



# Practicing militant inquiry: Composition, strike and betting in the logistics workers struggles in Italy

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## abstract

This paper, focussed on what we can call a cycle of struggles in the field of retail logistics in Italy, is the result of a process of political inquiry. That is to say the result of a process of knowledge production that has put analysis of the struggles together with moments of political organization. It analyses the specific context of production in retail logistic at the age of just-in-time capitalism; the labour composition and the race management that organize labour; the production of an autonomous and resistant subjectivity, capable to overthrow race hierarchies and other capitalist dispositifs of control, as well as to relate to 'its' trade union in a pragmatic manner that we could define as 'the workers' making use of the union. In the conclusion, it considers the political betting at stake within these straggles.

Rethinking the strike, bet on generalization. Here is what we learned from a cycle of struggles in the field of retail logistics in Italy, and specifically warehouse workers at cooperatives managing and organizing the sorting and transport of goods for major brands such as IKEA, the national Coop<sup>1</sup> and for large-scale distribution companies such as TNT Global Express and SDA Express Courier<sup>2</sup>. These struggles, taking place over the past few years, began simultaneously in the Po Valley that is an extraordinary hub for transport of goods by road. Between

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1 A big supermarket chain in Italy originally founded on cooperatives principles and now completely devoted to profit.

2 An international express and mail delivery services company and Italian-based international delivery service company, respectively.

2008 and 2010, strikes and blockades took place, first at Veneto and Lombardy, then at Emilia Romagna where the first one of the logistics workers' insurgencies took place in 2011.

Following five years of standoff between workers and companies, workers' struggles in retail logistics in Italy have achieved a minimum of dignity at work, previously erased by a long period of deregulation of employment in the cooperatives and laws affecting labour mobility (and control) on a European and national level. In the cooperatives working as subcontractors in warehouses of global firms, circa 98% of workers are migrants, meaning a system of blackmail and exploitation, allowing for long shifts and disturbed patterns of work, was more easily implemented.

In cognitive capitalism<sup>3</sup> and at the age of 'just in time', acceleration and linearity in circulation of goods, services, information and data flows are a privileged space for capitalist valorisation. Processes of racialization are also prominent grounds for the contemporary capitalist accumulation. In cooperatives that manage and organize the retail logistic warehouse workers in Italy, these two aspects are inextricably linked, generating a specific and explosive mixture, which produces an increase of speed in goods circulation, as well as brutal extraction of surplus value and workers exertion (Chignola, 2012). Therefore, in such a working environment, the weapons available to workers are attempts at breaking of the racial segmentation organising labour within warehouses and blockading the circulation flows necessary for the just-in-time capitalism. Using these, logistic warehouse workers have been able to produce effective material and damage the public image of big corporations in the industry.

A one-day blockade at the IKEA store in Piacenza 'means that goods are not loaded onto trucks. These do not arrive on time for the ships, producing a delay in deliveries at destinations in Eastern Europe, the Middle East and North Africa. A one-day blockade blows up the organization of the entire process, and in order to restart it companies must wait at least ten days, meaning a big economical damage, as well as an incalculable damage to their image', the national leader of the grassroots union SI Cobas that supports the struggle said. 'In a warehouse where fresh food is stored, a four-hour blockade means 2-300.000 Euros lost' he added. At any rate, to get an idea of the large damage caused by workers picket-lines and blockades we only need to look at the ritual brutal attacks by police against the workers in struggle.'

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3 Although usually based on hard physical work, we look at the logistic industry following the hypothesis of cognitive capitalism, since its main source of valorisation are based on acceleration and linearity of the processes of goods circulation that are strongly linked to knowledge production.

In short, as workers repeat, the strength of these struggles lies in having learned ‘who hurt bosses’, that means in having broken the symbolic level of the strike – such as to merely stay at the gates with some flags – making it a concrete weapons in the struggle – that is to say to add a commodities blockade to the job abstention. For warehouse workers, the strike did not simply mean a day off work and some flags hung on the gates to the warehouse. The strike is real, in the sense that it aims to (and) interrupt the entire process of production and distribution. In this regard, the knowledge workers acquired while working in the warehouse has been decisive. It is the basis for the construction of the struggle, - a chain dynamic of blockades that follows the traffic of goods by holding up the most significant hubs at various stages process.

