



Uniti Possiamo Tutti

self-organisation and social struggles in Milan

HAMBURG IN SPRING 1923
FROM JAN VALTIN, »OUT OF THE NIGHT«

**»Refuse to
pay rent to the
landlords!«**

As it grew lighter I came to a house where a town official argued heatedly with a housewife. The housewife looked unhappy. She had her arm tightly around the shoulder of a boy about ten. At the curb stood a truck. Two sinewy truck-men were waiting. I stopped and listened to the argument.

The woman could not pay her rent. The official showed her a warrant of eviction. Every day there were mass evictions. To attract the least attention, they were carried through in the early morning hours.

»We shall transport your belongings to the city storage«, the official said. He pushed the woman aside and entered the house, and the two truck-men followed him.

A minute later they began loading the furniture into the truck. A passing man who carried a big bundle of newspapers under his arm halted and asked the woman: »An eviction?«

The woman nodded. »I don't know where we shall go now«, she said dejectedly.

»I'll call up the Red Self-Help«, the man said. He placed his newspapers on the sidewalk and ran to the nearest store. Then he sauntered back and told the truck-men: »You can't drive away with this woman's furniture«.

The woman waited nervously. In less than ten minutes the truck was loaded and the truck-men were tightening the ropes around their load. At this moment a column of roughly-clad men swept around the corner on bicycles. All of them had the red five-pointed star on blue caps. The truck-men, seeing the raiders approach,

stood aside. The official came running out of the house. The man with the newspapers pounced on the official and started beating him. The others leaped from their bicycles, cut the ropes on the truck. Each of them seized a piece of furniture and carried it back into the house. Two minutes later the truck drove away, empty, and the official had fled. People gathered. The men of the Red Self-Help formed a picket line in front of the house. Others marched along the street, shouting in chorus:

»Refuse to pay rent to the landlords!«

»Form Red Self-Help squads in every block!«

»Only Communism gives you freedom and bread!«

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Ciao ragazzi!

Having made social movements in Greece and Spain the topic of our work in the past two years¹, we chose the political sphere in Milan as the topic for our third brochure. In terms of content, we will link up with our last projects, by focusing on the very topic of self-organised neighbourhood work. However, the reason that brought us to Milan, which has been in the limelight of impressive social struggles over the last century, in the first place was neither accidental nor intentionally planned.

When in Milan in May 2015 more than 30000 people decided to take their protest against the world exhibition Expo, an incredibly costly and superfluous event, to the streets, the repressive authorities were in no need of a second invitation. Among others, some of our friends were arrested even prior to the beginning of the actual protests. Knowing that solidarity is one of our most effective weapons, we saw the upcoming trial as an opportunity to pay the city several visits in the following months.

In the course of the trial, we met our soon to be friends of the *Comitato Abitanti Giambellino-Lorenteggio*. Teaming up with those who seem to have been driven out of the modern city, they have been squatting apartments in Milan's popular neighbourhoods. Together they aim at collectively organising their everyday life – based on solidarity and focusing on specific needs of the people. Furthermore, large parts of the group are organised in other radical left projects, work in nationwide *no-border networks* as well as within the *reclaim your city movement*.

Similar to our previous brochures, this one consists mainly of interviews. Our interview partners are all members of the *Comitato Abitanti Giambellino-Lorenteggio* and the *Comitato Autonomo Abitanti Barona*. They report on the creation of the two Milan neighbourhood committees, the daily issues the inhabitants of popular neighbourhoods have to face, how solidarity is put into practice as well as their political work. Those members of the committees, who have spent a considerable amount of their time with political work, grant a first-hand insight in the on-going transformation process of

their current political practice: relinquishing politics traditionally rooted within the subcultural scene in favour of open self-organisation within specific neighbourhoods.

We begin with contextualising the specific political and social place in which the interviews have been recorded. The brochure's middle section focuses on the history of the Italian *Autonomia*-movement, which serves as a point of reference for our friends' theoretical and practical political work. Here and there you will find quotations taken from a writing our comrades have composed at the beginning of their work and which can be seen as they theoretical base (If you are one of the lucky ones being able to be fluent in Italian, you can read the whole text on our blog).

