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Italy

RiMaflow, an exemplary workers' struggle of the 21st century

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RiMaflow is located in the declining industrial belt around Milan, in Trezzano sul Naviglio. "Ri" (re-) because it was the workers of the former metal factory Maflow who restarted it after its last owner, Boryszew SA, relocated its activity in 2012. [1]

History

Maflow, an automotive components company employing 330 people, went into a crisis due to the fraudulent bankruptcy of the industrial group – and not due to a lack of work or orders, particularly from the giant BMW. Despite a combative union struggle that lasted two years, the only alternative "solution" to the closure was to sell the plant, at a discount, to a new contractor, Boryszew SA, which promised the government to immediately hire 80 workers by promising a global recovery that would gradually rehire the remaining 250 workers. But the day after the two-year deadline (minimum time required by the Prodi-bis law for compliance with the agreements) it began to relocate the plant to Poland.

Then a small group of workers decided not to passively accept to unemployment and to take charge of what was left of the company – the workshops – to start a new productive activity, under self-management, in harmony with the needs of the population and the territory. This group occupied the factory and formed a cooperative.

Taking as an example the network of Argentinian roccupied factories – with which RiMaflow has been collaborating since then – workers have gradually invented various production and service activities, mainly in the field of recycling and ecology, which could generate income and create new jobs inside abandoned workshops. From the flea market to the repair of electrical and electronic equipment, from the popular canteen to the repair of bicycles, from the manufacture of "Rimoncello" liqueur (with lemons from the Italian/Immigrant solidarity project, SOS Rosarno) to the promotion of culture within everyone's reach, based on the "open factory" model.

This policy of opening up to the territory - free use of premises for associations, neighbourhood festivals and trade union activities, space for theatre and music groups, information and debate evenings, reception of refugees, relations with farmers in the South Milanese Agricultural Park and critical consumer groups, with Caritas, etc - has so far made it possible to resist attacks by local authorities and attempts by the owners, UniCredit Bank, to take over the buildings.

Building an alternative

From the beginning, this extraordinary experience of workers' self-management took place in a context of anti-capitalist and ecological struggle, based on the very concrete needs of defending employment and creating an income for dismissed workers, summarized in the slogans posted at the entrance of the factory: reuse, recycling, reappropriation, income, debt revolt, revolution ... [2]

What is in question is the private ownership of the plant, the type of production chosen by the bosses according to profit and not according to the satisfaction of social needs, its harmful nature for the environment. This is an open challenge, not only to the former owner, to the bank, but to the system as a whole, by affirming in practice that the

workers, who have worked for 20 years in this factory, know how to do better for themselves and for society. At the same time, it is an example for the workers of dozens of companies that are closing and for their unions, who abandon the fight as soon as no new buyers appear, imagining nothing other than a negotiation on the number of workers to be rehired.

The basic idea is to broaden the concept of class and trade union struggle, no longer only defensive against bosses in crisis, but positive by building bastions of resistance, which are at the same time embryos of economy and alternative society, based on solidarity and workers' creativity, in relation to the surrounding population and socio-political local networks.

In this sense RiMaflow is at the heart of the Fuorimercato network (outside the market) associating food and other producers, who oppose the logic of productivism, the destructive mass distribution of the environment and who exploit to the bone workers, immigrants and Italians. This link with the realities of sustainable agriculture and critical consumer groups, which defend the idea of food sovereignty, has brought RiMaflow closer to the Brazilian Landless Movement (MST) – whose slogan "occupy, resist and produce" it shares – and the Union of Agricultural Workers (SOC), which is part of the Andalusian Trade Union of Workers (SAT), as well as the militant international peasant network Via Campesina, of which MST and SOC are part.

The specific form of struggle, occupation of the factory and self-managed operation immediately created fraternal links with other self-managed companies, in Europe as well as in Latin America and the rest of the world, organised in the international network of recovered companies (whose next European meeting will take place precisely in RiMaflow in spring 2019).

RiMaflow's activities have expanded. Little by little, dozens of small craftsmen (often workers who have lost their jobs or small self-employed people affected by the crisis) have settled in the abandoned areas while in workshop C has started experimenting with wallpaper recycling, with the introduction of a prototype machine that separates plastic from paper (which RiMaflow also hopes to produce).

