



The work-technology nexus and working-class environmentalism: Workerism versus capitalist noxiousness in Italy's Long 1968

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Abstract

This article traces the trajectory of theory and praxis around *nocività* or noxiousness – i.e., health damage and environmental degradation – drawn by the workerist group rooted in the petrochemical complex of Porto Marghera, Venice. While Porto Marghera was an important setting for the early activism of influential theorists such as the post-workerist Antonio Negri and the autonomist feminist Mariarosa Dalla Costa, the theories produced by the workers themselves have been largely forgotten. Yet, this experience was remarkable because it involved workers employed by polluting industries denouncing in words and actions the environmental degradation caused by their companies from as early as 1968, when the workerists had a determining influence in the local factories. The Porto Marghera struggles against noxiousness contradict the widespread belief that what is today known as working-class environmentalism did not have much significance in the labour unrest of Italy's Long 1968. The Porto Marghera group's original contribution was based on the thesis of the inherent noxiousness of capitalist work and an antagonistic-transformative approach to capitalist technology. This led to the proposal of a counterpower able to determine “what, how, and how much to produce” on the basis of common needs encompassing the environment, pointing to the utopian prospect of struggling for a different, anti-capitalist technology, compatible with the sustainable reproduction of life on the planet.

Keywords Future of work · Petrochemical industry · Technology · Toxicity · Workerism · Working-class environmentalism

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A group of workers march to Porto Marghera's Petrolchimico factory carrying a four-metre-high wooden cross. The time is 27 February 1973, the place Venice. Yet the setting for this story is not what people normally imagine when thinking of the "City of Water". There are no gondolas, ancient bridges or winged lions in sight, only the tangle of pipes and chimneys typical of so many petrochemical sites across the world. When they are almost at the factory gates, some lay the cross down and tie a mannequin to it, then they raise it and pitch it on the ground. This is however no Catholic ceremony. It is a protest against the health damage and environmental degradation caused by the industry. The puppet, in fact, wears a gas mask and is the symbol of what these workers refuse to become, a human sacrifice on the altar of "progress".

This article focuses on the trajectory of theory and praxis around *nocività* or noxiousness put forward by the Porto Marghera workerist group,¹ the workers' collective who organised the above-described action. The Italian word "*nocività*" refers to the property of causing harm. Through its use by the labour movement, it came to encompass damage against both human and non-human life, hence it can be translated neither as "(human) health damage" nor as "(non-human) environmental degradation". It is rendered here literally as "noxiousness". Workerism, or *operaismo*, is a New Left current, emphasising workers' autonomy *vis-à-vis* party and union structures, that emerged around the struggles of Italian factory workers in the 1960s, mainly through the reviews *Quaderni Rossi* and *Classe Operaia*.

The industrial area of Porto Marghera, in the mainland part of Venice, is one of the most significant manufacturing hubs in the history of Italy's post-WWII labour movement (see Chinello 1996; Zazzara 2009). The heart of "*laboratorio Veneto*" was also the practical incubator for the work of influential intellectuals such as the leading post-workerist Antonio Negri – who described his experience in Porto Marghera as "an extraordinary decade of apprenticeship in class struggle" (Negri 2009, 140) – or the autonomist feminist pioneer Mariarosa Dalla Costa, who "would go to leaflet in Porto Marghera, in a pale dawn full of mosquitoes, discovering what a factory is, its rhythms, its health hazards, and its history" (Dalla Costa 2018, 161).

However, the theories produced by Porto Marghera's workers themselves have been largely forgotten. The Porto Marghera group's original contribution was based on the thesis of the inherent noxiousness of capitalist work and an antagonistic-transformative approach to capitalist technology. They addressed such issues since the late 1960s – when the workerists had a determining influence in Porto Marghera's class struggles – due to the severe levels of toxicity and hazard they faced in the local factories, particularly Montedison's Petrolchimico, which would later become widely known for the trial over the death of many workers² exposed to carcinogenic vinyl chloride monomer (VCM) (Allen 2014). The Porto Marghera struggles against noxiousness are significant because they contradict the widespread belief that what is today known as working-class environmentalism did not have much significance in the labour unrest of Italy's "Long 1968", a cycle of struggles that – in all its contradictory organisational

¹ This group changed denomination many times, using simultaneously different names for different purposes (Potere Operaio, Comitato Operaio, Comitato Politico, Assemblea Autonoma di Porto Marghera, Lavoro Zero, Controlavoro, Collettivo di Lotta contro le Produzioni Nocive, etc.). Here, it is referred to simply as the "Porto Marghera workerist group", or the "Porto Marghera group" for the sake of brevity.

² The trial was over the death of 157 workers, but a later study updated the figure of verified deaths to at least 248 workers (Pirastu et al. 2003).

and political articulations – led to unprecedented improvements in wages, conditions, and welfare services and to an enduring transformation of Italian society.

In this paper we show how the Porto Marghera group’s environmental awareness led them, as expressed by the slogans they adopted, to complement a mere quantitative focus on “more money, less work” with a qualitative reflection on “what, how, and how much to produce”. While there exists one book on the Porto Marghera group’s history (Sacchetto and Sbrogiò 2009),³ there is no systematic account of their theorisation and activism regarding noxiousness specifically. We argue that this experience is of historical interest to inform current debates on the relations between the capitalist work-technology nexus and the ecological crisis, because it delivered an early attempt to overcome the productivist opposition between labour and the environment through a workplace- and community-rooted critique of capitalist work and technology.

The paper begins by recapitulating current debates on the relationship between the future of work (particularly the work-technology nexus) and the ecological crisis. The following two sections analyse the history of the theory and praxis around noxiousness by the Porto Marghera group. Such trajectory is divided in two periods: one centred on the struggle for workplace health (1967–1972) and another which saw an attempt to extend the opposition to industrial noxiousness to the surrounding territory (1972–1980). The conclusion explains how this experience ended and assesses its contemporary meaning.

This work is based on two main sets of sources. On the one hand, Lorenzo Feltrin carried out in-depth archival research, mostly in Marghera Municipal Library’s Augusto Finzi Workers’ Archive, on the journals *Lavoro Zero* (LZ) and *Controlavoro* (CL), political leaflets, and news articles. On the other hand, Devi Sacchetto conducted 24 life history video-interviews with members of the Porto Marghera group.

Between accelerationism and degrowth: The work-technology nexus and the ecological crisis

This section recapitulates recent debates over the relationship between the future of work – i.e., the long-term effects of the co-evolution of capitalist work and technology, which we call here “work-technology nexus” – and the ecological crisis. As shown in the following sections, the Porto Marghera group partially anticipated such discussions. Therefore, in this article, theory is not externally applied to the case of study, because the very workers and activists who are the “objects” of this research were also the “subjects” of theory making.

