

# **The Rise of Fascism in Italy**

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The Italian workers could during the occupation of the factories in August-September 1920 have seized the opportunity to deal a final blow to the bourgeoisie. They failed to do so and from that moment they fought a retreating battle against the ruling class and the rapidly growing fascist danger. The government began to imprison working class militants while fascist hooligans could act with complete impunity. Mussolini began an organized struggle against working-class organizations, their offices were burned, their centers destroyed, their members murdered.

The measure of the government's arbitrary power was given when Giolitti, then prime minister, ordered Armando Borghi, the anarchist secretary of the Syndicalist Union, and Errico Malatesta, the old anarchist militant, to be arrested. The workers had been too demoralized by the defeat which followed the occupation of the factories to put up any serious opposition. The situation was different in February 1920; then the government had tried to arrest Malatesta at Tombola, a little town near Leghorn. Immediately all the major towns of Tuscany declared a general strike and the railwaymen decided to stop the trains in the whole of central Italy. Before they could do so Malatesta was released.

Anarchists and syndicalists all over Italy organized demonstrations and strikes in order to obtain the liberation of their comrades but they received no solidarity from the socialist organizations. The organ of the Socialist Party, *Avanti!*, published in large type the following appeal: "We beg our working comrades most earnestly to pay no attention to any appeals for action until such appeals shall have been duly passed by the Party's central organs and by the economic organisations competent to deal with them." All the party leaders did in order to show their solidarity towards Malatesta and Borghi was to decide that a one hour strike in protest should be called!

Thanks to the complicity of the Socialist reformist organizations the government was able to keep Malatesta and Borghi in prison for nine months. When they were released the reactionary movement had gained such tremendous ground that the working class was unable to react.

On the 15<sup>th</sup> of May 1921 the government decided to dissolve Parliament and to call new elections. Elections in such a period of unrest spelt civil war and the government was well aware of it. It used them in order to precipitate the crushing of the left-wing movements. All over Italy acts of violence took place; the Fascists took this opportunity to intensify their attacks. The Socialist Party retained however the same number of votes as it had received at the previous elections, while Mussolini, together with 30 Nationalist and Fascist deputies, entered parliament. The *Avanti* declared that fascist reaction had been buried under an avalanche of red votes but in reality the initiative already belonged to the bourgeoisie.

The Socialist Party and the General Confederation of Labor refused to take action against the fascists and the Socialist parliamentary group adopted policy of wait and see. They refused to join the government, but they equally refused to act against it. While their leaders sat tight in their comfortable armchairs the workers were faced by unemployment, rising prices, government repression and fascist provocations.

On the 6<sup>th</sup> of July 1921, an attempt was made to unify the working-class forces and to meet the fascists with more than words. A pact of Proletarian Alliance was signed in Rome by working-class organizations and a workers' militia the Arditi rossi was formed. The Socialists only gave it lukewarm support; they declared in their paper *Avanti!* that it was no use trying to use force against the overwhelming forces of the government.

## **Socialist-Fascist Pact**

Unwilling to use force, the Socialist Party preferred to resort to intrigue and compromise. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of August 1921, in the office of the President of Parliament the Socialist leaders signed a peace treaty with the fascists. They promised to cooperate to prevent any acts of violence and reprisals and to respect each other's right to propaganda and organization. Socialist and Fascist leaders shook hands across the bodies of the peasants and workers assassinated by Mussolini's henchmen.

This pact was a clever move on the part of Mussolini to gain time and to increase and organize his forces. For a few months Fascist violence decreased but this did not last long. While Socialist leaders severely reminded the rank and file to respect the pact, Mussolini renewed his attacks. At the Socialist Congress of Rome in January 1922 the peasants' and workers' delegates from the regions invaded by the Fascists brought hundreds of proofs of the fact that the Fascist Party had not respected the pact. They talked of their burned buildings, of the cooperatives destroyed, of their murdered comrades, and they asked for action, but the Socialist leadership remained unmoved and declared its unshakable faith in parliamentary tactics.

## **Last Attempt To Resist**

Another attempt was made to coordinate the working-class forces. A Workers' Alliance between the General Confederation of Labor, the Syndicalist Union and Railway Union was formed. Its aim was "to oppose the alliance of workers' forces to the coalition of the reaction." This alliance might have been able to stop the rise of fascism but it came too late, when the working class was demoralized, weakened and divided.

The Workers' Alliance made, however, a last attempt to oppose Fascism. On the 31<sup>st</sup> of July 1922, it declared a general strike. The strike was successful and complete but the streets belonged to the Fascists. After three days of strike they started to attack; they were defeated in the revolutionary towns of Parma and Forli but they were victorious in Milan and the strike finished with a defeat of the proletariat.

The fascist onslaught continued. From the Po valley the attack spread to Tuscany and to the Puglia. The Socialists went on advocating a return to legal means, to fair competition between parties. The climax of naiveté was reached when the socialist deputy Filippo Turati called on the king to bring him the wish of the proletariat for liberty and to remind him that his duty was to defend the constitution to which he had taken the oath. The king's answer was a few days afterwards to call Mussolini to power!

