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Italy

# **“Let us rise up”: GKN, an exemplary battle**

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**In March 2020, due to the health crisis, the Italian government decreed a freeze on lay-offs, that is, a ban on companies laying off workers in the event of a crisis and restructuring. This measure helped to maintain jobs in the best protected sectors, but unfortunately it did not prevent the real devastation of the loss of around a million jobs, almost all of them concerning women on precarious contracts.**

This freeze, which was gradually extended, was only lifted on 30 June 2021. From that moment, companies were “finally” free to lay off workers, without the unions, for their part, having obtained either the reform of social protection nets, or the lowering of the retirement age, or the reduction of working hours. The period of the layoff freeze ended with a problematic union agreement: union representatives limited themselves to asking for 13 weeks of benefits for economically-motivated redundancy in the event of lay-offs, without any obligation for the companies. A few days later, as could be expected, the collective redundancies began. On 9 July workers at GKN received, by email, the announcement of the total closure of the plant.

GKN is a factory with 422 workers - around 500 if we add the subcontracting companies for canteen and maintenance - the vast majority of them men. GKN produces transmission shafts for the automotive sector, mainly for Stellantis (ex-Fiat and FCA. [1] The factory is located in the province of Florence and it was bought a few years ago by an English investment fund, Melrose. It is not a company in crisis, on the contrary, it is at the forefront in technological innovation; it also produces transmission shafts for Ferrari, of a very high technological and qualitative level, which explains why until the last moment, just before the announcement of the closure, the company continued to invest, including with public aid allocated each year by the various levels of government.

## **The only reason for the closure is to move production in order to speculate elsewhere**

GKN is just one example among many, but which, this time, caused a social explosion: it has become the most important trade-union conflict in the country and the signal for a salutary awakening of the working class as a whole, rendered dormant by decades of defeats, resignations and trade-union moderation.

The trade-union history of GKN, whose workers are overwhelmingly members of the FIOM and have been historically linked to the most militant internal current of the CGIL, *Riconquistiamo tutto* (“Reconquer all”), has always been an example of radicalism. [2] This is explained by years of advantageous company agreements, by a great political coherence and above all by a methodical construction of the balance of power, inside and outside the factory. For years, GKN workers obtained better working conditions, winning back on the factory level much of what the unions had conceded on the national level (such as retaining Article 18 against individual dismissals) and also succeeding in opposing the most detestable elements of the 2016 national metallurgy convention (flexibility and overtime, variability of premiums, payment of sick leave, etc.).

## **A mass movement**

When the company announced its closure on 9 July, workers occupied the plant. From the start, the Factory Collective led the struggle. This collective has existed for years at GKN and is made up of factory delegates

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(recognized by national union agreements) and a group of elected workers, representing the different production sectors, in direct contact with the workers.

The factory was immediately supported and carried by the strength of the solidarity of the whole region and beyond. A local support committee was formed, made up mainly of other workers and solidarity activists. Very quickly, too, the coordination of women was created, especially comprising the wives and companions of male workers and women workers of subcontracting companies, which played an essential role in the development and defence of this struggle. The mayor of the commune where the plant is located supported it from the start, immediately issuing a municipal by-law preventing trucks from approaching the plant to try to empty it. The FIOM and the Factory Collective broadened the front of the conflict to the legal field by denouncing the anti-union behaviour of the company. On 19 July, the CGIL in Florence called for a territorial general strike (a call joined by the other unions) and filled one of the city's central squares. The following Saturday, 24 July, the Factory Collective called for a demonstration and the factory was surrounded, physically this time, by a huge human tide made up largely of solidarity workers, some of whom had come from afar. The Factory Collective once again took to the streets, with the ANPI (National Association of Italian Partisans), on 11 August, the day of the commemoration of the Partisan Resistance of Florence 5, a demonstration which again filled the city, although we are in the middle of summer.

At the same time, this struggle filled the pages of daily newspapers and received the support of the university, culture and entertainment milieus. No one in the country can ignore its determination or its ability to build a very broad agreement around slogans that are very radical, but far from being in the minority. Regional and national institutions have been forced to show solidarity with the workers, by making promises that they know they will not be able to keep if the laws they have approved for years are not changed.

To try to cover itself, the government, in the middle of the summer, began to evoke a proposed anti-delocalization law on the French model, without making it clear whether, on the other side of the Alps, it had really been effective. The proposed text is really very limited and, rather than preventing delocalization, it simply sets out the procedure to be followed by companies which relocate, without mentioning possible sanctions. In short: slightly longer deadlines for announcing layoffs and generic undertakings to find other jobs for the workers concerned and finance their dismissal. Exactly what the workers of GKN - correctly - do not want.

Although this proposal is very limited, Bonomi, the head of the Italian employers' organization, immediately cried scandal: “free enterprise is being called into question”. But the confederal union leaderships were not so combative: instead of asking for a more incisive text and launching a major mobilization in the country against delocalization and company crises, especially in the automotive sector and related industries, which are increasingly likely to be weakened by the industrial and professional choices of Stellandis, they have remained almost silent.

