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The Turin Communist Movement

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The Turin Communist Movement

Abstract

The Communist Movement in Turin

Translator's presentation

The specific variations between Gramsci's two Italian texts on the Turin movement are covered in Flavio Silvestrini's *Introduzione*, but a few general points should here be noted. Considerable confusion has arisen over the nature of the two versions in which the essay appeared: *The Communist Movement in Turin* (published in the various languages – see the editorial, above – of the journal “Communist International”, November 1920) and *The Turin Workers' Councils Movement* (“L'Ordine Nuovo”, 14 March 1921). Writers have often assumed or claimed that the two essays are one and the same; this comment also applies to an English version available on the Internet, which moreover omits about a quarter of Gramsci's text. There are, however, differences between the two articles. It seems that the manuscript, the typed-up transcription (hand-corrected by Gramsci) and its carbon copy were all sent to Moscow, so the prefatory lines (reproduced here at the start of the article itself) to the later version explain that the article as there published is based on a retranslation from the German translation of the original. Some differences between the two versions are thus explained, while the others are dealt with by Flavio Silvestrini.

Additionally, and perhaps as an aid to its translators in Moscow, some simplification is apparent in the “Communist International” version. This, for example, makes more use of the term “operai”, as noun or adjective, referring to industrial workers, as compared with “lavoratori” in the broader sense of “working people”, while the latter version makes a clearer distinction between the two. And while the latter version goes into detail on the Turin Cooperative Alliance (omitted from the English version on the Internet), this is dealt with more summarily for the international readership.

For some terms in the present translation, the nearest equivalent in the British context has been used; thus “Trades Council” is used for “Camera del Lavoro”. For “Sindacati professionali” we have used “Trade Unions”, while “sindacati” without any qualification appears simply as “unions”; workers’ “delegati” elected in a factory are “stewards” or “shop stewards”.

At the end of the manuscript written for the Comintern journal, Gramsci's name was added by someone else in Cyrillic, followed by “Gramchi”, exactly as the name was printed at the end of the translation in number 14 of “L'Internationale Communiste”. When, years later, the essay had been forgotten by nearly everyone, at the end of the top copy of the manuscript's typed transcript – which bears occasional corrections in Gramsci's hand – another person added the name “Antonio Gramsci” and a comment in Italian: “Addition. Antonio's manuscript consists of 15 pages, without crossings-out (except for pages 13 and 14). It bears no date, and no signature. Year – summer or autumn 1920. Archive of undated material. It could, even, it seems, be a report. Greetings”.

The person making these various additions to the typescript then signed himself “Tu”. A cross-check with other documents, some with specimens of handwriting, contained in the Fondazione Istituto Gramsci's fascicules 495-010a-187 and 188, indicates that, to a fair degree of certainty, the person in question was Rigoletto Martini, whose main pseudonym was “Tutti”, sometimes seen as “Tuti”. On reaching Moscow from the Spanish Civil War, he was entrusted with reorganizing the PCI in Italy, but was arrested by the fascists and died in prison aged only 34. The combination of Martini's age, the pseudonym appearing as an abbreviated signature, and the handwriting all point to him as author of the addendum.

As well as the crossings-out in the manuscript to which Martini draws attention, Gramsci is also sometimes unsure about how best to express a phrase, and on occasion deletes words or an initial letter then rethinking an expression. Where it is possible to see their meaning, these items appear barred and underlined in the translation, as done for the Italian transcription, e.g. “had been”, while later insertions, often above the line, are indicated in blue, e.g. “at the time”; explanatory translator’s notes in the text are in square brackets.

A 1970 pamphlet, *Turin 1920. Factory Councils and General Strike*, seemingly the only publication of a certain Moulinavent Press, contains an occasionally imprecise English version of the 1921 “Ordine Nuovo” article, but detailed searching of library holdings has not come up with the English-language version of the “Communist International” article. With thanks to the Comintern Archive, where Gramsci’s original is kept (location 519-1-81, pp. 1-15), we here present a fresh translation, this time of the original manuscript.

Keywords

Turin, Strikes, 1917, Factory Councils, Communist Movement

The Turin communist movement

Antonio Gramsci

A member of the Italian delegation who has recently returned from the Russia of the Soviets has told the Turin working class that the platform set up in Kronštadt to welcome the delegation was adorned with a banner bearing the wording: “Long live the April 1920 Turin general strike”!