### **Politics of Workers’ Inquiry**

This paper is the result of a process of political inquiry within the logistic workers struggle – a common process of knowledge production and organising between the UniNomade collective (supported by the use of a web radio called Radio UniNomade) at first and by the Commonware project later and workers involved in the struggles in the north of the Emilia-Romagna region (especially Piacenza and Bologna) during 2012 and 2013. Speaking schematically, we, as militant researchers, have knowledge related to analysis of capitalist transition and transformation of forms of production, such as the cognitive capitalism hypothesis (Vercellone, 2006, 2007) and use of race management in the capitalist mode of production (Du Bois, 1935; Roediger, 2008; Curcio and Mellino, 2010). Workers, however, hold the internal knowledge of the production process, as well as the various forms of exploitation. Thus, the process of militant or political inquiry included two different subjects, positioned at different points of the knowledge production process, practising together a common production of knowledge, based on its distribution and well beyond the distinction between the researchers and the workers, where the former are the subject and the latter the object of research. In the spirit of the Autonomous Marxist approach, we attempted to activate a process of con-research (Alquati, 1993; Roggero, 2011). While we helped in the inquiry and analysed the struggle, we actively contributed to the struggle itself.

No distinction has been made between moments of struggle and moments of investigation. We did not create elaborate questionnaires or interviews in order to collect information from workers. Rather, we actively participated in the construction of picket lines and blockades; we took part in assemblies and workers meetings, as well as produced, together with workers, moments of close examination for activist and mainstream media. In this sense, we used our

knowledge of value within the struggle; we measured and, where necessary, recalibrated our hypotheses as result of an open exchange of discourses, practices and imaginaries together with the workers. Every moment, every step in the construction of mobilization required cooperation between different knowledges, placed variously within the production-cycle. Both militant researchers and workers have gained from this exchange and cooperation. While we were investigating and organizing struggles we have seen, and probably contributed to, the formation of strong political subjectivities among workers, many of them for the first time involved in a struggle. At the same time, facing the materiality of the struggles, as militants we learned to put our certainties in question, testing the performative ability of our practices and discourses 'on the ground'. In this sense, we created a process of co-research that has been conducted in a collaborative and self-reflexive way.

Thus, our presence on the picket-lines in the Po Valley, close contacts with workers and the moments of more comprehensive discussion that we built together with them and the union delegates, functioned on two levels: the common production of knowledge about the industry and the social composition of the work force, and the construction of organizing processes from a common condition based on precariousness. In this sense, we could also see the participation of students and precarious workers on the picket lines not only as a simple act of solidarity, but as recognition that the struggle is for all and of all. However, this is not to say that students, warehouse workers and other precarious workers share identical forms of life and exploitation, but rather to stress a cross-social participation in a context in which – although segmented on the inside – potential for generalization and recomposition remains present.

Therefore, political inquiry is not militant crystallized knowledge or learning, but an open process situated within the struggle – and the logistical workers' struggles are still on-going. Thus, this paper can only address some of the theoretical and political approaches through which can get to the heart of the process. The aim is to draw lessons or more general details concerning the difficult terrain of workers struggle within contemporary capitalism. The specific context of production in retail logistic, labour composition, production of subjectivity and the relationship with the union are discussed in this paper.

### **Cooperatives in logistics industry at the age of just-in-time capitalism**

The logistics workers struggles of the past few years are located around Milan, Piacenza and Bologna, and Verona and Padua in the northeast of the country, in the heart of the Po Valley. These nodal points of the goods circulation are also

directly connected with the harbour of Genoa (in the west side of the country) and Venice (in the east one) that manage the whole movement of goods to and from the Middle East and the North Africa. Therefore, it is not by coincidence that a global distribution giant as IKEA located in Piacenza its largest department store in Europe, and the German group Hangartner recently purchased the logistic centre of Verona from which passes all the import / export of fruits and vegetables among Middle East, Spain, Latin America and North Europe.

Within this specific geographical location, both cooperatives in the logistic industry and global brands of the large-scale distribution have found a powerful dispositif of valorisation that is founded on acceleration and linearity of the processes of circulation of goods. Thanks to this, the industry has not been affected by the current economic crisis. Rather, intermodal transport connected to export largely helps to support the feeble Italian GDP in the time. But unlike other European countries where logistics operators invest in computer systems, warehouses machines and network, in Italy the large-scale retail chains prefer to use the cheaper migrant labour managed by a cooperative system that runs outside labour regulations. As research conducted by the Polytechnic of Milan and the University of Castellanza show, also companies that produce sophisticated warehouse management systems are cut off from the market by a system of organization of intermodal transport at the national level that 'prefers to have recourse to cooperatives that employed immigrants rather than to invest in technologies' (Bologna, 2013: 2). Thus in Italy the gains of the accumulated surplus largely depend on the exploitation of low-skilled (or paid as such) labour force, usually migrants, whose labour is managed in a deregulated, illegal system.