Critiques of capitalist technology were developed by a wide variety of theoretical traditions, such as the Frankfurt School (e.g., Adorno and Horkheimer 2016; Marcuse 2002), ecological thought (e.g., Bookchin 1962; Illich 1973), ecofeminism (e.g., Merchant 1980; Mies 1986), or labour process theory (Braverman 1974; Noble 1977). In particular, labour process theory stresses the role of technology in

³ The documentary *Porto Marghera: Gli ultimi fuochi* by Manuela Pellarin is available online with English subtitles, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TKf3YPYe9sc> (accessed 2 March 2020). The documentary *Gli anni sospesi*, also by Manuela Pellarin, was published together with Sacchetto and Sbrogiò’s book (Sacchetto and Sbrogiò 2009).

employment relations, in terms of deskilling, replacing, and controlling the workforce. As Paul Thompson highlights, technologies are not neutral but located “inside class relations and their antagonism” (Thompson 1989, 57). Labour process theory thus rejects technological determinism, considering labour-capital struggles as crucial in technological development.

For what concerns workerism, the pioneering text on the work-technology nexus is Raniero Panzieri’s “The Capitalist Use of Machinery”, which criticises “objectivist” understandings of technological progress seeing it as a neutral evolution of rationalisation rather than a conflictual process in which the intertwined transformations of technology and work are spurred by class struggle. Panzieri argued that capitalist machines are introduced in production to stave off workers’ offensives and thus “[t]he capitalist development of technology implies [...] a growing increase of capitalist control” (Panzieri 1961, 56). Therefore, technologies developed under capitalism must be radically transformed to serve the purposes of socialism: “The working-class overthrow of the system is a negation of the entire organisation in which capitalist development is expressed, first and foremost of technology insofar as it is linked to productivity” (Ibid., 65).

Since then, authors influenced by workerism (e.g., Caffentzis 2017; Dyer-Witherford 1999) tended to agree that technology developed under capitalism is not a neutral instrument, it is in fact *capitalist* technology bearing the marks of the conflictual power relations under which it is conceived. While ameliorations do occur as a result of struggles, capitalist technology remains structurally geared towards the exploitation of labour and the unsustainable appropriation of natural resources to fulfil the imperatives of profit-making. Yet, there is also a broad rejection of the position that capitalist technology is the only possible technology. This results in an antagonistic-transformative approach to technology, a variety of what Andrew Feenberg (2002) calls critical theory of technology: the latter must be subversively appropriated and transformed rather than shunned outright.

However, beyond the common rejection of both instrumentalist and technophobic views, there remains wide scope for disagreements, resulting in manifold degrees of optimism and pessimism regarding technology developed under capitalism. In such polarity, the line is usually drawn on the question of automation.

On the optimist side of the spectrum, Left accelerationism advocates a speeding up of automation (Bastani 2019; Mason 2015; Srnicek and Williams 2015). The latter, in fact, can be fruitfully deployed to reduce work to a peripheral part of human activity as a transitional step beyond capitalism: “[T]he tendencies towards automation and the replacement of human labour should be enthusiastically accelerated and targeted as a political project of the Left” (Srnicek and Williams 2015, 109).

In his critical account, Harry Pitts (2018) argues that the Left accelerationist perspective was influenced by Antonio Negri’s reading of the “Fragment on Machines” from Marx’s *Grundrisse* (Marx 1993, 704–706). Here Marx envisages a stage of capitalist development in which “the general state of science” and “the progress of technology” have advanced to such an extent that human labour time becomes peripheral to a production based on “social knowledge”. Socially necessary labour time ceases to be the measure of wealth and technology is ripe for an incipient new society. In Negri’s view, this hypothetical state of affairs became an accomplished reality during the crisis of the 1970s, with capitalism being kept alive as command over

labour only through “political” violence at the hands of the agents of repression. Negri first presented such theses at the 1971 *Potere Operaio* congress (Negri 1988) and reiterated them in many variations up to today (Hardt and Negri 2017). He largely endorsed Left accelerationism, although he cautioned that “there is too much determinism in this project, both political and technological” (Negri 2014).

Left accelerationism prompted a backlash from fellow radical theorists warning about the dangers of demanding “full automation”, sensibly citing the aggravation of the ecological crisis as a crucial problem (e.g., Dyer-Witherford et al. 2019; Federici 2018; Vansintjan 2016). As Federici maintains, Hardt and Negri’s thesis that “a society built on the principle of ‘the common’ is already evolving from the informatization and ‘cognitivation’ of production [...] ignores that this work produces commodities for the market, and it overlooks the fact that online communication and production depends on economic activities – mining and microchip and rare-earth production – that, as currently organized, are extremely destructive, socially and ecologically” (Federici 2018, 106–107).

One last strand of theory softened the above-described polarity by taking post-workerism towards an explicitly environmentalist direction through an exchange with degrowth (Leonardi and Pellizzoni 2019). Leonardi, for example, complements the quantitative demand for a reduction in worktime with a qualitative distinction between entropic work (i.e., unsustainable production that increases the metabolism of the planet) and negentropic activities (i.e., sustainable production decreasing such metabolism) (Leonardi 2017). Entropic work is based on the principle of capital accumulation and is thus indifferent to the needs of sustainable life reproduction, therefore it must be reduced. Negentropic activities, instead, produce use values based on the principle of the common, and should be expanded.

As mentioned in the introduction, this combination of quantitative demands for a decrease in worktime and qualitative assessments of what production to foster can also be found in the perspective developed by the Porto Marghera group. Here, the influence of workerism coupled with the very noxiousness of the labour process spurred these workers to address the relationship between the work-technology nexus and environmental degradation at an early stage. As shown below, their antagonistic-transformative approach to technology resulted in the proposal of a counterpower able to determine “what, how, and how much to produce” on the basis of common needs encompassing the environment.

Potere Operaio: The refusal of work against noxiousness (1967–1972)

Porto Marghera’s industrial complex was created in 1917 and significantly enlarged in the 1950s, when the company Edison established its petrochemical plants there (see Chinello 1975; Zazzara 2009). Edison merged with Montecatini in 1966 to become Montedison, the largest employer in the area with around 14,000 direct employees and 5000 outsourced workers in the early 1970s (Bortolozzo 1998, 61). The industrial complex also included metal factories, power plants, the industrial port, a shipyard, and a refinery. In the mid-1960s, it had reached its peak of employment, with about 40,000 workers (Zazzara 2017, 224), some of whom lived in the vicinities while many others commuted from several areas of Veneto. Meanwhile, the population of Marghera – the

residential area by the port – increased significantly to become a large working-class neighbourhood (Nappi 1994).