The workers welcomed the news with great joy and much satisfaction. The main representatives of the delegation that went to Russia ~~had been~~ were very hostile to April’s general strike; they sneered at the heroic efforts made ~~at the time~~ by the Turin workers, they wrote that in that strike the Turin workers did not have a precise political consciousness, but were following just a ‘false illusion’. The Turin workers welcomed with great joy and much satisfaction the news of what had taken place at Kronštadt because they said: – The Russian communist comrades have understood and have judged the April movement better than the Italian opportunists; the Russian communist comrades through this have given the Italian opportunists a well-deserved history lesson.

The April movement in Turin was in effect a great ~~historical~~ event, not only in the history of the Italian working class but also in the history of the European and world proletariat. For the first time a proletariat was seen to take up the fight for the control of production without being forced ~~into the~~ into this struggle by unemployment and hunger. And we are not dealing just with a minority vanguard of the local working class; the entire mass of the working people in Turin went united into the struggle which they upheld forcefully, without defections, subjecting themselves to the harshest deprivations and greatest sacrifices. The strike lasted a month for the engineering workers, and ten days for the entire mass of the working people: ~~as~~ the general strike of ten days covered the whole region of Piedmont, meaning around half a million industrial workers and peasants, corresponding to almost four million inhabitants. Italy’s entire capitalist class was involved in crushing the Turin working class; the entire forces of the bourgeois State were put at the disposition of the capitalists; on their side the

workers were alone, without the support of the leading bodies of the socialist Party and the Union Confederation. the workers were, instead, subject to the mockery and defamation of the Union and Party chiefs, who did everything to throttle the movements of solidarity that the working-class and peasant masses of the whole of Italy wanted to bring into being (and in some localities did actually do so) in order to aid their brothers in Turin. However the workers did not lose heart; they bore on their shoulders the whole weight of capitalist reaction, and even after the defeat they did not cease to remain disciplined around the banner of Communism and the world Revolution: the propaganda of the anarchists and syndicalists against the discipline shown to the political Party of the class of working people and against the proletarian dictatorship was unsuccessful, even after the betrayal of the leaders had led to defeat: the Turin workers simply swore to themselves to intensify the revolutionary struggle on two fronts, against the exploitative bourgeoisie and against the opportunist and treacherous leaders.

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This strength of consciousness and revolutionary discipline among the proletarian masses of Turin finds a historical explanation in the economic and political conditions in which the class struggle is being carried on. Turin is a city ~~in~~ ~~where is~~ given over almost exclusively to industrial production. Its population, of 500,000 inhabitants, is ~~thus constituted by 350,000~~ three quarters a working-class population. Except to a minimal amount, a ~~b~~ petty bourgeoisie does not exist: ~~the intellect~~ as well as the working-class population, there exist great masses of white-collar employees and technical staff, but they work in the **big** factories, are organized in big Unions affiliated to the Trades Council, have taken part in big strikes alongside the industrial workers and the majority of them have acquired the psychology of the proletarian worker, the psychology of those who are fighting against capital for the Revolution and for Communism. The production apparatus in Turin is strongly centralized and unified. The engineering industry, with 50,000 workers and 10,000 among the white-collar and technical staff, dominates the entire industrial field: in the engineering industry one sole firm (Fiat) employs 35,000 workers, white-collar and technical

staff, and the main Fiat factory employs 16,000 people, centred ~~on~~ ~~the~~ ~~mos~~ around the most perfect automatism of modern production. Engineering production in Turin is entirely given over to the car: the majority of the workers are skilled and specialist, but they do not at all share the petty bourgeois psychology of, for example, the skilled workers of England. The car dominates engineering production, as it also dominates some of the other big industries: that of wood and that of rubber. The engineering workers are the vanguard of the Turin proletariat: due to this unified structure of the industrial apparatus, every movement **automatically** becomes a mass movement, and its nature, even if it was initially corporative, quickly becomes political and revolutionary.