As coincidental as our first encounter with our friends from Milan might have been – we have a wholehearted, personal interest in our friends' political work. The brochure at hand represents a reflexion of the discussions that we have been having with each other as well as with people from Frankfurt and many other cities, who share our passion for a social and political change. The shared feeling of a certain lack of focus and strategy within the radical left in Germany serves as our common starting point. The radical left might succeed in mobilising thousands of people to protest against international summits and to other demonstrations. Nevertheless, according to our point of view, the left does so, mostly without outlining a clear perspective in the long run, without

striving for more than a shift in the public discourse. Therefore, becoming familiar with our friends' ideas has been tremendously inspiring, as we have come to see their work as the specific realisation of ideas that we have been discussing only on a hypothetical level so far: the implementation of self-organised struggles on a local level as the fundamental point of reference for revolutionary politics.

Without anticipating the content of the following pages too much at this early stage, we would like to state four decisive principles which are, in our opinion, characteristic for this form of political practice and which partly stand in stark contrary to the previous praxis of our different political collectives:

- **concrete problems** are the starting point of political work instead of criticising abstract social structures and mechanisms – as a lot of people cannot relate to them only on a theoretical level. Denouncing the lack of park areas, high rents, poor health service, unavailable residence authorisations, offensive behaviour in bars, pending wages and exam stress addresses people more directly than the more abstract and theoretical definition of the aforementioned symptoms: racism, sexism and capitalist exploitation logic.
- **create trust and a specific form of collectivity** that can actually be experienced rather than addressing an anonymous media publicity with glossy campaigns. As criticism is only effective if it is actually noticed, mutual trust, based on shared experiences within territorially restricted local frameworks – such as neighbourhoods, residential blocks, factories, universities -, is to be defined as an essential precondition.
- **find self-organised, specific solutions and succeed concretely** instead of postponing social change to an abstract never-to-come revolution. Trust in solidarity and self-organisation can only be won if both concepts actually work. Creating a sense of achievement by solving actual problems are crucial to ensure that people's efforts are reinforced and that they might eventually become potential advocates of this idea.

■ **trust in the principle of learning by doing** instead of solely relying on theoretical education. In many cases, being taken seriously with one's personal daily problems, meeting people whose prime motivation is solidarity rather than instrumentalisation and egotism, and – in a best-case scenario – overcoming existing grievances adds significantly more to people's politicisation than books, lectures or movies.

If there is one lesson that we have learned through our numerous interviews over the past few years, it is to get serious with the search and need to find new forms of revolutionary politics. The experiences of self-organised politics that we encountered over the last few years have confronted us with concrete challenges. Challenges we have to face, that consists of taking the experiences from our past and the critique on those old forms of politics and link upcoming ideas productively to each other. In order to do so we need to constantly question those ideas and adjust them to the changing circumstances. Therefore we need a serious willingness to learn.

We need the courage to try new things, to meet new people, to scrap old stuff and to be able to make mistakes. We need an honest and self-critical attitude. If we want to develop new subjectivities, then this not only includes us, but – even more – the whole process can only begin with us changing ourselves.

One last thing: we thank everyone that helped us meeting wonderful people, asking good questions and writing

down even better answers. Everyone that helped translating and kept going until we were finally finished.

Enough of words! We hope that you can take something out of the experiences of our friends for your own political work and wish you all much fun reading.

yours

malaboca kollektiv

PS: fortunately, our accused friends were acquitted due to lack of evidence.

¹ *What's next? Social movements in Greece after the change of government* (2015), *Preguntando cambiamos. Strategies of social movements in Barcelona and Madrid* (2016)

Milano's Wild West

The Peruvian drinking game *la ronda* is simple. A single beer glass passes quickly through each hand of the round – as soon as it is empty, it is refilled. If someone is too slow, that person will be made to hurry, reminding him or her that the contents are not soup. Because there are so many people you might assume that the effect could take a good while but this is proven a false prediction quite quickly. The atmosphere in the courtyard of the social center *Burrida* is good. From here you have a view from the roof on almost all of Genoa. Latin American pop music gets the crowd moving and if you didn't know any better you could assume this is just an ordinary garden party. Except that almost everyone here actually lives in Milan, a two hour drive away. And most of the people came from Peru or Ecuador to the north Italian metropolis a few years ago searching for work. Some of them are so poor that these last two days on the Ligurian coast have been the first vacation in their lives.

Everyone celebrating tonight is staying in the *Quateri popolari*, as the quarters of the workers are called in Italian, and of which there are many in Milan. In the beginning of the 50s, the first migration movements from the south of Italy to the industrial centres of the north began. Later the *Quateri popolari* became a destination for global migration movements. Common to all these quarters is a lack of connection to public transportation, many small shops, and that they are big apartment buildings, most of which were built in the time of Italian fascism and have never been, or only externally, renovated. Rental prices here are climbing faster than you can spell the word gentrification. The average cost for a one-room apartment in Milan's center is currently above 1000 euros a month. In the peripheral area it is still 700 euros, but climbing. The average wage in the city is about 1500 euros. Though not determined separately for the *Quateri popolari*, the average wage here is even lower so housing is not affordable for most of the people.

