URBAN ACTION IN ITALY

REVOLUTION FROM BELOW

Stephen Schecter, a well-known militant in the **Montreal Citizen's Movement**, *recently completed* **The Politics of Urban Liberation**, *a libertarian socialist analysis of urban struggles.*

Most of the book deals with questions of strategy, and focuses on praxis, both historic and current, using well documented examples especially from the Montreal experience.

Schecter discusses "not only the development of Montreal as a city and recent aspects of its urban politics, but also larger questions about the nature of urban space, the transformation of cities and the significance of urban politics."

His book begins with a look at the political economy of the urban question, goes into the "redefinition of the revolutionary project," and examines lessons of major working class movements of the 20th century, including the Spanish anarchist movement, the Hungarian revolution of 1956, and Portugal in 1974-75.

What makes this book particularly useful to North Americans are the parallels drawn between the lessons of urban struggles outside the continent, and questions activists such as those in Montreal are trying to answer.

As Schecter himself says in the preface, the question is put in terms of "not only how to live in the city, but how to live so as to change the city; what kind of changes are we working for, and what kind of politics do we need to bring that change about."

The following is an abbreviated excerpt from a chapter called "Revolution From Below: Contemporary Urban Struggles." The book is published by Black Rose Books, 3934 rue St. Urbain, Montreal, H2W 1T7, Quebec and is now available for $5.95.

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Urban struggles in Italy emerged out of the crisis of Italian capitalism, itself a product of the increasingly revolutionary militancy of Italian workers at the point of production. More pay for less work, the suppression of wage differentials, the emergence of internal commissions based on shop floor and assembly-line delegates as parallel bodies to the trade unions, sabotage, absenteeism, wildcat strikes and work stoppages characterised the struggles of Italian workers in the factories of monopoly capital throughout the seventies. The lessons are salutary and significant. In the first place, such radical action was common to very different groups of workers, reflecting once again that popular militancy is not the prerogative of any one section of the working class. In 1969 immigrants from the south of Italy formed a large proportion of Fiat workers. The management, feeling their recent arrival gave them little attachment to the factory, saw in them a major cause of the upsurge of working class militancy and sought therefore to isolate or cashier them. In the years that followed they recruited their workers from the Turin labour force, but in 1972 and 1973 conflict broke out again with renewed vigour and even greater displays of working class autonomy. In March 1973, tired of lagging negotiations and the union strategy which called for limited strikes by different sectors within the plant, the workers took matters into their own hands, organized processions throughout the Fiat factory and in little over a week succeeded in occupying the entire plant at Mirafiori. This was no small feat given the tremendous area over which the plant extended. As one worker pointed out looking back at the occupation, had the idea been suggested in 1968 or 1969, the reaction would have been one of incredulity.

"TOO MANY DOORS"

"We would have been told: 'It's not possible, there are too many doors, there is a sea of doors.' This time the occupation seemed like child's play."

It succeeded precisely because no one raised it in advance; rather the strategy emerged in the course of the action, reflecting once again how revolutionary moments can not be "organized" but once they emerge the workers come up with the appropriate action. In this case it consisted of workers from different sections going to block doors in other areas of the plant, an action itself inconceivable without the initiative taken by workers on the shop floor.

As usual, the unions and the PCI, the Italian Communist Party, denounced the workers' initiative as adventurous and came out in favour of wage differentials. Forced to recognize the delegates' movement, they sought to institutionalize it in the form of factory councils. In exchange for the imposition of social order demanded by the capitalists, they proposed a series of structural reforms in line with their state capitalist thinking, amounting to a more rational use of productive capacities and investment funds. The negotiated settlements were always much less than what the workers demanded, involving considerable wage increases but not touching on the issues pertaining to workers' control. In a sense, however, this was a victory, which only the autonomous organisation of the working class guaranteed. On the one hand, the profits squeeze on Italian capitalists was maintained; on the other, the unions were forced to resist capital's attempts to link recognition of the delegates' movement to productivity increases. The return to work did not lead to any let-up in the workers' opposition, which amounted to no more and no less than the refusal to work, thus driving even Fiat to have recourse to the Cassa integrazione, that system, now expanded, whereby the state covers, for an indefinite period, 80-100% of the salaries of workers laid off by private enterprise for almost any reason. . .