In Turin, there exists one sole big Union organization, with 90,000 members, the Trades Council. The anarchists and syndicalists represent only very small groups, without any influence on the mass: the mass is led only by the Socialist Party Section, with an absolute predominance of communist workers. The organized communist movement possesses the following bodies of struggle: the Party Section, constituted by about 1,500 members; 28 city territorial circles, with about 10,000 members; 28 young socialist Branches with around 4,000 members.¹ In every factory there exists a permanently constituted communist group, with its own leading committee: the groups are centralized by city zone in their Circles and finally all are centralized in the Party Section and in the Executive Committee of the Section, which has in its hands the whole of the city's organized communist movement and controls the whole mass of the working people.

Before the bourgeois revolution that led to the formation of the unitary Italian bourgeois State, Turin was the capital of the small semi-feudal State of Piedmont, Liguria and Sardinia: at that time the main activities in Turin were small-scale industry, artisan production and commerce. After the unitary Italian State was created, the capital was taken to Rome and it seemed inevitable that Turin would decay; instead the city ~~was~~ ~~able~~ overcame the

¹ This corresponds both to the manuscript and to the typewritten transcription done at the time and corrected by hand by Gramsci; the French, German and Russian translations give 2,000 rather than 4,000 young socialists, as then does the retranslated *Ordine Nuovo* version (14 March 1921).

economic crisis, and in fifty years doubled its population, becoming the biggest industrial city in Italy. It may be said that Italy has three capitals, a political one in Rome, where all the threads of the bourgeois state administration are gathered together, a financial and commercial one, Milan, where ~~there are centr~~ the biggest banking institutes in Italy are based, and an industrial one, Turin, where ~~they have~~ the factory system has found its greatest development.

~~Since~~ The transfer of the capital took away from Turin the small and middle intellectual bourgeoisie, which provided the apparatus of the new bourgeois State with its personnel: the rise and development of big industry instead brought to Turin the flower of the whole of the Italian working class. ~~Thus it came about that historically Turin represents a~~ The process of formation of the city is one of the most interesting from the point of view of the history of Italy and the Italian proletarian Revolution. The Turin proletariat thus came to find itself at the head of an apparatus of the ‘spiritual’ government of the working masses of Italy, who are linked to Turin by many bonds – of family, of historical tradition, of ~~immigratio~~ desire (every worker in Italy wants to go and work in Turin). This explains how it ~~often~~ came about that the masses all over Italy, even against the wishes of the leaders, wanted to offer their solidarity to the general strike: they saw in Turin the capital of the communist Revolution, they saw in Turin the Petrograd of the Italian proletarian Revolution.

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In the period of the 1914-1918 imperialist war, two armed insurrections broke out in Turin. The first was in May 1915, in opposition to Italy’s entry into the war: on this occasion the Casa del Popolo² was completely ransacked by the police: the second insurrection took place in August 1917 and took on an acute form of revolutionary armed struggle. The March revolution in Russia was welcomed with immense joy in Turin: the workers wept with emotion, in the knowledge that the tsarist government had been overthrown by the insurrection of the Petrograd workers. But the

² The “casa del popolo” played and, in some of the traditional formerly “red” areas, still does play, an important role in Italy as a popular and working-class institution, predominantly cultural and recreational in nature.

Turin workers did not allow themselves to be deceived, even minimally, by the demagogic phraseology of Kerenskij and the Men'sheviks. In July 1917, when the mission ~~of~~ sent to the West by the Petrograd Soviet arrived in Turin, the delegates Smirnov and Goldenberg,³ who spoke to a crowd of over 50,000 workers, were greeted by loud cries of: Long live comrade Lenin! Long live the Bol'sheviks! The ~~Men'shevik~~ "Novaja Žizn" Goldenberg was not very satisfied by this welcome on the part of the Turin proletariat: he could not understand how comrade Lenin enjoyed so much popularity among the Turin workers. And one must bear in mind that the July insurrection had already been crushed in Petrograd, and that the Italian bourgeois press was writing furious articles against Lenin and against the Bol'sheviks, calling them bandits, adventurists, agents and spies of German imperialism!

From the beginning of Italy's war (24 May 1915) the Turin proletariat had not up to that day been able to hold any mass demonstration. The great meeting in honour of the Petrograd Soviet of workers' deputies began a new period of mass action.