Under the supervision of former fascist officials, the “production inferno” of the post-WWII decades featured appalling toxicities and hazards, where exposure to heat, smokes, and powders and the lack of health and safety measures resulted in widespread accidents and occupational diseases such as cancers, silicosis, asbestosis, hepatic and dermatological pathologies, etc. (see Zazzara 2009). Montedison’s Petrolchimico began producing polyvinyl chloride (PVC) using Monsanto patents that involved high levels of toxicity. The Montedison worker and then environmental activist Gabriele Bortolozzo wrote: “The chloralkali units were sadly disastrous for the workers, due not only to chlorine but also to mercury vapour. [...] To calm things down, all the company did [...] was distributing abundant doses of cow milk”⁴ (Bortolozzo 1998, 33).

Up to the 1950s, Porto Marghera’s class composition was centred on the figure of the “peasant-factory worker”, employed in factories but living in the countryside and immersed in a rural lifestyle (Piva and Tattara 1983). Some of them, the so-called “*metalmazzadri*” (literally “metal-sharecroppers”) had access to small plots of land. Strong ties to the land would remain a characteristic of Veneto’s working-class culture even after their material severance. This was a time of labour weakness and relative social peace, as Veneto was a scarcely industrialised, conservative region, where the Left had limited influence. However, the situation began to change rapidly in the 1960s, when a new cohort of young workers showed their determination not to accept the hard fate endured by their parents, with the first major strike at Edison taking place in July 1963. Ties to the land proved not to necessarily be a factor of quiescence: “The Petrolchimico workers were peasants until the day before, and after taking off their blue overalls [some] went home to work their plot. [...] The strike days were very expensive for the urban workers, and less for the others”⁵.

The Porto Marghera group originated in the early 1960s through the encounter between intellectuals and students⁶ – mostly based in Padua and Venice – led by Antonio Negri and militant workers disaffected with the line of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and its associated union Italian General Confederation of Labour (CGIL) (Sacchetto and Sbrogiò 2009). By 1967, they had become an extra-parliamentary local organisation known as Potere Operaio, with an office in Marghera and a journal titled *Il potere operaio: Giornale politico degli operai di Porto Marghera*, leafletting regularly outside the factory gates.

Over the 1960s, the Porto Marghera group developed its own perspective centred on the mastering of the productive cycle and radically egalitarian demands as an instrument for class recomposition: equal wage increases (in absolute value) for everyone or inversely proportional wage hikes, a guaranteed minimum wage for all workers, the reduction of the working week, and an abolition of differences in statutory conditions (holidays, social contributions, etc.) among the different categories of employees. The guaranteed wage was rapidly expanded to become a “guaranteed income” as a demand

⁴ All sources in Italian were translated by the authors.

⁵ Interview with Roberto Sanguinetti by Devi Sacchetto, Marghera, 2006.

⁶ Including the would-be public intellectual and centre-Left Venice mayor Massimo Cacciari, who returned to activism in the PCI in 1968.

to unify all workers, waged and unwaged. This strategy built on immediate working-class needs to expand them quantitatively to the breaking point of incompatibility with capitalism. As the division of the working class through differential wages and conditions was a political instrument of class dominance, “egalitarianism was not merely making do in the warmth of equals”⁷ but a political platform to “make the wage an independent variable”, independent from productivity gains in line with Keynesian planning.

This platform proved to be largely successful when the discontent of Petrolchimico’s workers exploded in the summer of 1968 (see Bortolozzo 1998; Chinello 1996; Sacchetto and Sbrogiò 2009; Sbrogiò 2016; Trevisan 2017; Zazzara 2009). By then, Potere Operaio’s influence had reached five out of seven members of the CGIL workplace executive committee (*commissione interna*) at Petrolchimico. This mobilisation was thus characterised by a “dual leadership” in which Potere Operaio conducted a hard rank-and-file campaign of wildcat strikes, active pickets, mass marches, and roadblocks – culminating in the occupation of the Venice-Mestre train station on 1 August 1968 – while the unions were pressured to endorse the egalitarian demands of the base and negotiate for them at the institutional level.

Class conflict would remain extremely high throughout 1969, when it expanded countrywide with the “Hot Autumn” strike wave for the renewal of the national-sectorial collective agreements (see Wright 2002). In June 1969, however, CGIL expelled a number of prominent Potere Operaio shop stewards and activists. The already acrimonious relationship between Potere Operaio – which became a national organisation in that year⁸ – and the unions deteriorated further as the Porto Marghera group adopted a line of frontal opposition against the traditional labour movement. The unions, meanwhile, developed a more base-oriented approach that would allow them to recover much of the credibility lost in the first stages of the strike wave (Trevisan 2017), “riding the tiger” of workers’ spontaneity.

The Porto Marghera group’s theorising over noxiousness was spearheaded by the Petrolchimico technician Augusto Finzi, with the assistance of external intellectuals such as high school chemistry professor Lino Bassani, academic physicians Libero Battiston and Lorianò Bonora, University of Padua’s occupational health professor Bruno Saia, and Claudio Sossai, a mathematician for Italy’s National Research Council. Born in 1941 from a well-off Jewish family⁹ based in insular Venice, Finzi spent part of his early childhood in a refugee camp in Switzerland to escape the Shoah.¹⁰ In 1960, he received a high school diploma in chemistry from Mestre’s Istituto Pacinotti – “where the beginning and end of the classes were signalled by the sound of a [factory-like] siren”¹¹ – and immediately began working in a Petrolchimico VCM-PVC unit, where he joined the Porto Marghera workerist group around 1965–66.

⁷ Interview with Lino Bassani by Devi Sacchetto, Venice, 2007.

⁸ Noxiousness-related issues, however, were mentioned only in passing in the national version of the paper *Potere Operaio*, probably reflecting a lack of interest from the national leadership.

⁹ Augusto Finzi’s father was a manager for the flour mill Mulino Stucky but died in a boat accident when his son was six. Augusto’s mother was then hired by Mulino Stucky as a white-collar employee.

¹⁰ In 1974, *Lavoro Zero* (directed by Finzi) wrote: “We, the workers, don’t want to be destroyed – like maybe we have already partially been – inside some gas chambers!” (LZ, May 1974, 13). While this similitude is out of proportion, it is interesting in light of the German chemical industry’s key role in the extermination camps.

¹¹ Interview with Augusto Finzi by Manuela Pellarin, 2002.

In many ways, Finzi's "factory intellectual" profile was the counterpart to Italo Sbrogiò's practical and charismatic approach. The Porto Marghera group's most prominent leader, Italo Sbrogiò¹² was a Petrolchimico maintenance worker hailing from a poor and numerous rural family.¹³ Having started working before finishing elementary school, he reached Porto Marghera aged sixteen as a precarious construction labourer and joined Potere Operaio through, and in spite of, his activism in PCI and CGIL, from which he was expelled in 1969. He remembered his early factory years in these terms: "Chemical technology crashed on us like an avalanche, so much so that many labourers and technicians paid for this experience with their lives" (Sbrogiò 2016, 13–14).

