (the ROS) raided 60 addresses across Italy, arresting dozens of militants on various serious and outlandish charges, not least murders, bank robberies and kidnappings!

Behind these raids appeared the figure of Judge Antonio Marini. There is debate in Italy whether the campaign against the anarchists is a personal crusade by Marini prior to his retirement, or whether he is merely the latest front-man for the Italian secret services, or both. Using a shadowy informer, Namsetchi Modjeh (in Italy such people are known as 'repentants', repenting for the sin of being revolutionary...), Judge Marini attempted to conjure up a vast

political-criminal conspiracy with the title of the 'Revolutionary Organisation of Anarchist Insurrectionalists'(ORAI), at the head of which was placed Alfredo M. Bonnano. This organisation, something like a hybrid of the Red Brigades of old and a criminal fraternity, was supposedly responsible for a good percentage of all the unsolved major crimes in Italy and its 'members' were accused of 'subversive association', a catch-all charge often used against political prisoners. The press joined in the spirit of conspiracy-mongering and anarchist-bating.

The response of the anarchist movement was swift, despite the climate of intimidation. The FAI issued a statement, 'The Federated Italian Anarchists Accuse!'(21 September 1996), which condemned the "acts of repression amplified by the press" as "a malicious articulation of new techniques of social control". They pointed out certain blatant lies, not least that the phantom ORAI had been expelled from the FAI in 1988, at a Congress in Fiori which didn't even take place! They also rejected the attempt of the State to divide the anarchists into 'good anarchists' (the FAI) and 'bad anarchists' (the so-called Insurrectionalists) and pointed out that if the Judges wanted to eliminate the FAI they would use the same tactics of criminalisation. Simultaneously the FAI distanced itself from the sort of activities which the arrested were accused of (ie.kidnapping and murder) and criticised the myth of "illegalism", which tends to see all acts of illegality as necessarily revolutionary.

SOLIDARITY AND BEYOND...

This response, however, was criticised, particularly by the Cane Nero group, who saw it as an attempt by the FAI and others to distance themselves from the arrested comrades. Cane Nero also demanded not just solidarity with the accused against the state (which all libertarians should not hesitate to give), but political support, that is support for the specific perspectives of the accused. This attitude seriously pissed-off many comrades, who saw it as self-marginalising. At this time libertarian communists inside and outside the FAI were doing solidarity work and attempting to link the repression with a general critique of the whole prison system and its function vis a vis the working class.

An Anarchist Defence Committee was set up and through its work many people outside of Italy came to hear about the Marini frame-up. Internationally, an active defence committee also developed in Munich.

Inside the prisons, the accused issued statements which rejected the charges and poured ridicule on the idea of their membership of any organisation such as the ORAI. They stated: "Judges know perfectly well that the anarchist organisation they talk about does not exist. They know the model of an armed gang- a mirror of their own model- cannot be applied to the real relationships between anarchists." (Statement reproduced in 'Communism', journal of the Internationalist Communist Group, No 10, May 1997.)

The approach of the state, that was to attempt to connect the accused together through the imaginary ORAI, was also exposed by the supposed 'leader', Bonnano, following his release from prison after 13 months. Referring to the documents of the prosecution, Bonnano said: "The model that was realised in Germany with the R.A.F., in France with Action Directe, as today with the Basques of E.T.A ., or in Italy with the Red Brigades...has nothing to do with us, have been stitched on to us as we see in these accusations. Reading the documents, which are thousands of pages long, one realises that this is the kind of model they have in mind , i.e. that they do not

understand that our revolutionary aim is to go towards another kind of attack on the state.” (Interview with Alfredo Bonnano, Radio Onda Rossa November 20, 1997. Published in ‘Breakout’, May 1998.)

During their incarceration in 1997 some of the accused and their comrades on the outside broke with the ‘Anarchismo’ current and formed a group called Anarchist Revolutionary Action, publishing their platform in the final issue of Cane Nero and producing a new magazine, ‘Pagine in rivolta’. Politically the group appears to remain in the ‘insurrectionalist’ mould.