~~Not even a mon~~

A month had not passed before the Turin workers rose in arms against Italian imperialism and militarism. The mass action began on 23 August 1917. For five days the workers fought in the streets and the squares. A number of areas of the city fell completely into the hands of the insurgents, who had guns, grenades and some machine guns. Three or four times, armed masses of workers attempted to conquer the centre of the city, where the public buildings and the military command headquarters ~~were~~ are; but in the two years of war the workers' revolutionary organization had been dismantled by reaction, the workers had no centre of military coordination and were⁴ crushed by the soldiers, who were made to believe that the insurrection had been plotted by the Germans. The workers, who had built perfect barricades, trenches, and who had stretched electrified iron wire around their quarters of the city, held out for five days against assaults by troops and the police. More than 500 workers were killed in the repression, more than 2000

³ See the photograph on the cover of this issue; the short-lived "Novaja Žizn" ("New Life") newspaper, established by Maksim Gorkij and other social-democrat Internationalists was trying to bridge the divisions between Men'sheviks and Bol'sheviks among Internationalists.

⁴ The non-existent word "furato" crept its way into Gramsci's manuscript, which he then corrected by hand to the right form "furono" ("were") in the typed-up version.

were seriously wounded. After this massacre the best elements of the working class were either arrested or sent away from Turin. There was a loss of revolutionary intensity in the movement, but it did not on account of this lose its spirit of communist mass discipline. One episode serves as a good description of this strength of socialist consciousness. Straight after the August insurrection new elections were held for the Board of Management of the Cooperative Alliance, a great **working-class** institution which supplies a quarter of the population of Turin. The Alliance is constituted by the union of the railway Cooperative and the General Association of workers (a great mutual benefit society). The Management Board had for many years been under the control of the Socialist Party Section, but at that moment the Section had to carry out only very limited, clandestine activity, and could no longer reach the great masses. The ~~great~~ majority of the Alliance's capital was constituted by the railway workers' shares, and many of these shares were held by the railway clerical workers and their families. The development of the Alliance had taken the effective value of each share from an initial 50 lire up to 700 lire, but the Party succeeded in persuading the shareholders that workers' Cooperation must not serve for personal gain, but for providing means for the revolutionary struggle: the shareholders therefore contented themselves with an interest of 3.50 percent on the nominal value of 50 lire and not on the real value of 700 lire. After the August insurrection, with the help of the police and the bourgeois newspapers, a Committee of reformist railway workers was formed, in order to wrench control of the Board away from the socialists. The shareholders were promised immediate payment of the difference between the real value and the nominal value of each share (650 lire); they were promised that the Cooperative would give preference to the shareholders in distributing goods. All possible propaganda was carried out by the reformist traitors and by the bourgeois newspapers to transform the Cooperative from a working-class institution into a petty bourgeois financial institution. The working class was persecuted, the voice of the socialist Section was stifled by censorship, and great suffering was caused through the lack of foodstuffs; but the majority of the cooperative was reconquered by the revolutionaries who had not bent an inch in their programme of working-class cooperation to provide the

means for class struggle. In the railway Cooperative, although ~~there were~~ many of the voters were white collar staff and one might assume a step backward on their part after the proletarian armed insurrection, 700 votes from the 800 voters went to the Party list.

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After the armistice in the imperialist war, proletarian action began afresh with great vigour and energy. The Turin proletariat clearly understood, however, that the historical period that had been opened up by the imperialist war is fundamentally different from the one immediately preceding the war, that the Third International is the world proletariat's organization for civil war, for the conquest of political power, for the proletarian dictatorship, for the foundation of a new order in the relations of production and in the social relations that depend on them. Great discussions took place in the workers' assemblies on the problems of the Revolution, on economic problems and on political ones. The working-class energies of the communist vanguard were organized around a weekly journal of communist culture, *L'Ordine Nuovo*. The polemics that took place in the pages of this weekly aimed at the goal of creating a revolutionary organization of the masses to win over the workers' Unions for communism and take the industrial struggle from the terrain of the fight for improvements in wages and hours of work onto the terrain of the revolutionary struggle for the control of production and for the dictatorship of the proletariat. The watchword was that of the factory Councils.