Looking at the banners workers bring to the picket lines, the cooperatives that employ them are shown as dispositif of slavery and as mafia system. At the IKEA in Piacenza a banner read: 'IKEA CGS + coop = MAFIA' (where 'CGS' is the acronym of the consortium of cooperatives that manages the warehouse labour in the Piacenza IKEA store: Consorzio Gestion Servizi – Consortium Services Management; 'coop' being abbreviation for cooperatives). In this sense, talking about mafia is not a metaphor; it reflects the real-life money laundering by the cooperatives and the ordinary use of violence, such as mafia gangs that target workers involved in the struggles. Another banner at the TNT warehouses read: 'Warehouse workers coop. = slavery'. As workers have explained, in the logistics warehouses the acceleration of the pace of work has been aided by close control and the person in charge shouting, 'do this, do that', perceived as the modern day equivalent of the whip in the plantation system (Arafat Interview by Curcio and Roggero, 2013).

At the TNT warehouses this acceleration of labour means 200 workers now do the job of 500, largely reducing the cost of labour. Under these conditions, in the past five years, TNT got the best result of productivity in Italy while workers endured faster pace of work, have been subjected to threats and intimidation, and felt increasing physical ailments: hernias, joint problems and postural disorders, often not recognized as work-related injuries. At the IKEA centre in Piacenza, in June of 2012, the 'rows' to unload were increased from 12/13 to 35. Also, the increase in productivity did not translate into any wage increase. When workers went on strike to protest against this, many saw their daily hours strongly reduced, with added days of enforced rest at home and a wage of only few hundreds Euros.

Usually, workers employed by cooperatives<sup>4</sup> are not subject to protection and labour laws since cooperatives have a non-mandatory application of the CCNL (the National Collective Labour Contract that, in the Italian Public Law manages the employer/employed relations in any sector and industries<sup>5</sup>). Within cooperatives, workers are employed as associate-worker. This means they are both workers and members of the cooperative. As members they have no labour rights since they take the full risk of the job upon themselves, however as workers they have no access to company's profit. Furthermore, as members of the cooperative they have also to pay up to five thousand Euros – in the form of deductions from payroll – as a percentage of the share capital of the cooperative. This means the workers are effectively paying for taking charge of their own exploitation. According to these features of the employment towards cooperatives system, companies could dramatically reduce the cost of labour and benefit by tax incentives related to social security, which concern the system itself. Furthermore, on the financial edge, cooperatives – and especially the great trusts of cooperatives that follows the capitalist requirement to concentrate the commanded labour – function according to the well-known model of the fly-by-night company. For tax purposes, they appear and disappear quickly (Bologna, 2013). As a worker explains: every two years these companies change name in order to do not pay social security and scrub workers, or they rely owners of 80 years that can not be prosecuted (Arafat Interview by Curcio and Roggero, 2013).

At the same time, the labour management within each warehouse is centred around a person in charge or 'corporal' who sets work-shifts on the basis of

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4 And it is worth noting that this affects workers across all sectors, not just the logistics industry.

5 The CCNL is a contract of employment stipulated at the national level jointly by trade unions and employers, predetermining the regulation of individual employment relationships and some aspects of their mutual relations.

precise hierarchies organized according to the criteria of docility and obedience. These are achieved through blackmail and the construction of fear – mainly the fear of losing the job and with it the resident permit since the large part of them are migrant workers – and by racially dividing workers and producing hierarchies and separation between ‘Italian’ and ‘foreign’ workers. However, these hierarchies are not fixed, but follow the labour composition and workers availability to meet (or not) the demands of corporals. Each week the corporals fix weekly hours for each worker determining in turn, their salary (within the cooperative system workers are paid by the hour). Often, as form of retaliation for their union activities, active workers (regardless of their nationality or colour of their skin) find themselves receiving significantly fewer hours of work, or temporarily suspended.