Up to the 1960s, the routine policy regarding noxiousness was its "monetisation": unions and management would agree a compensation for the health damage and risks that workers suffered. The first notable struggle over noxiousness in which the Porto Marghera group was involved took place in 1967, precisely when Montedison decided to withdraw the noxiousness allowances from some factory units. In a way, this was merely a reactive struggle to restore what could be called the "moral economy of noxiousness" that had held sway up to that point. Yet, it marked the beginnings of the Porto Marghera group's reflections and actions around noxiousness (*Potere operaio*, 20 June 1967).

At that time, other Italian leftist organisations were beginning to analyse work-related noxiousness and the resulting damage to health and the environment (Barca 2012). For example, activists around professor of medicine Giulio Alfredo Maccacaro founded the association Medicina Democratica with strong ties to the labour movement, as shown in the *Sapere* review after Maccacaro became its director. Important figures in this milieu were Luigi Mara, a technician at Montedison's Castellanza (Varese) plant, and Ivar Oddone, a physician involved in struggles against noxiousness in FIAT's Turin factories and author of the influential 1969 union pamphlet "The Work Environment". In 1971, the PCI held a national conference titled "Man [sic], Nature, Society" to outline the party's perspective on the environmental question, followed by the 1972 trade union conference "Factory and Health".

The specificity of the Porto Marghera group's conception was its linkage to what Mario Tronti (2019) called the "strategy of refusal", the refusal of work. In this perspective, capitalist work is the production of capital and thus the reproduction of a society of exploitation. Therefore, the strategic aim of class struggle is not understood as an affirmation of work as a positive value, but as negation: "A working-class struggle against work, struggle of the worker against himself [sic] as worker, labour-power's refusal to become labour" (Tronti 2019, 273).¹⁴ As Finzi recalled: "The great, long-lasting, existential fracture with the union [CGIL] and the PCI was that they considered work as an instrument that shapes people, while the perspective of those who – like me – became workers at that time and faced the contradictions of the factory, was that the human being comes before, and it is the human being who must decide the conditions of acceptability and liveability of work".¹⁵

¹² Not to be confused with his younger brother Gianni Sbrogiò, an employee of the metal factory AMMI and also a prominent member of the Porto Marghera group.

¹³ Interview with Italo Sbrogiò by Devi Sacchetto, Marghera, 2007.

¹⁴ Translation edited by the authors.

¹⁵ Interview with Augusto Finzi by Manuela Pellarin, 2002.

The combination of the strategy of refusal with the dire health and safety conditions faced by workers at the time led the Porto Marghera group to the core idea of capitalist work as inherently noxious. The reduction of worktime was thus the commended tactic to transform the fight for survival in the factory in a struggle for human liberation from capitalist work. As a 1968 flyer stated: “As the whole Porto Marghera is noxious [...], we want the noxiousness allowance to be included in every payslip. General and common allowance for all Porto Marghera workers. Introduction in all factories of safety facilities that already exist and function in other countries. But we know, comrades, that the only real way to reduce noxiousness to a minimum is *spending less time in the factory*. We thus demand: more holidays, less worktime, more staff” (Potere Operaio, 21 September 1968).

The harmful impacts of capitalist productivism not just on workers’ health but also on the external environment had already been acknowledged then: “Every month, for every square kilometre of Mestre, 10,000 kilos of powder produced in the Porto Marghera plants fall down. Obviously, the powder comes with gases whose toxic effects are universally recognised. The rates of lung cancer in the population of Mestre and Venice are among the highest in Italy” (Potere Operaio, 28 November 1968).

A critique of capitalist technology was also already in the equation. Safer machinery was necessary, “but maybe a new race of engineers is required to build machines that would not destroy health and enormously increase profits” (Ibidem). The group, in fact, criticised the union line of demanding more growth – rather than shorter hours – to maintain employment levels, as such investments would result in automation and layoffs, and “[t]he bosses are still using automation in an anti-worker function. The introduction of new machines and computers does not lead to a decrease in working hours but to an increase in their profits” (Comitato Operaio, 6 February 1970). Under such conditions, therefore, automation should not be accelerated.

The group also intervened on the noxiousness faced by outsourced workers: “Here is the function of the subcontracted enterprises that often, to mask their beastly exploitation, are falsely called cooperatives. Through the subcontracted enterprises it is possible to impose on the workers an exploitation recalling that of the owners of black slaves.¹⁶ Outsourced workers are exposed more than others to accidents, often deadly, or to the nastiest diseases caused by gases, powders, mercury vapour, solvents, acid substances, etc. Comrades, it is true that all workers are exploited, but the outsourced workers are exploited twice [by the subcontracted enterprise and by the main company]” (Comitato Operaio, 3 July 1969). Such conditions were so unbearable that a three-month strike by the outsourced workers turned into a riot, from 2 to 5 August 1970, on the streets of Marghera – with the most violent episodes near the Church of Jesus the Worker, where the police shot on the demonstrators – before an ameliorative agreement was granted (Boato 2019).¹⁷

These reflections were systematised in two documents: “The Refusal of Work” manifesto (Comitato Operaio, 1970)¹⁸ and the paper “Against Noxiousness” (Comitato

¹⁶ While this was a metaphor (in a time when virtually all the workforce was “white”), outsourced labour for fictitious cooperatives has been actually racialised over the last decades in Porto Marghera and Italy more broadly, as it is mainly assigned to immigrants, mostly non-white.

¹⁷ In these events, the most relevant organised actor was the “rival” extra-parliamentary group Lotta Continua, which had also been active in struggles against noxiousness.

¹⁸ An English translation is available here: <https://libcom.org/library/refusal-work-workers-committee-porto-marghera-1970> (accessed 5 February 2020).

Politico, 28 February 1971). The manifesto restated the critique of capitalist technology that emerged from the combination of workplace struggles and workerist theory: “Technological progress is never a neutral and inevitable factor, as the bosses and the unions always say whenever they talk about redundancies due to the introduction of new machines. [...] [T]he workers have a different logic: they think that rather than working eight hours with a hundred workers, after the introduction of the above-mentioned machine, they can certainly work in two-hundred doing four hours each. This logic diminishes the burden of permanence in the factory and also resolves the problem of unemployment. The workers are not against machines, but against those who use machines to make them work” (Comitato Operaio, 1970, 28–29).

The paper “Against Noxiousness”¹⁹ opens with the statement that: “It is necessary to immediately distinguish between one form of noxiousness – i.e., that traditionally understood –, linked to the work environment (toxic substances, smokes, powders, noise, etc.), from the one linked more generally to the capitalist organisation of work. No doubt, ultimately, the second type of noxiousness has a deeper impact on the worker’s psycho-physic balance. It makes him [sic] an alienated entity, a piece of the productivist machine completely detached from the end of his work and subject to the continuous usury that brings upon him an inhuman use of his labour-power as it is the capitalist one, driven exclusively by the profits of the ruling class” (Comitato Politico, 28 February 1971, 1).