In the Turin factories there were small workers' Committees, recognized by the capitalists, but some of which had already begun the fight against the union bureaucracy and the legalitarian and reformist spirit of the union officials. The greater part of these Committees were, however, an emanation of the union offices, their members were proposed to the factory assemblies by the union offices and were chosen from among the **most** highly skilled opportunist workers, so as never to give any 'trouble' to the capitalists and so as to nip in the bud any mass movement. The propaganda carried out by the workers who followed the exhortations of *L'Ordine Nuovo* was based on transforming these

Committees,⁵ which were intended to become the **direct** emanation of the masses and no longer of the union bureaucracy, which were intended to take on the tasks of the struggle for the control of production, of the military preparation of the masses, of activity for the economic and political education of the masses, and which should no longer [illegible cancelled word – trans. note] be involved as guard dogs for quelling mass insurrections against capitalist discipline in the factories.

The propaganda for the factory Councils was welcomed with immense enthusiasm by the masses: in the space of six months, workers' Councils had sprung up in all the engineering factories, the communists had conquered the ~~local~~ Council of the engineering Union and ~~the majority~~ the idea of factory Councils and of the fight for the control of production had conquered the majority at the Congress of the Trades Unions affiliated to the Trades Council.

The organization of the factory Councils is based on the following principles: – In every factory, in every workplace of the working class, a body must be created based on a representative and not a bureaucratic system, which embodies the power of the proletariat, fights against capitalist power and imposes control over production, drawing the whole of the working people into the revolutionary struggle for the foundation of the workers' State. ~~Every~~ The factory Council must come into being according to an industrial principle, so that the working class has an image of the communist Society as it will be realized through the proletarian dictatorship, of a Society without class divisions, in which the relations between men will be pure relationships of production technique and no longer those of force organized in a State. The working-class mass must understand the greatness and beauty of the ideal for which it is fighting and sacrificing itself and must understand the necessity of the stages it has to go through along this road, must understand the need for a dictatorship and for revolutionary discipline. Every factory is divided into shops, and each shop is occupied by work teams: every workshop team will elect a shop steward, with an imperative and revocable mandate. The union of the stewards of the whole factory forms the Council,

⁵ Here in the manuscript. Gramsci uses a singular “this” (*questo*) and a plural “Committees” (*Comitati*), but a few lines earlier had used “some of which” (*qualcuno dei quali*, with a plural reference). The later version, published in “L’Ordine Nuovo”, has the plural form.

which from its ranks elects an executive Committee. The Union of the ~~Committees~~ political secretaries of the executive Committees will form the central body of the factory Councils, which will have its own Committee for the whole city in order to organize propaganda, compile work plans, study the plans and the proposals of the single factories and of the single workers and take care of the movement in its entirety. Among the tasks of the factory shop stewards, apart from those of a more strictly industrial nature, such as control over the technical staff, **violent** expulsion from the factory of those who were the declared enemies of the working class, struggle against the management to acquire internal freedom, study of the production possibilities of the factory, of ~~its~~ the value of the capital employed, etc., there were also the following: ~~as orga~~ military preparation of the working class, precise statistics of the elements who are capable and trustworthy from the viewpoint of insurrectionary struggle, cadre formation and troop formation for the armed action of the masses.

The power of the factory Councils increased rapidly. This form of organization of a soviet type was very well received by the masses, who united firmly around the executive Committees and supported them with great strength in the fight against capitalist autocracy. These Committees and factory Councils, recognized neither by the industrialists nor by the union bureaucracy, managed to obtain many successes; they swept away from the factories the spies and the agents provocateurs put there by the capitalists, they created relations with the white collar employees and technical chiefs in order to have financial and industrial information regarding the firm, they actually took over the disciplinary management of the factories, and made the exploited and extortion-ridden masses understand ~~what it~~ what workers' self-management means in production.

The activity of the Committees and Councils was deployed to the full in the strikes within the factories, which lost ~~their~~ the impulsive and chaotic nature that they had had up to then, and became conscious actions of the revolutionary mass. The apparatus of the Council and the executive Committee reached such a working perfection that it was possible **within five minutes** to bring to a standstill the work of the 16,000 Fiat-Centre workers ~~in five minutes~~, distributed among 42 big workshops. On 3 December

1919, the Councils gave proof of their capacity to lead mass actions in the grand style: – on the order of the Socialist Section, which has in its hands the entire apparatus of the mass working-class movement, the factories were unexpectedly mobilized in the space of an hour by the proclamation of an order; every factory had constituted its proletarian battalions and 120,000 workers descended into the city centre, sweeping ~~the~~ from the streets and ~~the~~ from the squares ~~of the~~ the nationalist and militarist rabble.

