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Italy

# **A special day. Living and struggling in the occupied and self-managed RiMaflow factory.**

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**Rarely has the Milanese sky and its foggy metropolitan area been so open and starry as tonight. But maybe it is climate change that has also caused this.**

Getting up at six in the morning and seeing this sky makes us think that it will be an important, beautiful day, maybe it is a portent. Today at this time the café at the self-managed RiMaflow factory is open early. Beppe is already preparing breakfast, despite going to bed just three hours earlier – “I wasn’t able to sleep anyway”. Not even Pippo has been able to sleep even though he had gone home, “better to be here than twisting and turning in bed”. So he is keeping the brazier going at the entrance to the factory. It is improvised from some iron structure left behind from the industrial past of these factories. The fire will keep people warm during the mass meeting to defend the factory today. It’s like a black and white photo of occupied factories defended by workers in the early years of the crisis of the 1970s in Italy and elsewhere - images and memory of working class history.

Within a couple of hours the space in front of the factory gates is filling with so many people. Hundreds are coming from eight in the morning of a working day in Trezzano sul Naviglio, a good way from the centre of Milan. Young people, not so young, older people still working, pensioners and activists from so many struggles are here. “But I am older but not elderly” says Fabio 81, with many years of political and trade union struggle behind him. People from quite a diverse social and political background - from the broad left, catholic charity volunteers, rank and file and confederation trade unions from the CISL to the USI, the Non Una di Meno feminist current (=one is too many) with their pink scarves scattered among the crowd. And finally, as a female comrade remarked, “remember all of us too who are not represented by anyone”.

Perhaps the majority of those present at the factory entrance are unattached politically or organisationally. It seems that it was an individual response rather than a defined political or social connection which impelled all these people to respond to the call made by the RiMaflow workers to come and join them at the cordon in front of the factory gates to stop the eviction scheduled for today. It’s a consciousness that you have to choose which side you are on and a very good understanding of the specific, exemplary experience of these workers (although the project is not unique). They understood and shared this experience because they have seen the factory operating, they knew the people working there and perhaps also knew Massimo, (who is still under house arrest) because of his role in any of the many struggles he has been involved in or supported. Also because they are living in a country without a left (as the title of the first issue of the Italian version of the Jacobin magazine suggested) but want to defend an experience which they feel close to, which is based on the needs of everyone. They wanted for once to see if we can avoid a defeat that leaves not much more than a sour taste in the mouth..

Just to experience for once the real conviction that “struggle pays off”. Because we are so used to repeating this slogan while we lose, almost like a litany that is not listened to much, a rhetorical device for maintaining a routine of closed and not very engaging initiatives. For many people in front of these gates, RiMaflow represented a protagonist which they could feel close to. It is a protagonist that is not immediately labelled, defined within a trade union or party current, linked to a specific movement or the deadening circles of aimless activism. It is an open experience that resonates with so many people, which does not abandon political struggle but engages with it at the base and on the left, in the mobilisation for and construction of a practical alternative. An alternative of a solidarity economy, concretely social and of the people and not symbolic, that truly develops the practice of working without bosses and that is capable of resisting and opposing the logic of the market. A broad social and political alternative to build from the base the tools we need to build a new society without exploitation or oppression. You can understand – when speaking with the people who came – listening to their comments and banter but also detecting an anxiety why they all are clear that it would be an intolerable injustice to eliminate such an experiment.

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A banner stretched above the heads of the people meeting at the factory with red letters on a white background spelling out "Our lives are worth more than your profits." This is a very old slogan that has been widely circulated down the years, a slogan that might seem abstract and just a principle after recent years in which the profiteers have been able to flourish without many constraints and have penetrated ever more completely into our lives. But today, in a special way, it has stopped being just a slogan but is incarnated with the living people brought together today in this self-managed workplace, who through their presence exemplifies these words. Our lives, wherever we come from, are exploited, oppressed or violated in various ways, are being put on the line to oppose those who today want to rub out the RiMaflow project in order to make profit. So this banner and the living images of this event hit us right in the guts, they fill us with emotion and are like a breath of fresh air.

The struggle pays off. What does it mean? Which struggle and in what sense has it paid off. We are not here going into the merits of the agreement wrenched from the hands of the mighty UniCredit bank by the RiMaflow workers. Naturally you have to look at the real value of any agreement, particularly important here where we are talking of the prospects for work, income and social insertion of dozens of men and women and their families. Today's agreement is like a draw won away from home in the last seconds when there is still the home leg to come – a three point score in the dying seconds to get level with the opponents – a sprint in the last metres of a race to come up to the shoulder of the competitor who is about to break the tape. It is a great result but the match is not over yet. It still needs great commitment in order not to lose concentration or the collective strength of the team. Some people may think that it is not a great victory to get an agreement on a soft exit, that we have to resist to the last person and we should concede nothing to the bosses. We do not want to pontificate on this but an agreement implies a compromise and if it allows us to continue to pursue our objectives in better conditions then it certainly is a good agreement. This is one.