The document goes on to state that, while in former capitalist phases traditional noxiousness was necessary to keep costs at bay, in the advanced capitalism of the time a reduction of such noxiousness was compatible with the system. On the one hand, it provided a political justification for technological changes that downsized the workforce, on the other hand, it was inefficient to physically deplete too fast the educated workforce required to operate the machines. Parts of the text read eerily prescient: “In the new factory, coupled with a modest reduction in toxicities and thus in occupational diseases traditionally understood, there will be a strong increase in mental health disorders” (Ibidem). A struggle for health targeting traditional noxiousness only, like the one proposed by the unions through bipartite commissions tasked with reforming the work environment, was deemed insufficient because it would be harnessed towards the requirements of capitalist restructuring while leaving the crux of the matter – i.e., the priority of value production over life reproduction – untouched. On such bases, the group called for the constitution of factory unit committees against noxiousness. This analysis can be read as a radical critique of green capitalism *ante litteram*.

“Against Noxiousness” also identified working-class communities as sites of class struggle at the point of reproduction: “The working-class neighbourhood [...] is a big cage where the proletarians are locked up to squeeze a bit more out of them. [...] A blatant environmental noxiousness is to be found there as a result of smoke pollution from the factories” (Ibidem). This was in line with the autonomist feminist analyses emerging at the time around unwaged reproductive labour. Even if the factories were heavily masculinised settings,²⁰ feminist intellectuals like Mariarosa Dalla Costa and

¹⁹ This paper was presented on 28 February 1971 at the Convegno Operaio Veneto (Veneto Workers’ Congress) by the Comitato Politico di Porto Marghera, an alliance between the local branches of Potere Operaio and Il Manifesto (another extra-parliamentary group, which founded the homonymous newspaper).

²⁰ As an interviewee commented: “What you never saw there was women and plants” (interview by Lorenzo Feltrin, Mestre, 2019).

Alisa Del Re approached them in the context of Potere Operaio's leafletting drives and developed a critical perspective through their work with working-class housewives in the surrounding communities, which resulted in the founding of the organisation Lotta Femminista (which would join the International Wages for Housework Campaign) and of the reviews *Lotta femminista* and *Le operaie della casa*.

The Porto Marghera group's theory of noxiousness developed between 1967 and 1972 – chiefly by employees of polluting factories with no university education – was in many ways ahead of its time in placing health damage and environmental degradation as terrains of struggle intrinsically linked to capitalism. Yet, their strategic proposal to address noxiousness at that stage appears as somewhat blunt with the benefit of hindsight. The focus on “more money, less work” – and the list of quantitative demands resulting from it – did not directly tackle noxiousness itself (in principle, an industry can be toxic even if it employs zero workers) and seem to be rather based on the assumption that an imminent collapse of capitalism could be imposed through the factory-centred strategy of refusal. The group's subsequent reflections, however, led them to further extend their interventions in the communities and to elaborate a new type of qualitative demands.

The Autonomous Assembly and *Lavoro Zero*: What, how, and how much to produce (1972–1980)

Over the 1970s, there were two main changes in the Porto Marghera group's politics. The first was the extension of their activism from the factories to the communities. This was probably encouraged by a decline in workplace influence relative to 1968–69 and the discovery of effective forms of struggle in the neighbourhoods. The second change was a reflection on how the quantitative reduction in worktime had to be supplemented by a qualitative transformation of production to fully address noxiousness.

On 2 November 1972, after the campaign of articulated strikes for the new national-sectoral collective agreements, the Porto Marghera group launched the Autonomous Assembly of Porto Marghera (*Assemblea Autonoma*, November 1972), in an attempt to reach out to workers who did not identify with Potere Operaio. The latter had become increasingly riven by internecine struggles, which resulted in the decision of the group around Negri (who had moved his political activities to Milan) and of the Porto Marghera group to exit the organisation after the May–June 1973 congress. Potere Operaio would cease to exist by the end of the year. As the subsequent efforts to coordinate the different factory assemblies on a national or regional level failed and the Porto Marghera group did not join the then emerging autonomist *Collettivi Politici Veneti*, its activities remained focused on a mostly local level. This was signalled by the founding of the bulletin *Lavoro Zero: Bollettino della Assemblea Autonoma di Porto Marghera*, directed by Augusto Finzi and distributed locally, with the first issue released in October 1973.

The connection between factory and community struggles had been experimented with since at least 1970 but reached a high point in 1974. With the 1973 “oil crisis” – that inaugurated the slow decline of Porto Marghera's petrochemical complex – inflation was eroding in the sphere of circulation what workplace struggles had gained in the sphere of production. In response, the Autonomous Assembly – in coordination

with neighbourhood committees and feminist collectives – organised a campaign of price “self-reductions” for utility bills, transport fares and basic consumer goods, including pickets at supermarkets and house occupations. In December 1974, 13,000 electricity bills were self-reduced and an agreement between unions and government decreased utility prices (Sbrogiò 2009, 82).

Noxiousness came to the fore once again after the new Petrolchimico toluene diisocyanate (TDI) units were completed in 1971, and leaks of phosgene and other gases occurred repeatedly poisoning hundreds of workers (Bortolozzo 1998, 145–147).²¹ In January 1973, the Labour Inspection required all Porto Marghera employees to work with a gas mask within reach. The order caused widespread outrage not only because of its unworkability but also because it implied that severely unsafe working conditions need not be eliminated.

It was in this context that the Autonomous Assembly organised the performance symbolising the crucifixion of a worker wearing a gas mask.²² The action was publicised with a flyer restating the group’s positions on noxiousness, including the oft-quoted paragraph: “Workers do not enter factories to make inquiries, but because they are forced to do so. Work is not a lifestyle, it is the obligation to sell oneself to make a living. It is struggling against work, against the coerced sale of themselves, that workers clash against all norms of society. It is struggling to work less, not to die poisoned by work, that they also struggle against noxiousness. Because it is noxious to wake up every morning to go to work, it is noxious to accept productive paces and conditions, it is noxious to take the shift system, it is noxious to go home with a wage that forces you back into the factory the day after” (Assemblea Autonoma, 26 February 1973).

Noxiousness loomed large also in the VCM-PVC units. According to the investigations carried out by public prosecutor Felice Casson, VCM’s toxicity had been known by the global petrochemical industry since the 1960s (Casson 2007). Its carcinogenicity, however, was first communicated in 1970 by Pier Luigi Viola (a factory doctor in Solvay’s Rosignano-Livorno plant) and confirmed to Montedison by Prof Cesare Maltoni in 1972. Montedison, however, did not publicise the information due to a “secrecy agreement” on Maltoni’s research subscribed to by the largest multinationals of the industry (Markovitz and Rosner 2002). The information became public only in 1974, after the causal link between exposure to VCM and death by the rare angiosarcoma liver cancer was denounced in the case of Louisville’s BF Goodrich plants in Kentucky. Porto Marghera’s worker-poet Ferruccio Brugnaro²³ (see Mueller 2015) wrote: “Vinyl chloride/ spares no one/ death was/ never/ so present” (Brugnaro 2001, 11; see also Brugnaro 1998).