### **Labour, racialization and composition of struggles**

As already mentioned above, in Italy, logistics operators prefer to increase profit through exploitation of (proposed) unskilled labour rather than by innovation and automation of the industry. For this reason, over 98% of workers employed by cooperatives in retailing logistics industry are migrants. In Emilia Romagna, where the inquiry I am referring to was based, a large part of workers come from North Africa (Egyptians, Moroccans, Tunisians), with others from Eastern Europe, South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. A lot of them, especially among North Africans, were recruited in their home countries by work brokerage companies acting in a legislative vacuum guaranteeing a good income from their activities. These workers are mostly men but there are also some women; for the most part they are young, often graduates or enrolled at an Italian university, among them there are also some who were born or grew up in Italy, the so-called ‘second generation’ migrants.

In the retail logistics industry, labour composition, while coupled with the aforementioned blackmail, pertains as well to the particular system of control and management of migrant labour in Europe. In Italy, management and control of labour mobility has resulted in tying of the contract of employment and the residence permit together (established in 2002 by the Bossi-Fini law). This links the labour with the right to remain in the country, exposing migrant workers to many forms of possible exploitation. This measure is linked to a systematic process of racialization that points to the hierarchical construction of the labour market or, in the words of Frantz Fanon (1969), to the subordination of certain social groups by others. Nowadays in Italy, as well in Europe and more generally, of course, within capitalism, migrants, far from being excluded from the labour market, are fully included, however, in its lower rungs, where labour protection

and employment laws are scarce or not-existent, wages low and potential for blackmail high. This is the situation, in recent years, in the cooperatives serving as subcontractors in the retail logistics industry. Beginning in the 90s, in conjunction with migration becoming mass phenomenon in Italy<sup>6</sup>, workers' rights and labour protections, as well as the wages, have decreased in the industry as result of employment of migrant workers. As a retired Italian worker said:

During the 90s to work in the warehouses of the logistics of distribution meant a very well paid job. The high wage (around 3.5/4 million liras – around 2.000 Euros) was an incentive for an extremely tiring work that no one wanted to do. But nowadays, over twenty years later, as there was the option of hiring migrant workers that are forced to do any kind of job just to be able to stay in Italy, wages have dropped dramatically. Thus today an average salary is equal to approximately one third of the one of the 90s (around 7/800 Euros).

Inside the warehouses, racism and processes of racialization, function as an 'internal supplement' of labour organization. That is to say racism works to produce internal hierarchies and play workers against each other in order to stop forms of solidarity and processes of unification (Roediger, 1999). This is not, of course, a feature of the labour organization within the warehouses in the retailing logistic industry. Racism is – and has historically been, at all latitudes: in Italy, Europe, United States and wherever there is capitalism – a dispositif of labour organization. We can further say that racism and capitalism are historically and intrinsically linked to each other. Since the dawn of capitalism, they have supported each other, and the history of capitalism, together with the development of global commerce, slavery and colonialism, is marked by a 'racial division of labour' (Quijano, 2000). A precise functioning of race within capitalism that describes what Cedric Robinson (1993) defined 'racial capitalism'. From this perspective, race – which is a social construct that informs racism, and not, of course, a biological attribute – becomes a verb: to racialize (Curcio, 2010), functioning as dispositif for the organization and management of the labour market in its national or transnational scale. It is a dispositif able to follow the capitalist transition and to adapt itself to the different and successive phases of accumulation (cf David Roediger, 2008 on 'race management'). In this sense, as Critical Race Theory brilliantly shows, race and racism reveal strong ability to assume new and different forms over time, and so target new and different subject or social groups. However, they always maintain the function as dispositif

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6 The history of Italian migration is pretty different from other European country since it is not connected to decolonization processes started at the end of the War World Two but it follows the globalization process.

of hierarchization and segmentation of the labour force (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001).

Race and racism working as dispositif for the organization of the labour market, is exactly what happens in the logistic industry in Italy – and rest of the world – where race has now, in all respects, become synonymous with migration (Balibar, 1991). On the picket line at the IKEA store in Piacenza, one of the workers spoke explicitly of racism as a previously unknown ‘disease’ provoked by employers. He says: ‘In the warehouses, ‘corporals’ say to the Moroccans they are better than Tunisians, to Tunisians that they are better than Egyptians or Romanians. They aim to put Italians against foreigners, Egyptians against Moroccans, remarking: ‘if you’re good I’ll pay you more, do not meddle with the struggles, and so on’ (Radio UniNomade, 21 December 2012). In producing differences and separating workers from each other, the aim of warehouse’s management is to extract as much labour from the workers as possible, stressing their need of extra money and better condition of labour or the fear of being fired or having their working hours and wages reduced. In the meantime, in the warehouses strong lines of incommunicability or at all hostility are build up, putting workers against each other in order to put each worker at most concentrated on his work.