Alone in the struggle, the workers of GKN, at the end of August, invited, in front of the gates of the occupied factory, the greatest democratic jurists of the country and asked them to rewrite a bill, presented to Parliament a few weeks ago, which can really prevent the delocalization of companies which are not in crisis and which, until the last moment, received money from the State.

On 18 September, a few days before the end of the procedure which was to lead to letters of dismissal (Italian law, in the event of collective dismissal, provides for a special 75-day procedure, during which the company and the union must try to find an agreement before the layoffs become final), the Factory Collective called for a national demonstration in Florence, prepared in other cities (Rome, Naples, Turin, Milan, Bergamo and many others), by a series of assemblies addressed by delegates from GKN, then also from the CGIL and the FIOM.

## 40,000 people from all over Italy invaded Florence

This demonstration was one of the most radical and the most successful of recent years. For the first time in decades, the working class found itself in the streets, going beyond all political and union divisions, with a single slogan launched by the Factory Collective, borrowed from the anti-fascist resistance of Florence during the war: #let us rebel [3].

Two days later, the Tribunal made its ruling on the FIOM's charge of anti-union behaviour, ruling against the management of the company and blocking the 75 days provided for by the dismissal procedure. The company which, on the announcement of the sentence lost 4 per cent on the stock market in one day, must launch a new procedure and wait at least 75 more days before being able to make further lay-offs, this time in correctly informing the syndicate. Even if this will not be enough to prevent the closure of the factory, it is a first victory, which can be explained by an extraordinary level of mobilization. In other conflicts, where such mobilization was insufficient, the judges unfortunately took the opposite decision by upholding the dismissals and rejecting the charge of anti-union behaviour.

For GKN, a month after the court's sentence, the collective dismissal procedure has not yet been relaunched. To the ministry, the management of the company declared that it was considering the establishment of a new production site. This does not mean that it is giving up on abandoning the plant which will be put into liquidation anyway, but for the first time it has declared itself ready to find a new owner. But what exactly it is willing to sell is unclear: the building, the land, the machines, the orders ? Or, more likely, the rubble ?

The risk is that this is an expedient to gain time and weaken the struggle. It would help Confindustria (the Italian employers' organization) to be able to say that the lay-offs at GKN, in fact, were blocked only because “we cannot lay off by mail”. This would be the end of the country's most important struggle, silencing other conflicts and especially the battle for the anti-delocalization law.

## Build on this first victory

This is why the workers remain on the defensive and have declared with great lucidity that they do not intend to demobilize: they have not been fooled by the vague promise of a hypothetical new owner (dozens of other struggles have ended in recent years with the closure of the company after a promise of this kind) and instead want the government to play a decisive role in ensuring the continuity of production in the plant and approving the law they have proposed.

It is more than ever necessary that the unions, in particular the FIOM and the CGIL, call for a national mobilization, going as far as a general strike against lay-offs, but also for the lowering of the retirement age. (which on the contrary will increase again in January 2022) and for safety at work (in Italy, the number of deaths in the workplace is more and more worrying). This is all the more necessary since it is necessary to respond to the scandalous attacks that the CGIL has suffered in recent days from the fascists, but also to respond to the immediate needs of workers, by occupying the terrain of a social crisis which otherwise will end up being completely colonized by the right and by the delusional positions of the No Vaxers. Unfortunately, we are not about to have such a mobilization and the unions are content to propose a social pact (which is, besides, improbable) between the companies and the government and show no sign of taking any action.

The GKN conflict, going completely against the stream, is exemplary for many reasons, and above all for the

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autonomy of its union leadership and the role of its Factory Collective, in direct and daily relation with the workers' assembly. The positive outcome of this conflict is not guaranteed, we are aware of that, but the strength, even symbolic, that it has acquired is such it will not be easy for anyone to normalize or marginalize it.

This struggle is also exemplary because it has shown that the workers do not resign themselves to their fate, despite decades of defeats and regressions, which can also be explained by the moderation of ineffective union choices, based solely on consultation. Before the gates of GKN, the stereotype of the worker defeated before even having started the struggle, fizzled out. The moral and social force of this conflict is such that it can only give hope and put into action many of those who no longer believed that to be possible

Finally, this conflict is exemplary because it has shown that a radical struggle - and even a very radical one - is not necessarily in the minority and that it can even be massive, if those who lead it have the intelligence not to stay isolated and build consensus without sectarianism.

Being radical means taking things at the root. This is what this combat has the merit of doing.

The struggle continues.

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[1] Stellantis is a multinational automobile group established on 16 January 2021 as a result of the merger of the PSA group and Fiat Chrysler Automobiles.

[2] FIOM - Federation of engineering workers. Part of the CGIL, General Confederation of Italian Workers. This was close, historically, to the Communist Party.

[3] On 11 April 2021, the day when Florence celebrated the 77th anniversary of its liberation from Nazism-fascism, the workers of GKN and the regional Partisans' Association demonstrated together on the main square of the city. The slogan of the partisans was: “Insorgiamo» - “Let us rise up!” as in the title of this article.