In 1974, the Autonomous Assembly published a pamphlet specifically dedicated to noxiousness, to inform the workers on the most dangerous substances used in the industrial complex (including VCM) with a detailed analysis of their presence in the

²¹ In addition, on 23 November 1973, an Italian military airplane crashed on Petrolchimico’s parking lot, not far from the phosgene tank. A catastrophe was averted by sheer luck.

²² The action is also recounted by the Autonomous Assembly militant Franco Bellotto in the documentary “Porto Marghera inganno letale” (2002), on the life of Gabriele Bortolozzo, by Paolo Bonaldi, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qM5Q8WhBzo&t=1s> (accessed 2 March 2020).

²³ Ironically, Ferruccio Brugnaro is the father of Venice’s incumbent conservative mayor Luigi Brugnaro, a businessman who rose to prominence thanks to his ownership of a temp-work agency.

labour process, denouncing the measures taken by management as insufficient. The group rejected the “jobs versus environment dilemma” claiming that the most noxious units had to be closed: “Just like the monetisation of health is a losing game, so is the defence of employment at any cost [...] which risks becoming a new form of monetisation, involving the negotiation of the number of workers to be hit by cancer every year” (Assemblea Autonoma, 1974, 17).

In its interventions in struggles against noxiousness, the Autonomous Assembly encouraged the tactic “Stop-Renovate-Restart” with the guarantee of the wage, i.e., the refusal to work in dangerous units until they were made safe. During the renovation period, the workers had to be paid even if they could not work (Potere Operaio, 6 March 1972). As *Lavoro Zero* explained: “The workers’ practice ‘Stop-Renovate-Restart’ must become the norm. Yet we should not wait for the explosion of a valve, a gas leak, or the discovery that we are becoming deaf [...]. A unit becomes dangerous also when it is understaffed, the work pace is too intense, the supervisors become the executors of the bosses’ repressiveness...” (LZ, May 1974, 11). It was in this period that the Environmental Commission of the newly created workers’ representative institution Factory Council – led by the unions and in combination with grassroots mobilisations against noxiousness in many units – won important health and safety improvements through modifications of the productive cycle.

Lavoro Zero deepened the group’s critique of solutions that remained within the parameters of capitalist development. In their analyses, noxiousness was now being used as a political excuse to introduce new machinery aimed at containing workers’ struggles with “three objectives in one move: a reduction of the workforce, a more rigid command on the labour process, and significant productivity gains. [...] Polluting is a new way of making money! The gas leaks are being used to foster restructuring...” (LZ, November 1973, 5–17). Even if such new machinery purportedly lowered the risk of accidents, it worsened other aspects of noxiousness by intensifying the work pace and requiring more shift work and night shifts (LZ, February 1974, 22–24). The group also denounced the delocalisation of noxiousness to places where struggles for health had not been as powerful: “The bosses are telling us with an absolute shamelessness [...] that regarding the environment we can rest assured, because they have already found those who will suffer noxiousness in our place in [the Sicilian petrochemical complex of] Gela” (LZ, May 1974, 9–10).

The Autonomous Assembly’s last publication was a pamphlet titled *Absenteeism: A Terrain of Workers’ Struggle*. The essay recognised that the health care reform of the time was a concession to workers’ struggles against noxiousness but charged that such struggles were being harnessed to meet capitalist requirements for an educated and durable workforce: “The protection of health is the planned wearing down of the workforce [...]. From the planned obsolescence of the means of production and of commodities, we arrived at the planning [of the obsolescence] of the capacity to work” (Autonomous Assembly, January 1975, 5–6). According to the group, such rationalisation would bring the unions to co-manage the repression of large-scale absenteeism, “one of the forms in which the workers’ foreignness to the mode of production is expressed” (Ibid., 8). The pamphlet rejected triumphalist interpretations of mass absenteeism, acknowledging its individualism and poor amenability to collective organisation, but provocatively argued that it was a legitimate form of struggle among others.

In early 1975, the Autonomous Assembly dissolved because of internal divisions and the failure of its objective to become an organisational alternative to the unions. The remaining members of the Porto Marghera group thus decided to transform *Lavoro Zero* from a mimeographed factory bulletin into a printed magazine directed by Augusto Finzi, titled *Lavoro Zero: Giornale comunista dal Veneto*, professionally designed and accompanied with countercultural graphics. Since 1977, *Lavoro Zero* – whose frequency was quite irregular – was supplemented by the weekly paper *Controlavoro*.²⁴ Between 1975 and 1980, the Porto Marghera group remained politically active in the factories and communities, but its reach declined as – in the context of economic restructuring – the epicentre of radical mobilisations moved from the large factories to the universities and young precarious workers (see Wright 2002).

In 1977, the group adhered to the campaign for worktime reduction as an answer to rising unemployment alternative to the union demand for more growth: “[T]he system imposes on the workers the following blackmail: either you work under the conditions that we (bosses of all kinds) want, or you are out and wage-less. [...] This way leads to the acceptance of things like the new thermal power plant or an increase in PVC production with extreme consequences on the health of the workers and of the populations of Mestre, Marghera and Venice. [...] The other way is that of rejecting the bosses’ blackmail and shifting the terrain of struggle from the demand for investments to worktime reduction, the closure of noxious productions, and the full guaranty of a wage at the expense of the bosses”²⁵ (CL, 16 May 1977, 3).

In this period, Augusto Finzi, Gianni Sbrogiò and others launched the *Collettivo di Lotta contro le Produzioni Nocive* (CLPN, Collective of Struggle against Noxious Productions). This was a rather extraordinary experience as it inverted the typical (although by no means universal) scenario of workers employed in polluting industries defending them against infuriated fenceline communities. Here, the very factory workers published data on industrial emissions and waste disposal, conducted participative inquiries on noxiousness not only in the factories but also in the communities, and organised public meetings and displays to sensitise the local population about the health and environmental dangers caused by their own employing companies. For example, a CLPN statement directed to the fenceline communities read: “Every year, 1,200 VCM tonnes are emitted by Montedison’s chimneys. [...] We are all Montedison employees. The struggle against noxiousness is a common struggle, the protection of health does not concern those who work inside the factories only [...]. We are organising an inquiry to verify the health damage caused by VCM on the population of Marghera and Mestre’s communities” (CL, 30 May 1977, 4).

²⁴ All *Lavoro Zero* and *Controlavoro* articles were unsigned, which makes it impossible to establish their authorship. The journals also contained materials on a variety of topics that cannot be addressed here (the refusal of work as a factor of capitalist crisis, the transformation of the Veneto class composition linked to the rise of the new industrial districts, the global relationships between secure and precarious workers and the political attempts to recompose their struggles, the debate on organisational forms and the critique of the “Leninist bureaucratic machine”, etc.).