Between the cooperative, composed of about twenty people, and the craftsmen, also organized in association, there are now more than one hundred people who have found a job and an income within RiMaflow.

Opponents

What is at issue is the idea that abandoned places and property (public or private property) can be converted into common property, used by the organized population in collectives of workers and users. This idea is obviously contested, not only by the right but also by the centre-left and in particular by the Democratic Party (PD, ex-PCI), which manages the municipality of Trezzano sul Naviglio and has constantly obstructed RiMaflow's economic activities, claiming technical and administrative defects. Thus, despite the cooperative's desire to comply with security and other measures, and by making significant financial efforts, we were forced to move the flea market out of the plant and limit high-impact cultural activities.

However, negotiations are ongoing – and have been ongoing for years without reaching a conclusion – with the owner, UniCredit, to whom RiMaflow has made several proposals for the use and preservation of the building.

However, the survival of the cooperative and the fighting network that supports it is still an exercise in balancing.

Ignoble attack

In mid-summer 2018, at the end of July, the police arrived at the factory with an order to freeze the computers and the bank account, to immediately close the C workshop while the president of the cooperative, our comrade Massimo Lettieri, was arrested, at his parents' house in Calabria (south of Italy) where he was on holiday, on the absurd and ignominious charge of illegal trafficking in waste and criminal association of a mafia type. Since then, our comrade has been in prison and the cooperative has been struggling to survive.

The legal investigation concerns about ten companies suspected of illegal waste trafficking, with which RiMaflow was unfairly associated. The trial, which has not yet begun, is likely to last several months and during this time our comrade Massimo remains in prison while the cooperative's work is largely blocked.

This situation is totally unfair and unbearable. A major solidarity campaign has been set up to mobilize all the people, collectives and associations that have been able to connect with this unique experience, both locally and internationally. We need all the support we can get to deal with the significant costs of legal defence and to fill the gap created in the co-op's account by the court receiver.

A large assembly took place on the weekend of 15-16 September inside the factory, where dozens of movements – from social centres to Caritas, critical consumer groups and trade unions – showed their political and material support for RiMaflow's cause. An international call is circulating and has already gathered dozens of signatures from representatives of well-known movements, intellectuals and artists. [3] Dozens of solidarity initiatives will be organised in the coming weeks from north to south Italy.

This is a battle that concerns us all.

RiMaflow will live! Immediate release of Massimo Lettieri!

Milan, 19 September 2018

PS:

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[1] Maflow, which produces automotive components for major brands (BMW, Fiat, Peugeot, Renault, Scania, Volkswagen and Volvo), founded in 1973 in Milan under the name Murray, then renamed Manuli Automotive Components SpA, was sold to an investment fund in 2004 for 140 million euros. The debts of this investment fund were transferred to Maflow, which led to its insolvency in 2007 and its administrative liquidation. As a result, Maflow's assets were sold for a total of 8.1 million to the Polish financial group Boryszew SA, which took over its plants in Italy (Ascoli and Trezzano sul Naviglio), but mainly in Poland (3 plants), France, Spain, Brazil, Mexico, China and India, as well as patents.

The Polish company Boryszew was privatised in 1992. It has since become a major financial group, Boryszew SA, whose financier Roman Karkosik, one of the richest Poles, has held 64.31% of the shares since 1999. R. Karkosik built his fortune by buying bankrupt companies for nothing and selling them at a very high price (in whole or in pieces). Since 2005 he has also bought shares from other groups and integrated them into the holding company Boryszew SA (the Polish non-ferrous metals financial company Impexmetal in 2005, Maflow in 2010, the German companies AKT, Theysohn and Wedo in 2011 and YMOS in 2012). In 2017 Boryszew SA's net profits reached 47.54 million euros and in the first quarter of 2018 - 12 million euros. 60% of turnover is generated outside Poland. Roman Karkosik has just been convicted in Poland of stock market manipulation ("tax optimisation" according to the accused), but the court... exempted him from punishment (cf. *Gazeta Wyborcza* of 13

September 2018).

[2] RiMaflow - "ri" for rinascita (rebirth), riuso (reuse), riciclo (recycling), riappropriazione (reappropriation), reddito (income), rivolta (revolt), rivoluzione (revolution).

[3] See "[RiMaflow will live!!](#)".