## **The March On Rome**

Mussolini, once having helped to defeat the workers, set himself to conquer power. He had to win the support of the big capitalists and royalty, who, once the revolutionary danger passed, might have wished to thank him and dismiss him. By a series of intrigues and by declaring himself prepared to accept and defend the king (whom he had always attacked) Mussolini managed to get the support of the capitalists, who gave him 20 millions to prepare the March on Rome, and

of the royal family. Sure of his ground, Mussolini declared from Naples on the 24<sup>th</sup> of October 1922: "If they do not give us power we shall take it by marching on Rome."

The government by that time had resigned but on learning of Mussolini's declaration of war it published a decree putting the country in a state of siege. All civil authority had to be surrendered to the army which took steps to prevent any armed putsch on the part of the Fascists. Mussolini had only limited forces at his disposal and if the army had opposed him he would have been lost. But the king came to his rescue. He refused to sign the decree putting the country under state of siege. Instead he called Mussolini to Rome to form a new government. Mussolini "marched on Rome" comfortably installed in a sleeping car.

By the 30<sup>th</sup> of October he had formed his government. In Rome his troops marched before the king and the royal family; all over Italy his followers celebrated with new violence. Parliament did not put up any opposition; it had been taken by surprise and once again it decided to wait for events.

Mussolini immediately took measures in favour of the bourgeoisie. All legislation favorable to the workers was repealed. Meanwhile Fascist terrorism increased.

On the 18<sup>th</sup> of December 1922, 12 workers were massacred in Turin. The organizer of the engineering workers, Pietro Ferrero, an anarchist, was killed. [4] Everywhere socialists, anarchists, syndicalists were murdered under the very eyes of the police who never took any steps against the Fascists.

From the March on Rome to Matteotti's murder in June 1924, Mussolini consolidated his forces. He managed to confuse and fool Parliament with clever speeches which kept everybody guessing as to what his intentions were. Meanwhile his bands carried on a merciless struggle against the last working-class bastions. The election which took place in April 1924 only gave the Fascists another excuse for violence. In Parma, the Socialist candidate Piccinini was assassinated.

## **Matteotti's Murder**

On the 10<sup>th</sup> of June 1924, Giacomo Matteotti, a socialist deputy, was kidnapped in full daylight in Rome. This murder could have been just another anonymous fascist crime if a man had not taken the number of the car where Matteotti had disappeared and reported to the police. Matteotti's body was not found until after three months of searches but the inquest led the police to the government's doorstep. Mussolini in order to clear himself accused all his collaborators; one after the other: Rossi, Finzi, General de Bono and Dumini. They defended themselves by accusing him. No doubt could be left as to Mussolini's having ordered the murder. Public opinion was aroused. Fascist methods were well known and Matteotti's name was just one more in a long list of fascist crimes but this was a unique case, where the police had by accident found the murderers and where Mussolini's hand was clearly shown. It might have been possible to start a movement at that time which would have overthrown Mussolini's government. Workers' organizations proposed to declare a general strike but the socialist parliamentary group thought such action unwise. Instead it issued a declaration condemning the murder.

Again in January 1925 Mussolini's government seemed on the point of collapse. Rossi, who was implicated in Matteotti's murder, wrote a memorandum on the methods used by Mussolini to crush his political opponents. After such revelations two cabinet ministers felt compelled to resign. Instead of allowing a governmental crisis to take place and a new cabinet to be formed the

king hastened to accept two fascist ministers whom Mussolini proposed to replace the others. In October 1925, Mussolini published his version of the murder, the kidnapping was merely a joke, the murder, an accident.

The popular reaction to Matteotti's murder which put Mussolini's position in peril made him realize how quickly he had to act to prevent public opinion from expressing itself. All through 1925, particularly after Zaniboni's attempt on Mussolini's life, measures were taken to suppress the right of association and the liberty of the press.

The only expressions revolt took from now on [were in] the form of individual actions against Mussolini and his acolytes and of underground propaganda. In both fields the anarchists showed courage and initiative. Out of seven attempts against Mussolini's life, four were carried out by anarchists.

## **Lessons to be Drawn**

The events which led to Mussolini's conquest of power clearly show that reformist and legal methods are of no avail in the fight against reaction and Fascism. The ruling class is only prepared to adhere to legality, to respect their own rules of the game, as long as it suits them. When their situation is in danger they use violence, corruption and assassination. The Socialist Party in Italy made the mistake of thinking that the capitalists and the Fascist leaders would be prepared to accept fair competition between parties, that they would respect peace treaties, that they would be moved by appeals to decency and honesty. All through those seven years of conflict they played into the hands of the ruling class. They continued to rely on election results when the Fascists had brutally declared that if they were not given power they would conquer it, revolver in hand. While Socialists scrupulously respected a government sold to the capitalist class, the Fascists did not hesitate to assassinate the Socialist candidates whom they could not silence, as for example during the April 1924 elections when the Socialist candidate Picinini was killed by the Fascists. They kept relying on the number of seats they had in parliament as the surest guarantee against Fascism, when it was obvious that Mussolini relied more on political intrigues and armed force than on democratic methods. After the 15<sup>th</sup> of May 1921 elections the Nationalists and Fascists had 30 deputies while the Socialists had 138 members and the Communists 15, but this did not correspond to the real balance of forces. The Fascists had the government, the police and in some cases the army on their side; they could upset any majority the Socialists had in Parliament. If the Italian workers had relied more on their class weapons, strikes and insurrection, rather than on the voting paper, they would not have been defeated; If, when they occupied the factories, they had taken control of the industries rather than relying on the government to give them control, then the rise of Fascism would have been impossible.