Thus, at the beginning of mobilization process, this labour force segmentation in the warehouses was the first issue to overcome. As a worker from Egypt explained:

We had meetings with the Indian and the Chinese, we felt the difference with the Arabs but I said to people convened at the meeting: ‘forget where we come from. Here we are, all workers and all of us are exploited. This is the only thing we have to think about. (Arafat Interview by Curcio and Roggero, 2013).

Following this approach, labour fractures built along the race line were overturned and largely destroyed within the struggles. What workers did was unification in place of capitalist attempts to fragment the labour force, showing how race difference could work toward the production of the common (Curcio, 2010). That is to say: they re-composed what capital has divided, they worked on the composition of the labour force taking power as workers. First of all they learned to look at each other not as enemy or adversary but as workers subjected to the same system of exploitation. And instead of fighting each other they started to solidarize driven by the belief that they have a common goal: to improve their working conditions. Then, when following meetings and common discussion they were able to trust each other, they were also able to put their fears aside and begin to fight. Where capital resorted to race and racialization, they

produced links and connections building a common ground of confidence, bravery and boldness that started to jam the capitalist valorisation of race differences up. In other words, the composition of the struggle beyond different national belongings has been possible focusing on the common condition of workers subjected to control and exploitation. And the commonality built during the struggles produced a strong and concrete alternative that changed everyone. To recall the words of a worker from Morocco employed at the TNT in Piacenza: 'I never thought that I would trust an Egyptian': a state that put on view the ability of this struggle to defeat racism as capitalist dispositive of labour force divide.

Thereby, one of the weapons in the hands of the workers was the ability to overthrow capitalist labour force hierarchization by race and bring to the fore the common state of labour and exploitation. 'We learned that if we are divided the master will control us. Now we were taught this lesson [...] if they touch one of us it will mean they touch all, and together we will stand' said a worker, echoing the 'An injury to one is an injury to all' slogan from the IWW: a sign of the subversive cooperation that allowed logistics workers to win the battles for the improvement of labour conditions.

Moreover, this subversive cooperation concretely deprived racialization dispositive of its meaning, interrupting one of the main grounds of capitalist valorisation in the logistics industry. According to this, to fight against racism could be possible only where struggle against labour exploitation and for a radical change take form - this is another important lesson from these struggles. Workers know that fighting the blackmail of a residence permit linked to the employment contract means at first to fight in the workplace against exploitation. Workers know that racism can only be destroyed through fighting exploitation. And it is on this ground that logistics workers struggles bet on generalization [of the struggle] that would involve others: young and precarious workers, as well as students, all fighting together against precarity. What is at stake in these struggles is the possibility to improve everybody's labour conditions despite the crisis. The organization and management of labour by the cooperatives system, together with its forms of exploitation and devaluation of labour, is in Italy a reality for many precarious workers and students. Thus, to challenge this system in the retail logistics industry also means to fight for better condition for precarious workers in general. Therefore, student and precarious workers stand on picket lines together with logistics workers not simply for solidarity, but also for themselves.

## The production of subjectivity

‘Our first problem was to unite all workers in the warehouse and defeat the fear to receive low wage or lose job,’ said a worker explaining how struggles began at the TNT warehouses in Piacenza. In the power to defeat fear, we can catch the struggles ability to transform workers subjected by capitalist command in autonomous and resistant subjectivity, capable to overthrow hierarchies and other capitalist dispositifs of control. We can take the capacity of struggles to become effective, producing material damage to companies and cooperatives. Workers know that to fight and block the goods circulation from warehouses gives them the strength to reach improvement in wage and labour condition, and this functioning as virtuous ground for the production of subjectivity.

One after another, in the warehouses where blockades start, workers have seen their claims recognized: possibility to unionize, application of the CCNL, and reinstatement of suspended or fired colleagues. But as they also remind, thanks to the struggles they ‘got dignity for the job, which is even more important than money’ (Arafat Interview by Curcio and Roggero, 2013).