In the 70s, public housing construction was booming. More than 75000 social flats still exist in the city. The public housing association *ALER*, short for *Azienda Lombarda Edilizia Residenziale Milano*, manages them. In 2013, the news broke that some of the employees of *ALER* misappropriated money on a large scale and had faked financial statements – some of the responsible persons had to go to jail and the scandal left a financial gap of over a billion euros. With this, *ALER* was practically bankrupt and for many politicians this was the perfect opportunity to insist on the complete privatisation of social housing construction. Since then *ALER* has not taken care of any repairs or renovation work on the existing housing, referring to missing financial resources, and it is using the poor condition of the apartments to not re-rent them when the prior tenants move out. Pepe, an activist in housing struggles in Milan, shakes his head: »Through these developments a ridiculous picture of the housing market in Milan is being painted: more than 20000 people are on a waiting list for social housing – some of them for more than ten years, while around 8000 apartments are empty. This can't go well for long«.

Because this neo-liberal mismanagement produces an existential threat, many families are occupying social housing apartments. Around 4000 of these squats currently exist. In the public discourse by the municipal leaders, this housing crisis is referred to as the »occupation crisis« which makes those who are actually suffering in this crisis responsible, and is an invitation to populist adventures. One of them started in November 2014 as Mayor Giuliano Pisapia loudly announced with maximum media orchestration to take care of the »occupation problem« and to evict 200 occupied apartments within a few weeks. One of the first apartments that were supposed to be cleared was in *Giambellino*, one of the *Quateri Popolari* in the southwest of the city.

In retrospect, the members of the neighbourhood committee of *Giambellino* call it the best present the city could have given them. When talking about those days they all start with a similar description, giving the scene the necessary dramatic aura: »It was gray and it was drizzling rain, no one was on the streets and as we arrived at the apartment the police were already in the building«. Then everything turned out differently. In just a few minutes, hundreds of neighbours were on the streets and marching angrily to the apartment and as soon as bottles and stones were thrown at the municipal police, they fled without achieving anything. The next day the regional newspaper headlined a picture of fighting residents as »Milano's Wild West«.

The same scenes, with often even greater confrontations took place at almost every eviction that was attempted by *ALER* over the next two weeks. To illustrate how heated the situation was during this time, the story of the anarchist center *SAO Rosa Nera* in the neighbourhood *Corvetto* is often told: The squatted center was traditionally subculturally isolated. Neither the local residents nor the squatters had any interest in any kind of neighbourhood relationship that would go beyond the daily visit to the neighbourhood kiosk. But as the municipal police joined by the *Carabinieri* moved in on 17th November 2014 to evict the building, this caused a riot lasting several hours with the participation of the whole neighbourhood. Not because the neighbours had spontaneously changed their minds about Rosa Nera but because they assumed the police had come to evict one of the occupied social apartments.

At first, the surprise of the rising rage and the growing willingness to fight was great. Soon those involved recognised the enhancing effect that this dynamic had on existing political experiments of neighbourhood organisation which had been living a rather sad existence. In *Giambellino*, the organisation had started a year earlier with the occupation of the first *Base*: a building in the residential area in which a hand full of squatters from the neighbouring quarter met in a futile attempt to get in contact with the local population. »As we arrived in

Living and fighting **in a territory means that** **you are already living** **in a new world.**

**»TERRITORIES TO INHABIT,
WORLDS TO CREATE«**

Giambellino to talk to the people of the neighbourhood we seemed like aliens to them. We arrived and started to talk about revolution and communism – even though these things have no meaning to the local people», Joanna remembers. After a few months when the police had cleared the building, the interest in the project was as large as before: Zero. After that a second building was occupied – this time opposite the local weekly market and a lot more visible and with that a part of public life. A few neighbours started to come but the really big breakthrough was in November 2014.