The anarchists advocated all through the strikes an expansion of the movement and Malatesta's speech to Milan factory workers after they had returned to work shows that he fully grasped the tragic consequences this compromise with the bourgeoisie would have for the Italian workers. This is how he described the pact between the General Confederation of Labor and the Employers Association:

"You who are celebrating as a great victory the signature in Rome of this agreement are deceiving yourselves. In reality the victory belongs to Giolitti, to the Government, and to the bourgeoisie, who find themselves saved from the precipice over which they had been hanging...

“To speak of victory while the Rome agreement puts you back once more under the exploitation of the bourgeoisie, is a lie. If you give up possession of the factories, do so with the conviction that you have lost a great battle, and with the firm intention of resuming the struggle at the first opportunity and pursuing it to the end. You will then drive the employers from the factories and you will not allow them to re-enter until they come in as workmen on an equality with yourselves, content to live by working for themselves and others. Nothing is lost provided you do not delude yourselves with the fallacy that you have gained a victory. The famous decree as to the control of the factories is to dupe you, for it will tend to the creation of a new class of employees [i.e., officials or bureaucrats], who, though sprung from your bosom, will not defend your interests but the new situation created for them and it will tend also to harmonise your interests with those of the bourgeoisie—the interests of the wolf with those of the lamb.

“Do not believe those of your leaders who mock you by putting off the revolution from day to day. The Revolution! You yourselves have to make it whenever the opportunity presents itself, without waiting for orders that never come, or, if they do come, only instruct you to give up the fight. Have confidence in yourselves, have faith in your future, and you will conquer.”

The Socialists displayed the same lack of revolutionary realism when the working class came to be attacked by the Fascist hooligans. They relied upon the police which would never defend them nor prosecute the attackers. An attempt in the right direction was made when a kind of workers’ defence corps was formed but it never reached the power and efficiency of, say, the Irish Citizen Army. [5] No serious efforts were made to defend workers’ organizations, buildings or Left-wing newspaper presses. When the Avanti building was burnt in Milan by the Fascists, no attempt was made to defend it in spite of the fact that such an attack had to be expected at any moment. It is almost incredible to think that an organization with two million members should have its property destroyed without any defense being put up. The Fascists were a very small minority; their strength lay in the fact that they knew the police would not molest them. If the workers had resisted in an organized way they would have been able to crush the Fascist revolt in the bud.

The organization of workers defense would have been equally useful when strikes took place. The workers were able to stage general strikes which covered the whole country and lasted several days. But they left the streets to the Fascists, who, while they could not break the strike, were able to burn union buildings and attack and murder Socialist and anarchist militants. Unlike them, the Dublin workers understood that danger and that is why they formed their own defenses during the 1913 Transport Workers’ strike.

The lack of workers’ defenses was partly due to the lack of unity amongst the Italian workers. While the bourgeoisie presented a united front against the working class the workers’ parties lost themselves in endless squabbles.

The Italian anarchist movement understood the danger of disunity and always advocated joint action against government repression and Fascism. At the Congress of the Anarchist Union held at Bologna, July 1 to 4, 1920, a union of rank-and-file members belonging to all parties was advocated. *Freedom*, September 1929, gives the following report of the discussion which took place and of the resolution which was adopted.

“A discussion took place on the problem of the united front of the Italian proletariat, which is divided on the industrial field into the reformist [General] Confederation [of Labour], the [Italian] Syndicalist Union, and the very class-conscious Catholic Trade Unions. Politically, the workers belong either to the Socialist Party with its different wings, from the reformists to the Communist

Parliamentarians, or to the extremely revolutionary Republicans and the Anarchists. The Catholic People's Party is also very strong. Besides these there exist innumerable autonomous groups of all tendencies. Dissensions have hitherto stood in the way of united action. Malatesta has repeatedly pointed out the great need for united action among all parties. In several localities there is today already a common united front, whilst in others the attainment of this object is difficult and even impossible. The following resolution was passed:—the Congress authorises and advises the formation of small local Groups of Action, outside the parties and existing organisations in the different localities, consisting of all those elements which will declare themselves ready to go into action at the first decided opportunity, and to fight with all their means against the existing institutions.’”

When one studies the history of Hitler's rise to power one is struck by the fact that the German workers learnt nothing from the experiences of the Italian proletariat. How long are workers all over the world going to commit the same mistakes, making the sacrifices of their comrades useless and bringing terrible sufferings upon themselves.

M. L. B.



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