²⁵ The guaranteed income as an instrument of general political recomposition was not conceived merely in monetary terms, it was also thought to include “forms of income not directly controlled by the capitalists and shielded from the attacks of inflation [...]. An example of such kind of income in Veneto is that stemming – for many working-class families – from the cultivation of small plots of land and from home ownership” (LZ, July 1975, 16). Moreover: “It is necessary to bring outside of the market a series of essential services [...], housing, transport, and food in the first place” (CL, 14 November 1977, 3).

While the CLPN's campaign did not reach mass proportions in the communities, the above-mentioned inquiries are an interesting inversion of the workerist co-research method. In the 1960s, workerist intellectuals external to the factories encouraged workers to research their abode of production to co-produce knowledge aimed at political action. With the CLPN, it was factory workers who encouraged external subjects – mainly women and youth – to research their abode of reproduction: “It is necessary that the women in the neighbourhoods manage directly this initiative, assessing it and implementing it if they think it is useful” (CL, 30 June 1977, 3).

The influence of the autonomist feminist theorisation of the point of reproduction as a site of struggle is likely. In fact, while the Porto Marghera group's make-up mostly reflected the male composition of the area's industrial workforce, *Lavoro Zero* hosted contributions by the feminist collectives active in the nearby communities. For example, in 1975, an article linked to the Wages for Housework campaign highlighted the importance of community-based struggles, indicating the need “to break to our advantage the ghettos (family, neighbourhood, parish, village) through which capital has historically ruled society. [...] We can interpret along these lines the occupations of luxury houses, the demand for schools at the service of the communities, the demand for control on environment and health [against] noxiousness, and the demand for wages for housework” (LZ, December 1975, 28).

Controlavoro also deepened the group's reflection on industrial hazards. Under the imperatives of profit-making, accidents are a “calculated risk” deemed to be acceptable: “Safety remains within the parameters of a productivist conception admitting the ‘danger of death’ and the factory as a space of ‘calculated death’” (CL, 19 December 1977, 4). To back this analysis, the paper republished from *Lotta Continua* a leaked Montedison internal document: “The primary and constant aim of the whole plant is competitiveness [...]. All maintenance work must be carried out only in case of a demonstrated necessity. In other cases, it is necessary to run reasonable risks [...]. The goal is not to maintain or, if it is impossible to avoid it, to maintain as rarely as possible” (Ibidem). This quote circulated widely when, on 22 March 1979, three technicians were killed by the explosion of a hydrofluoric acid cylinder while ten more workers received severe burns.

The group concluded that it was necessary to also demand deep qualitative transformations of production: “Today we need to challenge the organisation of work, but not just its levels and parameters, but also the fundamental choices that make us produce commodities and not wealth, useless things made only to generate profits. [...] *What, how, and how much to produce* must be our parameters of struggle” (CL, 19 March 1979, 1). For example, as a detailed information sheet on VCM-PVC noxiousness stated: “Workers and proletarians need to decide on productive choices based on our real collective needs. [...] As PVC is not biodegradable, the result is an enormous mass of waste that cannot be eliminated but with out-and-out recycling factories. [...] [W]e have good reasons to believe that an increase in PVC production is not consistent at all with our needs” (CL, 13 June 1977, 2–3).

This qualitative discussion was linked to the concept of “proletarian self-valorisation”, i.e., working-class empowerment through the production, re-appropriation and sharing of use values for the satisfaction of collective needs as opposed to capitalist work for the production of exchange values: “It is a struggle [...] between use values invented through creativity and the scrap, the so-called

commodities, produced by coerced labour” (LZ, December 1977, 4). The group connected self-valorisation to the struggle against noxiousness, proposing: “A struggle for the self-management of health and the full democratisation and socialisation of instruments and services, demanding social and health measures for the improvement of the work environment as well as the environment of collective life” (LZ, May 1979, 15).

Demands for a qualitative transformation of production went hand in hand with a redoubled critique of the neutrality of technological progress, extended to science as inserted in the valorisation of capital and thus immersed in conflictual power relations.²⁶ *Lavoro Zero* did not contest the reality of scientific discoveries, but noted how scientific expertise was subordinated to the imperatives of capitalist accumulation: “The new particles are good for advertising, but the real motive [of research] lies in what most scientists – in their ideological perversion – see as by-products or as unworthy of consideration: high-speed electronics, systems of complex data elaboration, superconductors, interpretative models, materials technology, the organisation of work, the possibility of making arms...” (LZ, May 1979, 33). Technology developed under capitalism is not a set of tools that can be unproblematically repurposed to further workers’ autonomy, for example: “[T]he proletariat cannot compete with capital on the level of weaponry, nor wishes to do so because such weapons bear in their DNA the conditions to create monopolies of violence” (Ibidem, 39). This resulted in an antagonistic-transformative approach to capitalist technology, eschewing both an instrumentalist view, according to which capitalist machines are neutral means, and the wholesale rejection of technology as such, pointing to the utopian prospect of struggling for a different, anti-capitalist technology, compatible with the sustainable reproduction of life on the planet.

While critiques of capitalist technology already existed (e.g., Bookchin 1962; Marcuse 2002; Panzieri 1961), the Porto Marghera group grounded them in their lived experience of the labour process. As *Controlavoro* sarcastically noted: “The bosses are sending spaceships that weigh tens of tonnes to Mars and the moon, using our labour. Yet they force us to take night shifts, saying it is impossible to create plants that can be switched off in the evening and turned on in the morning. But then what is all this research in schools and factories researching?” (CL, 23 May 1977, 4). In this respect, militant and *Petrochimico* worker Armando Penzo recalled: “You have to force research to be developed in certain directions that will allow you to modify the productive cycle and thus the relationship between you [as a worker] and production. This is really a formidable mechanism”.²⁷

An interesting aspect of the continuous flow process of petrochemical production is that machines could not be switched off quickly and safely in emergencies and strikes. During the latter, the strikers negotiated with management the number of “indispensable” workers that would be allowed to cross the picket lines to guarantee safety. The technical number of indispensable workers became the subject of hot disputes since 1968, when the workers’ practice of safely switching off the plants without managerial authorisation was first implemented. In November 1975, as Montedison refused to

²⁶ The *Lavoro Zero* issue dedicated to science (May 1979) appears to echo Augusto Finzi’s reflexivity on his role as a factory technician, a frontline expert (Interview with Augusto Finzi by Manuela Pellarin, 2002).

²⁷ Interview with Armando Penzo by Devi Sacchetto, Marghera, 2007.

switch some units back on after a strike, the workers – with the Factory Council’s backing – responded by taking the further step of reinitiating them autonomously (LZ, February 1976, 9–14). *Lavoro Zero* interpreted the action as an indication not of workers’ appetite for self-management but of their capacity to challenge the command embodied in capitalist technology (Ibidem).