The second *Base* was also evicted by the police in advance of the planned 1st May 2015 protest against the world exhibition Expo which was taking place in Milan. This time though, resistance was stirring up in the people who meanwhile had a connection to the place and the former occupants. Even though the reactions were drowned in the media, due to the battle sound of the 1st May, it did not take long until the members of the newly established neighbourhood committee *Giambellino* occupied a third *Base* that is being used to this day. Currently there are more than 60 families living in occupied apartments and who are organised in the committee – at first due to the fear of eviction but with time passing more as an emergency structure against *ALER* and police. The *Base* is an important place of social life, a space for collective self-organisation

in *Giambellino*. Every week there are medical consultation hours, homework support, soccer training for the community team *Ardita Giambellino*, a joint meal and of course the weekly assembly of the committee. The way that solutions are being found here together to meet the miseries of daily life have a great impact on the political socialisation of those who participate. The process of learning is by no means limited to the »nonpolitical« residents – quite the converse: »I think in the first place we ourselves have changed. Because when we arrived in *Giambellino*, there were already other ways of collective life existing; we only had to become familiar with them«, Marco explains.

Help with childcare, support fighting against landlords and police, or free health checks are very specific benefits that membership in the committee means and for many is essential for living. Through the political discourse that was brought by the initiators and what has since become a collectively developed project, a great potential of resistance has developed. Its core message is: the state and capital have no interest in satisfying our needs – so we do it on our own! Marco describes the process this way: »The people recognise little by little what's going on. In the beginning they may get active because they have a personal issue, for example to have an apartment, but our work does not stop there – otherwise we would be on the same level as the charity work that churches and other organisation do. But this would be barely just enough to clean your conscience«. It becomes clear that the committee is a lot more than a provider of self-organised social benefits with a touch of revolution. It is not about the satisfaction of basic economic needs. It is about cultivating a different way of living together that is not only about easing the material damage done by capitalist exploitation, but also counteracting its social implications.

Here in the garden in Genoa exactly this experience can be had, something that was much more abstract earlier. A weekend like this has no direct political effect nor does it represent an oppositional gesture of protest. It is the practical conquest of loneliness for many here that are pressed into isolation by the modern metropolis. Here, a collective body is being formed where people share, know and trust each other. Suddenly three young refugees from Senegal appear that were sent here from another squat in town. After a few shy minutes they are holding a dish in their hands and after not more than half an hour they are part of *la ronda* and at the end of the evening everyone is joyfully dancing to salsa and reggeaton.

Meanwhile Kristina who has been a member of the committee from the first day is sitting by the side and is looking thoughtfully at the dancing people. We ask what is on her mind while observing the evening. She remains silent. We think perhaps she did not hear our question. She finally answers with satisfaction, »We are living a kind of everyday communism while trying to build upon it – because it can't work any other way other than to learn through practicing it in daily life«.

»The women develop a new self-confidence«

It might be useful if you start explaining to us how your political work looked before you started to work in Giambellino

Giulia: Things were quite different before we started our work in *Giambellino*. We used to live in many different squats, together with rather young comrades. It was usually after about four months that the police evicted us, and then we moved to another squat. We did not have much responsibility, so we did whatever we wanted. Usually we spent a lot of time around the university, and most of our comrades were students. We were mainly involved in the university movement and the *No TAV-movement*¹. We would spend the whole summer in the *No TAV-Camp* in *Val di Susa*.

Due to the unsafe squatting situation, some of us started to squat houses in the quarter of *Ticinese*, which has been a left-wing neighbourhood since the 1980s. In this neighbourhood the police were more reluctant to evict squatted houses. But the situation in *Ticinese* is a little bit – you know...

Arianna: ... Stagnant.

Giulia: Yes indeed, stagnant. This is mostly due to the fact that in *Ticinese* around three whole streets are occupied and the houses are fully inhabited, this took most of the dynamic out of the neighbourhood. The kind of standstill was one of the reasons why we started to look for an area that was politically more interesting and challenging. At the same time, there was this squat called »Pizzeria«, which was located close to *Giambellino* – a neighbourhood where traditionally many migrants and workers live. At the beginning some people from *Giambellino* came to »Pizzeria« out of curiosity and to look around, through this the first contacts were made and we started to get to know each other step by step.

Arianna: Some comrades started to go to *Giambellino* and after some time we occupied some houses, empty houses for ourselves – just in order to try to get access to the neighbourhood. We started to live there. At the beginning, we had only one house for half a year. After some time we had, I think, three or four

houses. We realised that it was really interesting because a lot of flats were occupied and a lot of people were migrants. There are many Romani, many people from Egypt, Morocco, and South America. We started to notice that this neighbourhood offers many interesting topics for us.

