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# The last firebrands - workers' autonomy in the Veneto: screening & discussion

ByWildcat / Manuela Pellarin

Porto Marghera – the last firebrands

Screening and presentation/discussion

Friday, 9th of November, 7.30pm, Pullens Estate community centre [see end of page for details]

A film about petrochemical workers who took matters into their own hands in the giant industrial zone engulfing Venice. The mass refusal of literally toxic work forced hours on the job down at the same time as driving wages up. The labour hierarchy that sets white collar against blue, permanent against casual, was attacked by workers insisting on the maximum for everyone. The battle in the factory was linked to working-class life outside through direct appropriation of basic social needs (electricity, housing, food).

More clearly than any before them, the Porto Marghera workers identified the factory as the trigger of fatal diseases and destroyer of life. They remained on the offensive against the concerted hostility of unions, multinational employers and state from the late 1960s until well into the '70s. As part of an international wave of struggle, their actions contributed to a global accumulation crisis, provoking the capitalist counter-attack which has never ceased since then.

Unlike most more or less academic accounts of Italian Operaismo, which tend to focus on high-profile groups and individual leaders, Porto Marghera – gli ultimi fuochi (Manuela Pellarin, Italy, 2004) documents autonomous worker organization from the point of view of the worker-activists themselves, who talk about their experiences in the film. Many aspects and problems of this phase of class struggle are of immediate relevance today. For example:

- The Porto Marghera workers fought for better conditions within their work and at the same time against the damaging impact of the chemical industry and of work itself. They defended their health-damaging jobs, yet did so from a deeply critical perspective, at a time when a middle-class moralizing green movement did not exist.
- They developed independent organizational forms within the existing struggles of the time. This meant reassessing the relationships between:
  - the workers' mobilizations and their own role as active workers
  - the factory and the wider social terrain
  - workers' struggles, new forms of union representation and 'professional' political groups like Potere Operaio
- mass movement, armed insurrectionist groups and state repression.

The film, which includes archive footage and interviews with known troublemakers, was first distributed on DVD with the winter 2006/2007 issue of Wildcat (Germany)[[www.wildcat-www.de](http://www.wildcat-www.de)]. It will be presented at the screening by members of the Wildcat group. The DVD is also now available with English and other subtitles, together with the same director's short film Portrait of Augusto Finzi and a profusely detailed 70-page English-language booklet containing analysis and more interviews. To obtain copies of the film plus booklet (1 DVD=€6, 10 DVDs €30, exclusive of postage+paypal fees) contact [redaktion@wildcat-www.de](mailto:redaktion@wildcat-www.de)

The introduction to the booklet is reproduced below.

Porto Marghera - the last firebrands. The title of the documentary has various meanings: the Italian word 'fuoco' means 'fire', and also a 'shoot-out'. In this case, the word also means the flames of the petrochemical works that make the industrial zone visible from miles around. Its future is uncertain. The environmental damage that it has caused cannot be overlooked. The hundreds of deaths from cancer can never be made good. The most polluting parts of the industry have since been outsourced east, but Italy is still among the largest PVC producers.

The fire in the industrial wasteland, where the illegal immigrants warm themselves, is a symbol in the film for the new class composition, making an immigration country out of an emigration one.

But the phrase 'the last firebrands' also refers to the heat waves of class struggle that swept across this industrial zone in the 1950s, 60s and 70s; struggles that characterised the area and left a lasting impact upon it. Sometimes history takes a violent leap: in 1968 inexperienced peasants from the countryside were catapulted into the centre of the worldwide revolution. No working class had previously identified the factory as a trigger of fatal diseases and as a destroyer of life as clearly as they did in this struggle. The union shut out the organisers of the struggles. Those shut out found their own organisational forms. The autonomous assemblies in Porto Marghera in the early 1970s not only co-ordinated the struggles in the factories of the industrial zone, but also squatted houses, formed neighbourhood committees, organised price reductions in the supermarkets and together with thousands of workers burned their electricity bills. The unions and the government could only look on.

Pullens Centre, Pullens Estate, 184 Crampton st. London SE17 (Building may be disguised by scaffolding. Buses 35, 45, 40, 68, 468, 171, 176, 12, 343 etc; Elephant & Castle tube/train.

<http://www.streetmap.co.uk/newmap.srf?x=532015&y=178543&z=1&sv=Crampton+street&st=1&tl=Crampton+Street,+SE17&searchp=newsearch.srf&mapp=newmap.srf>