But it is interesting to reflect collectively on the meaning of "struggle pays off". Could we have reached the same agreement without mobilisation? Of course we do not have dialectical or scientific proof to support this hypothesis. But we believe that in this case it would not have been possible. Not because more than 300 people in front of the gates would have really been able to stop a violent eviction (nothing is sure but it would have been very difficult to resist over any length of time). Not because numbers on their own would have made any difference.

No, the strength of the mobilisation lies in the broad solidarity that was expressed by the most diverse people, This was seen in the many fundraising initiatives all over Italy, in the thousands of signatures collected and the financial support. The campaign reached its highest point in a day of unusual mobilisation making it difficult and awkward for Unicredit to use strong arm tactics. The relevance of this mobilisation lies above all in having brought together very different forces – who are often in conflict with one another. In this case, a confluence of people that punched above its weight and not a movement without objectives.

Truly it was down to the motivation and the achievement of this small but militant community of workers, their intelligence and to those who took on the commitment of guaranteeing continuity and openness and who on a daily basis gave time and resources to this experience.

Struggle paid off because it seemed to so many, and also among those who had opposed the RiMaflow Project, that it was unthinkable to have this experience eliminated. The struggle paid because over these weeks it was clear that there would have been a strong social and political confrontation – also on a cultural and media level – if the eviction had been attempted.

We do not want to underestimate the presence of so many trade union, political, civic and social movement supporters if we take some time to look more closely at the role of the Fuorimercato network – the self-management movement.

Never more than in this occasion have we seen the importance of each term in its name. A network in which every

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link knows how to defend all the others, is able to show externally the strength of its structures and which wants to demonstrate this even more to the rest of the network. Because this is what solidarity means for those who are part of the same journey. Outside the market (Fuorimercato) – these are the experiences of building an alternative economy that are still weak and often embryonic but which when working together can be effective and have a multiplier effect and spreading impact. Self-management – there are not any team orders or party line that decides on solidarity and common commitment but a taking on of collective responsibility, of working together and of reciprocal support. Movement – the strength of the network resides in being active, moving the collective forward together.

The cooperative movement of mutual support through which this network develops work and theory on so many different levels (economic, social, cultural, trade union and political) was evident also during this event by the strong common defence of a project and a group of workers and by their reciprocal links. It showed its potential in a conflict, pushing back with own forces an attack that otherwise would have been difficult to overcome. It has given us a big boost to see on a working day at Trezzano sul Naviglio comrades from: Contadinazioni from Palermo (Campobello di Mazara), Diritti a Sud (=rights in the South) from Nardo, Solidaria and Bread and Roses from Bari, Communia from Rome, the estate without landowners in Mondeggi, Sobilla from Verona and the Casa del Popolo Twenty Stones from Bologna. It has shown us what this network could be.

Over these months in various initiatives, articles and posters we have tried to promote the slogan: “Defend cooperatives, defend them with mutual solidarity”. These words today have been a reality here and not been empty principles lost on the wind.

The “First political, artistic, sporting and cultural international meeting of women in struggle” held in Chiapas (Mexico) last year, called by the Zapatista women relaunched this slogan:

“We have decided to live and since in order to live you have to struggle then we have decided to struggle.”

The RiMaflow workers have chosen to live and to struggle, taking over their own factory into self-management, defending a workplace without bosses and their very lives. Here you can see the victory of our lives against their profits in the choice of living their struggle against those who want to rob them of their lives. They defend their lives against those who want to destroy them. That is why yesterday had such a strong impact on everybody who was there and for those who followed it from a distance because this winning choice, of living and struggling was felt deeply by all.

Yes struggle pays off. Not only because we can get a good result, move towards our objectives and defend our own projects but above all because it strengthens our consciousness, our collective responsibility, the way we relate to each other. This has an impact even outside the network.

The question of winning a battle is not a small thing in these times. In bright sunlight we demonstrated in a contingent through Trezzano to celebrate the postponement of the eviction. We saw the abandoned carcass of the industrial fabric that a few years ago provided work. In the midst of our joy and excitement both younger comrades and people who have been active for decades commented “this is the first victory of our lives”.

Reading hundreds of posts on social networks that “Rimaflow has won”, “We have won” does not mean that there is dangerous collective illusion but rather an energy that has been renewed and which allows us to repeat a slogan that has resonated in the Spanish state and in Latin America for years – Si, se puede (Yes we can).

*30 November 2018*

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Source *Fuorimercato, Autogestione in movimento* "[Una giornata particolare. Vivere e lottare dalla fabbrica recuperata Ri-Maflow.](#)". Translated for *International Viewpoint* by Carmela Avella and Dave Kellaway.

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