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This movement of the working-class masses for the creation of the factory Councils was led by the communists of the Socialist Section and of the Trades Unions. A contribution to its development also came from the anarchists, who limited themselves to substituting some exoteric phraseology of theirs to the clear, lucid language of the Marxist communists.

Harsh obstacles were placed in the way of the movement by the local and central union officials, ~~and~~ by the Socialist Party Executive and by *Avanti!* The polemic of these people was based on the difference existing between factory Council and Soviet, ~~with a~~ and was carried on with a bookish and bureaucratic mentality: ~~it was~~ from the resounding phrases there emerged only the preoccupation to avoid any direct intervention by the masses in the revolutionary struggle and to keep the masses under the control of the union officials: the comrades of the Party Executive wanted no local initiatives before they had put together a single plan for the whole country, ~~with~~ which however was neither prepared nor studied. In Turin the project for the method to follow for the elections of the factory stewards and for the programme to be undertaken was studied and prepared by the workers themselves in factory meetings, under the guidance and leadership of the communist elements, and the central Committee developed only what the workers had proposed in motions and in long resolutions: the movement can therefore be said to be purely working-class and can be assumed as documentary evidence of the high level reached by the Turin proletariat in the industrial field. The Turin movement did not extend outside the province: the whole machinery ~~of the~~ union bureaucracy was brought into play to prevent the working-

class masses of the rest of Italy from following the example of Turin. The Turin movement was slandered, was sneered at, was fought in every way. This hostile attitude ~~of the bureau~~ assumed by the central organs of the Unions and the Socialist Party encouraged the capitalists to go all-out against the Turin proletariat and against the factory Councils. The plan of attack was prefigured at a Conference of the industrialists held in Milan in March: the central organs of the proletariat paid no attention even to this warning; ~~the union officials revealed their nature as traitors, depending on and foretasting the struggle that the workers~~ the Turin proletariat was left isolated to fight against the whole of national capitalism and against the power of the State. Turin was invaded by an army of policemen (around 20,000), there were encamped around the city whole brigades brought in from the armistice line: cannons and machine guns were stationed at the strategic points of the city. After this military apparatus had been well deployed, the capitalists provoked the mass of the working class, which tried not to give battle in such disastrous circumstances, but when it was realized that it was not possible not to go into battle, it went into the fight courageously with the will for it to go on to the bitter end. The strike went on for a month for the engineering workers and 10 days for the entire proletariat. The life of industry and transport was brought to a complete standstill in the city and province. But the Turin proletariat was cut off from the rest of Italy: the central proletarian organs launched no manifesto to the Italian people to explain the meaning of the battle fought by the Turin workers, ~~there was no~~ *l'Avanti!* was unwilling to publish a manifesto of the Turin Section of the Party; the Turin comrades who went outside Turin were presented as anarchists, as hotheads, as adventurists. Exactly at that time the National Council of the Party should have been held in Turin: it was transferred to Milan, because a city 'afflicted' by a general strike is not 'appropriate' for holding socialist discussions! One saw in that moment all the weakness of the men who were leading the Party: in Turin the working-class mass was fighting strenuously to defend the workers' factory Council, to defend the first representative institution embodying proletarian power; in Milan they were discussing how to create Soviets, ~~of~~ the form to give political power once it had been conquered by the proletariat, and meanwhile they

left the Turin proletariat in isolation, they allowed all the bourgeois forces that had been unleashed to try and annihilate the power that had already been conquered! The masses of the Italian proletariat spontaneously came to the aid of Turin: the railway workers of Pisa, of Livorno, of Florence did not transport the troops destined for Turin; the dockworkers and seamen of Livorno and Genoa ~~refused point-blank to transport other troops~~ f sabotaged sea transport; in several cities the working class went on strike against the orders of the Unions.

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This was the way the general strike in Turin and Piedmont was sabotaged by the bureaucracy of the union and the Party. It has had a great educational importance for the entire Italian proletariat: it has demonstrated the possibility of uniting in practice the workers to the peasants, bringing these latter on to the same plane of struggle as the workers, and has demonstrated the urgent necessity to intensify the fight against the bureaucratic union machine which represents the platform on which the parliamentarians and reformists are basing their opportunistic action to throttle and ruin each and every mass movement.