Italian urban scenes: Rioting in Turin (top); tenants march in Milan (bottom). Banner says: "The only fair rent is no rent."

HOUSING

. . Although the massive lay-offs diminished somewhat the force of the delegates' movement, it merely displaced the struggle from the factory to the city. The crisis of Italian capitalism, coupled with the strains it placed on the state's finances, led the state to try and recoup from the workers via the social wage what capital could not impose at the workplace. From 1974 on increases in transport, electricity and telephone rates were announced, provoking a series of urban struggles characterized by the same kind of autonomous working class militancy that marked conflicts in the factories. The merging of contradictions in the workplace and the community found its strategic parallel in the linkups made between workers from both social spaces, while the dialectic between organizations at the base and the official organs of the working class was reproduced here as well. . . .

. . In part the inability of urban struggles to get beyond their specific and local character in the period 1969-71 was a response to their being caught between the hammer of left-wing avant-gardism and the anvil of PCI reformism; but in part it also reflected that the moment was simply not right. This does not mean that urban struggles are inevitablly doomed to 'neighbourhoodism,' or that the principles of direct action and autonomous organization are impractical. Rather it suggests that the moments of popular upsurge are not predictable, that no political line can guarantee a revolutionary outburst or account totally for its failure, and that hammering away in the intervals of political quiet at the contradictions of capitalism, advancing revolutionary ideas, pushing for autonomous working class mobilisation are not wasted efforts. When urban struggles exploded once again in 1974 they extended to areas beyond housing and made linkups with the unions. Those tenant groups and neighbourhood committees who had already been involved in housing occupations, who had not ceased to reduce their rents, who had some history of political combat provided the most persistent support in this next wave of self-reduction struggles. In Rome two new features stood out in this round of housing occupations: the direct participation of factory workers and the extension of the movement to include dwellings built by the private sector, giving the struggle a dynamism similar to that exhibited by the workers of Santiago and Lisbon. The combativity of the workers produced tangible results, the occupation movement spread to Naples and Milan, and the state found itself faced with an intensified fiscal crisis. In 1974 delays in rent payment had reached the 20% level and the deficit of the public low-income housing office, 5 billion lire. By the autumn of 1975 the movement had become enriched:

"with a new form of communist appropriation of the city: groups of young workers had installed themselves in dilapidated factories and transformed them into places for encounters, life and combat."

FACTORIES & CITIES

The self-reduction struggles that emerged around the transport and electricity increases in 1974 also bore all the hallmarks of revolution from below—spontaneous and direct action organised by the workers independent of their unions and parties; linkups between the factory and the city; demands and forms of organisation that represented attempts to appropriate and transform the direction of social life; the development of strategies that required the practice of revolutionary principles. In the process the workers showed that the limitations encountered by urban movements in France, and previously in Italy, could be surpassed, and that the contradictions underlying their emergence were very real indeed. When the increases in transport fares were announced in 1974 in different parts of Italy, the first reaction on the part of workers was spontaneous and unorganised. In the Turin region cars were blocked, leaflets distributed and delegations descended on the municipalities. In the Milan region workers' committees in the factories went out on wildcat strikes opposing the fare increases. The PCI and the national unions opposed such action. The Milan strike was attacked on the grounds that the workers were confounding the role of their organisations with that of the mayor and the government. Under the impulse of popular pressure, however, the Turin steelworkers' union (FLM) undertook to organise the struggle on the basis of self-reduction. Their example, combined with the initiative taken by workers who did not wait for their unions to give

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