Around the issue of dignity, it is worth highlighting the key roll Arab uprising have played in this struggles. Workers that experiences the radical change unleashed by the uprisings in their own or neighbouring country are today largely aware that if was possible to demand dignity, dethrone the dictators in Egypt or Tunisia and open up a process for change in the whole society, a radical change could also occur at the workplace. For this reason workers at TNT in Piacenza explicitly talked about the revolution:

after thirty years, in Egypt Mubarak was thrown out, it was something that anyone could imagine before. Similarly, anyone was expecting our struggle at TNT. For this reason we talk about revolution. For us this was like in Egypt: the revolution of TNT.

The production of subjectivity in the logistic workers struggles combined different experiences gained during the struggle. At first, workers that were tired of the false promises of the trade union confederation (Cgil, Cisl, Uil) and especially in relation to struggles, considered by workers too much symbolic (‘They give us the only chance to stay with some flags in front of the gates of the warehouses’), decided to bring a real damage for the companies. They identified the weak points at the cycle of production / distribution in the industry in the moment of circulation. They start ‘to hurt bosses’ (a claim continuously repeated by workers) by interrupting the circulation of goods. This was their main weapon. The form of struggle they chose was indeed appropriate since it caused great damage, in the economic sense, but also to the public image of the

companies, pushing them to meet workers' demands. They were able to identify the more effective form of struggle, since during working time they accumulated specific knowledge about the cycle of production and distribution, meaning it was possible to block the warehouses exactly when large amount of goods were being delivered. In this way, the mobility of labour and goods became mobility of conflicts, rooted in the interruptions to capitalist valorisation.

Furthermore, tired as they were with the less than useful relationship with trade unions, workers decided, while supported by a grassroots union, to be autonomous in their organizational practices. This meant a specific form of relationship between workers and grassroots union, where workers largely held the reins of the struggle. A last feature emerging from the production of subjectivity in the logistics workers struggles was their use of media and social media, especially since media mainstream did not report strikes and picket lines. The grassroots media production by was a chance to circulate information and analysis. Moreover, social media has been used as a tool for communication and circulation of information about workers' struggles across the national borders. For example, the news about strikes and blockades at the IKEA storage in Piacenza have travelled from Italy to Sweden and Turkey, until reaching North Africa, creating a stir in places where IKEA was planning to open new markets. This offered a possibility of reproduction of struggles and of a change of power balance in these areas to the workers advantage. Therefore, these struggles were of a transnational importance.

Finally, discussing the production of autonomous and resistant subjectivity within the logistics workers struggles it is important to mention how important was the workers' higher education, especially in relation to their 'bosses'. As one of the workers said:

Bosses usually try to make us uncomfortable by playing on their social position and their qualifications, but all of us are graduates. If I am the warehouse worker and he is director of company, this does not mean that he is better than me. This only means that unlike me he is related to a powerful social network that allowed him to reach this position. So, he does not intimidate me. This only increases my anger and hatred.

### **The workers' use of the union**

At the beginning of summer 2011, dispute began at TNT warehouses in Piacenza, when a small group of about twenty workers (despite there being in total 380 workers) started to mobilize demanding better working conditions. As they explained, the process starts as community organizing, going door-to-door,

explaining the issue. In a few weeks, an opportunity for a strike arose. And it became clear that self-organization of workers was not enough. Mohamed Arafat, one of the leading figures of the mobilization, explained that the workers quickly realized they needed union support in the bargaining process and started to look for a union. In July, Arafat explains:

We met SI Cobas. And at once we explained that within a week we'd arranged to stage a blockade. They were available. We started, and we won. (Arafat Interview by Curcio and Roggero, 2013)

What is particularly important in the relationship between retail logistics workers and the union is that since the beginning workers chose to be independent in terms of organizational practices. While migrant workers are sceptical regarding the ability and willingness of trade unions to support them (including leftist union Cgil), warehouse workers at TNT in Piacenza – and in other warehouses – chose to organize with a small grassroots union, one that could best meet their needs. Workers said:

A union available to support us in the struggle by strikes and picket lines. A union that could be able to support workers in really affecting the interests of the employer.

Amongst migrant workers, trade unions (and especially Cgil, Cisl and Uil) are perceived as little more than agencies for the renewal of residence permits, reuniting families, beaurocracy. They are not seen as organisations that would fight for workers' rights. Therefore, in order to fight in the retailing logistic warehouses workers started to look for, and finally found in the two grassroots unions supporting struggles: SI Cobas in Emilia Romagna e ADL Cobas in Veneto, a union ready to put its work at the service of workers - a flexible infrastructure enhancement of the autonomy of the workers.