This antagonistic-transformative approach to technology and related demands for deep qualitative changes in production were deployed in various noxiousness-related debates, such as food, medicine, and energy. Regarding the latter, *Lavoro Zero* criticised nuclear energy as a further step in the centralisation, verticalisation and militarisation of energy production, allowing capital to tighten its “energy blackmail” on the working class. The austerity and restructuring drive brought about by the “oil crisis” in the 1970s was the most obvious example of such “energy blackmail”, for the working class in general and even more so for petrochemical workers. In opposition to that, the review proposed: “The political decentralisation of energy production as a means to broaden the circulation of struggles and organisation around the energy question” (LZ, December 1976, 7). Solar energy was thus seen as a possible way forward not only for its lower environmental impact but also for its amenability to political decentralisation: “We are not prefiguring a society fragmented into isolated producers or a return to craftsmanship [...]. The object of decentralisation is not the proletariat but the current capitalist configuration; we are pointing to the possibilities of intervening against the process of rationalisation of corporate command” (Ibidem, 14).²⁸

Over the 1970s, the quantitative demand for “more money, less work” proposed by early workerism in its strategy of refusal appeared as insufficient, because worktime reductions might spare workers from workplace-based noxiousness but would not necessarily halt environmental degradation. This problem called for a qualitative struggle over “what, how, and how much to produce” to impose a transition to a system based on collective needs, understood as involving a sustainable relationship between humanity and the environment. In other words, it was deemed “more valid to change the content of production rather than taking over the productive apparatus” (CL, January 1980, 1). Such shift was reflected upon in *Controlavoro*’s second to last issue in the following terms: “The contradiction existing within every one of us between a ‘desire to produce’ and the ‘refusal of work’ pushed us to attempt ‘productive’ experiments that were qualitatively and quantitatively different from the production we endured every day” (CL, 15 July 1980, 1).

Conclusion

The Porto Marghera workerist group self-consciously reflected in many ways Veneto’s regional specificities. Yet, its trajectory was inextricably linked to that of Italy’s Long 1968 and, like the latter, it moved from the enthusiastic discovery of workers’ autonomy in the late 1960s to a dark ending ten years later. On 21 December 1979, Finzi – who had quit his Montedison job the previous year to pursue other projects around alternative medicine and communication – was arrested along with others as part of the

²⁸ Today’s Rivolta Social Centre – an ex-factory in Porto Marghera self-managed by a post-autonomist collective – installed solar panels on its roof to power the social centre and the surrounding households.

“7 April 1979” prosecution against autonomist intellectuals and organisers. More were arrested on 24 January 1980, including Gianni Sbrogiò. While most would soon be released, Finzi spent two years and ten months in prison and Gianni Sbrogiò served for four years. The *Lavoro Zero* issue published in April 1980 was thus the last of fifteen. It was almost entirely dedicated to the Minamata disease, discovered as a result of mercury contamination caused by a Japanese chloralkali plant. The experience of the group closed with the warning that the struggle against noxiousness could not be postponed to “after the revolution” as traditional Marxism was deemed to believe (LZ, April 1980, 3–4). This was not, however, the only subject of the issue.

On 29 January 1980, Sergio Gori – Petrolchimico’s deputy director – was assassinated by the Red Brigades. This attack was followed, on 12 May 1980, by the murder of Mestre’s police officer Alfredo Albanese. Finally, in 1981, the Red Brigades kidnapped and killed Giuseppe Taliercio, the Petrolchimico director. The Porto Marghera group condemned the Red Brigades’ actions: “The terrorists can attack today, in a context [Veneto] where they had never had political space, because the powers that be clear the way for them, liquidating forms of organisation and struggle that move in a totally different direction. [...] For what concerns, for example, the dreadful price that Marghera’s industrial plants impose on the workers and the population in terms of noxiousness and quality of life, our research was always based on the attempt to indicate mass alternatives on how, how much, and what to produce” (LZ, April 1980, 2). However, the Red Brigades’ senseless assassinations effectively annihilated the group’s activism in Porto Marghera’s factories, as they provided a justification for heavy state repression and delegitimated the Porto Marghera group engendering a climate of suspicion and the charges that their inflammatory rhetoric had contributed to the killings.

In 1981, Montedison announced the layoff of 8000 workers, 616 of whom in Porto Marghera. The mobilisations to defend the jobs were to no avail. Like the 1980 defeat of the FIAT autoworkers in Turin, this blow marked the breakdown of workers’ rigidity towards restructuring, ushering the neoliberal phase in Italy. Meanwhile, a new form of noxiousness, heroin addiction, invested working-class neighbourhoods taking a high toll in Marghera too.

After his prison time, Finzi founded an environmentalist association but abandoned political militancy. In 2002, he commented: “My removal [as a reprisal for the 1968 strikes] from the infamous CV6 unit maybe ended up saving my life, because almost all those who worked there are dead by now. I was effectively put in an ‘exile unit’, in the nursery [...]. Here, I discovered a new figure that I had never considered before, that of the sick person. One thing is seeing the worker as a subject of antagonism, the moment of struggle, of rage... Another thing is seeing him [sic] as a person who suffers [...]. Health seen as a tension lived inside, not just damage caused by production”.²⁹ He died by a brain cancer in 2004, aged 63.

As environmental degradation evolved to become today’s fully-fledged ecological crisis, concerns about pollution amongst the public increased significantly relative to the 1970s. This partially explains the high media profile that the trials over the deaths caused by VCM and asbestos in Porto Marghera would have in the 1990s and 2000s. In 2002, a major explosion in the TDI units – then owned by Dow Chemical – eventually engendered the mass mobilisation against industrial noxiousness that had been less successfully promoted by the Porto Marghera group thirty years earlier. By that time,

²⁹ Interview with Augusto Finzi by Manuela Pellarin, 2002.

however, workplace-based and community-based movements had parted ways, resulting in a clash between the unions and the environmentalist groups along the typical lines of the jobs versus environment dilemma, despite attempts to demand a just transition. The TDI units closed in 2006, to be soon followed by the last VCM-PVC units – then owned by Ineos – in 2008–09. No alternative source of income was provided to many laid-off Ineos workers and the remediation works on the severely contaminated soils and waters have not been concluded until now.

Yet, the Porto Marghera group's experience, despite the limitations and mistakes that can be attributed to it, represents an early, inventive, workplace- and community-rooted case of working-class environmentalism that contributed to the winning of substantial concessions. The understanding of systematic environmental degradation as connected to capitalist production has been since then theorised widely, as well as the connection between workplace and community struggles. The refusal of capitalist work as inherently noxious to health and the environment resonates with the widespread demand for worktime reductions. The antagonistic-transformative approach to capitalist technology is now shared by many social movements and theoretical strands. The combined demands for quantitative worktime reductions and qualitative changes in production could still inspire anti-capitalist environmentalist strategies in our pandemic and warming times, in which the impacts of capitalist noxiousness on life are starkly manifest.

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Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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