NEW RAIDS, NEW REPRESSION

On March 6th 1998 the police once again raided the anarchist squats of Turin, arresting Massimo Passamani, Edo Massari and Maria Soledad Rosas. These comrades were eventually accused of a specific ‘criminal act’ (as opposed to any and all the police had lying about unsolved...), the sabotage of the construction of the high speed train network (TAV), between Turin and Lyon, at Val Susa, claimed by a previously unknown ‘group’ called the “Grey Wolves”. There had been an ongoing campaign against the TAV, involving the Rifondazione Comunista (Stalinists now part of the centre-left government) and the Greens amongst others, and rumours flew about that the attacks could have been the work of insurance racketeers or the secret services trying to discredit the protests. Whatever the case may be, the Turin squatters generally saw the attack as a direct action worth supporting.

On the morning of March 28th 1998 Edo Massari committed suicide in prison at Vallette a Cuneo. A reaction from the squatters of Turin was not slow in coming and street clashes with the police occurred upon the news of their comrade’s death. The local federation of the FAI stated clearly that suicide in prison was really murder at the hands of the state. The following week six thousand people took to the streets of Turin to demand the release of the other two ‘suspects’ and an end to the repression. This demonstration was supported not only by the squatters but the anarchist movement generally and the ‘autonomists’, the latter whom criticised the use of violence as a tactic. Angry and focused, the demonstration brought the events surrounding the resistance to the TAV and the repression to the attention of many, not least because of the attendance at the demonstration of one Stefano Alberione, a leading member of the Rifondazione Comunista and trade union big-wig, which the media made much of.

But another death was to come. In early July 1997 Maria Soledad Rosas committed suicide whilst under ‘house arrest’. Another victim of the repression, more blood on the hands of the state.

PARCEL BOMBS AND STATE INTRIGUE

Following the death of Soledad ‘persons unknown’ launched a letter bomb campaign against various targets. A journalist; the judge who conducted the investigation against the three squatters, a Green city councillor who had tried to mediate between the local council, the accused and the judge, a Rifondazione MP; another city councillor (Rifondazione), well known for conducting the negotiations between an autonomist squatted social centre and the local council; and the prison

doctor where Edo Massari died. The origin of these 'bombe pache', in the country where the secret services have been capable of so many provocations in the past, was questioned by many. The Correspondence Commission of the FAI issued a statement suggesting that the bombings were exactly that, a state provocation. They asked 'To whom are the parcels a valuable tool?' and accused the state and its secret services of preparing '...a soup to be used eventually as a pre-emptive weapon to criminalise the movement of the opposition, the base of workers (rank and file initiatives), the unemployed and immigrants.' They also spoke of 'secret service infiltrators' and of the 'tragic end of two lives (Edo and Soledad) crushed by the violence and power, which once again, we find inside the repressive apparatus of the state.'

Around the same time a previously unknown group, the Group of Revolutionary Initiative, believed to be Marxist-Leninist oriented, expressed its solidarity with Anarchist Revolutionary Action (see above) and claimed responsibility for attacks upon the offices of the Rifondazione in Turin and Milan. This has led the Italian bourgeois media to hysterical talk about a return to the 'bad old days' of urban guerrilla activity, such as that of the Red Brigades and numerous others in the late 1970s.

THE SITUATION NOW

The situation today remains quite fluid. Most of the arrested of 1996 and after, including the 'guru' of the supposed ORAI, Alfredo Bonnanno, have been released due to the collapse of the 'case' against them. Solidarity actions with those who remain incarcerated have taken place in places as far apart as Argentina and Greece and a group committed to publicising the ongoing struggle is forming in Britain. Resistance to the TAV continues and the squats raided in March 1997 have been re-opened.

The attempt by the Italian state to divide the 'antagonistic' movement, in particular the anarchists, into 'respectable' and 'criminal' appears to have failed.

To conclude, the repression, which focused upon activist elements, somewhat marginal to both the 'historic' Italian anarchist movement but also to the autonomous workers movement, can be compared to the attempt by the British state's harassment of, for example, the Green Anarchist newspaper. Testing the water, the state would appear to be attempting to see what sort of response can be expected from the broader 'movement' when its more 'illegalist' or apparently 'extreme wing' is attacked. The state will learn from the response it has met in both Italy and Britain. And we must learn too, for as social antagonism grows and our movement with it, state repression will grow too and divide and rule is only one of their tactics.

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