After winning the fight against TNT, mobilizations supported by the grassroots union SI Cobas quickly moved to other warehouses managed by the consortium Gesco North: Gls, the Antonio Ferrari group, Bartolini. Then struggles spread in the rest of northern and south-central Italy (i.e. the SDA of Rome). Particularly significant, even outside Italy, was the mobilization launched in June 2012 at the IKEA warehouse in Piacenza, which supplies North Africa and the Middle East. As with the TNT warehouses, mobilisation started with a small group of workers. Then, when the first blockades started to bring visible improvement in labour conditions, the process extended to involve a large proportion of workers, employed by several cooperatives working as subcontractors for IKEA. This first struggle led to the signing of an agreement for the implementation of the CCNL,

respect for workers dignity and the union, and a reduction to the pace and the workload that increased exponentially in the crisis.

However, just a few months following the signing of the agreement, 'cooperatives tried to return to pre-strike situation: they decided to almost triple the hourly average of pallets [...] and then in October they suspended 90 workers that resisted the new pace of work' (Arafat Interview by Curcio and Roggero, 2013). The fight became radicalised. Arafat explains:

every day, from October to January, we blocked the warehouse demanding reinstatement of the suspended workers. On November 2nd, at gate 9, police intervened with extreme violence, leaving 20 wounded and 30 complaints.

The echo of this intervention spread struggle beyond Piacenza. On December 18th in Bologna, students, precarious workers, political collectives and social centres organized, alongside workers from Piacenza and Bologna and delegates from Si Cobras, a picket line at the IKEA shop just outside the city. Although the police attacked the demonstrators, many IKEA clients expressed solidarity with the workers, acknowledging a common condition of precarity (Radio UniNomade, 18 December 2012). Then, blockades and picket lines at the IKEA warehouse in Piacenza were repeated during Christmas and until early January, when IKEA accepted to reinstate suspended workers. Nevertheless, as a union delegate said:

[...] the game remains open. Every workers achievement is followed by the employers reaction that aim to recover what they had to concede to the struggles.

## **The political betting**

What we observed during these struggles was the space of political subjectification opening up among warehouse workers. It was expressed by their political voice and a growing organizational ability and power to manage political disputes. As already highlighted, what made struggles so incisive, was the knowledge of specific cycles of production and distribution. Strikes and picket-lines have taken place on such days, so as to maximise damage – [to...] ...really touch the interests of the owner, so that they cannot reverse the damage we do.' At the same time, the union structures that supported workers have enabled building contact among different warehouses located in different cities, coordinating among them in order to cover every possible weak point of the cycle of production and distribution. Thus, when unions called for a general strike for the renewal of the CCNL, this is method of coordination was already rehearsed. On March 22nd, during the first general strike in the industry and on May 15th,

during the second general strike, the movement of goods by road in north and central Italy was almost entirely brought to a standstill.

Another feature of these struggles is the possibility to be able to bet on a more complex plan of mobilization capable to go beyond the strictly trade union claims, opening up a more general political plans. This is not only because to fight for better working conditions in the warehouses means also to fight against both the legislation that regulates the mobility of labour and the rampant racism in the country. A larger space of political mobilization around the retail logistic workers struggles came also from the workers wide and active participation in numerous initiatives against fines and restrictive measures that judiciary gave to union leaders, as well as from their participation in the May 1st march outside the traditional trade unions demonstration, from the many assemblies at universities or social centres they participated and from the meeting and discussion with students and precarious workers they attended. Last but not least, these struggles have brought back on the political agenda a possibility for something that we long forgotten: the victory.

Does it mean the circuits of political recomposition are already deployed and running? Certainly not, but the powerful and concrete allusion at the problem of generalization of struggles coming from these victorious ones – the workers awareness that to stay in a single industry does not much in the long run, and the students, precarious workers and political activist who participates in the picket lines say ‘this fight as our’ – is the cornerstone to develop and advance in common.

Furthermore, within a period characterized by fragmentation of conflicts that exploded in the crisis, militant inquiry aims to identify trends and possibilities within the existing struggle. Taking these trends and possibilities as already realized is a shortcut, however not bothering to identify these means giving up the production of the common. Therefore, the tiring dispute between the pessimism of the intellect and the optimism of the will results in a unique effect: a blurring of the militant reason.

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