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Seizure of the Factories in Italy, 1920

Armando Borghi

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Editors Note: The question raised by comrade Borghi, former secretary of the Italian Syndicalist Union, is of interest now only to the students of the Italian revolutionary movement of 1920. It goes to the very heart of revolutionary tactics and helps us understand why that movement was an abortive one. Every revolution - and Italy was on the eve of such a revolution in 1920 - has such crucial moments as described by comrade Borghi. The lack of resolute action at such a juncture leads to failure and the triumph of the counter-revolution. The seizure of the factories in 1920 was one of such critical moments when the destinies of the Italian revolution - and of the world revolution too for that matter - became suspended in the balance. Whose fault was it that the balance tipped in the direction of the Fascist counter-revolution - that is what comrade Borghi answers in this article.

The first of August will be the fifteenth anniversary of the seizure of the factories in Italy. This is a long time for those

who prefer to forget, but it is not long enough for those who wish to disguise the historical truth. However, it is no time at all for us who may have neither forgotten anything nor disavowed any of these events. The communists are not among those who like to make the truth known. I have just read a choice morsel of Spanish prose leveled at the anarchists by a specialist in parrotry. His name is Ferragut. In the March, 1932 issue of *Mundo Obrero* his name appears under the title "The Anarchists, The Russian Revolution, and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat." This may seem a little late, but it is always timely, for the same absurdities are continually propagated by the communists by orders from Moscow. The piece is as follows:

"The example of Italy in 1920, where the anarchists limited themselves to the seizing the factories with the hope that the capitalists and the bourgeoisie would abdicate, proves how empty and chimerical the conception of the anarchists is concerning force of resistance and attack."

The above proves one thing perfectly: How great, how vast and deeply rooted is the ignorance (or the dishonesty) of these reporters of cock and bull stories of which Moscow has become the nursery ground for years.

Just the opposite of the quotation is the truth.

First: The seizure of the factories in Italy was not the work of the anarchists. This movement was undertaken under the responsibility of the labor unions.

Second: The anarchist workers were just *one* element, though a considerable factor, in only one workers organization, the Italian Syndicalist Unions. This organization was a minority. Opposed to it (especially in times of revolutionary action) there was the General Confederation of Labor.¹ The latter was powerful for the following reasons: a) It was looked upon favorably by the government because it had *from the*

¹ There were anarchists in the Confederation of Labor, but they were scattered and without directing influence.

time of its formation (1906) to the Red Week (1914) always betrayed, repudiated, suppressed and set up barriers in the way of any direct action movement. b) Since its formation it was protected by the Socialist Party with which it was linked officially for the purpose of achieving electoral gains. c) It had made use of its collaboration with the government during the war (though it pretended to be against war under guidance of the Socialist Party) to become numerically powerful. d) During the post war events it was protected by the left wing of the Socialist Party (the wing that was actually leading the Socialist Party in 1920). Now this left wing was formed in 1920 by the Bombacci, the Serrati, the Gennari, etc.: that is, the very people who were then the proteges of Lenin and the "communists" of the Socialist Party. (The Communist Party of Italy was organized a year later by the same Bombacci, Serrati, etc.)

During the occupation of the factories, the trustworthy friends of Moscow, Bombacci, Serrati, etc., were in cordial and official relationship with the reformist leaders of the Confederation of Labor and were working together against the anarchists, against their newspaper Umanita Nova, edited by Malatesta, and against the Italian Syndicalist Union, which was not anarchist but which was for direct action and very much influenced by the anarchists.

But what were the reproaches of the Confederation of Labor and the communist extremists who were at the head of the Socialist Party? What were their common reproaches *against the anarchists*? They are as follows: The anarchists wished to proceed too quickly with force; their actions were precipitant; they were demoralizing the well disciplined forces of the Confederation of Labor; they did not care to understand that a revolution comes *by itself*, by a strange *fatality*.

What was the anarchist reply to this point of view?

They replied that they had done well to seize the factories:² that this movement would have been sterile if not carried out to its logical end at that moment of revolutionary upsurge following the war; that one could not retreat and that at that time one could not stop on the slope without causing a violent reaction; that it was a good tactic to *arm* oneself; that direct appropriation had to be extended to strengthen and support the movement; that without killing the watch-dog of property, that is, the state, nothing could be taken at all.

But just think: It was the anarchists who believed they could get rid of the bourgeoisie at once! Not only must one be entirely ignorant of Italian affairs, but also an imbecile to think that everyone would foolishly believe this idea of the *renunciation* of power by the bourgeoisie, which has been a part of Marxist fatalism against which the anarchists have fought for forty years. It is just this "mechanical" conception of historical materialism which makes the whole social structure depend on the economic factors. It is in opposition to this that the anarchists have fought most with the Marxists: be they the opportunistic Marxists, or the partisans of a "temporary" dictatorship.

And it is precisely against the same conception of historical materialism that the latter communists had been led to believe that it is sufficient to deny the bourgeoisie the right to vote, to give it exclusively to the proletariat; gradually to crush capitalism by means of the dictatorial state! The vote, always the vote, is the lever of the socialists as well as for the communists to destroy the bourgeoisie. It is always this same fatalism which makes the communists believe (if they still do believe it) in the certain disappearance of the classes after the temporary period of dictatorship. The anarchists still believe that the capitalists

² The seizure of the factories was not originally the realization of a revolutionary conspiracy. It began as a union drive of the metal workers to restore the wage level. It was only after the industry attempted to *lock them out*, that the workers replied by *locking themselves in*.

must be driven away by force. So you see they are not so naive when it comes to the idea of *resistance and attack*.

Fifteen years after these Red Days, we can still prove with many documents that with or without previously seizing the factories, it was the historical moment for the Italian revolution. The government could not stop it; the bourgeoisie believed it inevitable; the working class was ready for the fight. Only the tactics of delay, of obstructionism, treachery, electoral illusions (referring to the last electoral attempts), of well prepared sabotage by the communists of the Socialist Party together with the leaders of the Confederation of Labor, only these could succeed in rendering worthless the efforts of the anarchists, the Syndicalist Union and of a few sincere socialists who were soon expelled from the party for being tainted by... anarchism.