Giulia: The focal point at this time was probably in November 2014, when the police announced that they would evict all occupied houses in *Milan*. This announcement led many people to the streets to protest against it, even people who were not in contact with the affected comrades. Every day when the police was trying to evict a house the whole neighbourhood was on the streets and said: »No! We will not leave«.

Arianna: During this time, we were surrounded by all the residents of the neighbourhood fighting against the evictions, not only in *Giambellino*, also in *Corvetto* and all the working-class neighbourhoods. And for several months, our comrades created a group on *Whatsapp* where all the news about evictions was spread.

Giulia: The participants of this group were spread over the whole city of *Milan*. There were many funny posts as people were never in this kind of situation before, so they wrote things like »I see a police car in the street« – really far away – »everybody should come here!«.

Ticinese was one of the neighbourhoods where no evictions took place at this time because of the political circumstance. The police were quite careful and reluctant because they knew if they touched *Ticinese* it would have consequences.

At the same time, many times as I went home I saw people on the streets building some barricades because someone texted in the group that the police were coming, but nothing happened. The situation had a crazy dynamic.

But also in the places where no comrades were involved, people started to organise. All the residents stayed on the street at night in order to see if the police were coming. The next morning other residents replaced them. This situation lasted for about a month. That was when we met many different people on the street.

Arianna: Every day news about the police or evictions were sent in the group, such as »The police are here«, »here they're trying to evict my house«. People from every neighbourhood moved to these places that were

named in the group. The comrades, of course, but also people from the neighbourhood went to the streets and tried to defend the houses. The comrades were there, but all these things developed somehow organically or naturally, because people were afraid of losing their houses.

For us, the project of living and organising politically in *Giambellino* goes back to these days, since we talked with all the people who were on the streets because of the emergency. That was the time when we – all together with the people – decided to found a committee. I remember that we made a big assembly, including families, old people, and young people. At the beginning, we mainly did this for the purpose of defending the houses.

This sounds like an eventful month. How has the committee developed since, and what were your most important starting points in this genesis?

Arianna: After the decision to set up a committee we organised some stuff and we squatted a new place for building a kind of social centre – *La Base*, which was at a spot where a lot of people were passing by during the day because the market and the park are right across the street. There we were visible and present.

Giulia: We had an assembly once a week because the people wanted to continue to meet and to speak about what to do in case the police came and so on. So the people wanted to continue to organise together. Later on, we decided together to set up an after-school programme for kids, the *free food programme*, and things like that.

Arianna: We started to organise open lunches and dinners with the people. The important point was that we started to address the whole life of people in the neighbourhood. We did not only address the immediate threats of evictions and the general problem of housing, but life as a whole. It is important to understand that the people in *Giambellino* always came last in society, in every respect. This means that we started to deal with real problems, with existential problems and we asked ourselves, together with the people, how a new collective and autonomous life could be organised. Even without the financial means, we can create a good life together.

Giulia: That's how we found the slogan for our committee: »Together we will live well!«²

Thank you for your review of your history and basic ideas. We would now be interested in your thoughts on feminist perspectives: Does this process have any specific effects on the women living in the area? Do women's roles change due to this collective effort?

Giulia: Yes. We talked about this many times because in our committee where many women are involved. Especially in the month of the evictions, the women were those standing fearless in the first row. They were not scared.



Arianna: Even the newspaper reported about this.

Giulia: Yeah. The headline was »women were the first row«. It was something new because, you know, the house is regarded as the women's natural area of competence. In some families it is natural that the man says »I go to work. And you go to the committee. Our housing situation is part of your job«. But when we started to establish the committee it was great because they ...

Arianna: ... they developed a new kind of self-confidence. They started, little by little, to talk at our public meetings, which increased their self-confidence. This new confidence also had an impact on our whole struggle.

Giulia: But it is not that easy.

Why is it not easy?

Arianna: There are many families, especially from Latin America, but also other countries, where patriarchal structures and *machismo* are very common phenomena. The conviction that women have a different position in our society than men is also very common. And we have a number of cases of domestic violence. We often wonder

how to deal with the problem: What can we do? How can we do it? Shall we intervene pro-actively? It's difficult. An aggressive approach, which simply says that this kind of behaviour is bad and that it has to stop, will not work. Rather, we have to discuss it together and try to find a solution.

What solutions have you tried already?

Giulia: We have tried to form a women's assembly. We wrote an invitation saying »Let's meet, have tea or coffee and speak«. But nobody came.

Some women called us and said »I'm sorry but my son is feeling bad. So I have to stay at home«. Another said »I have to work«. So we decided to start with something more practical. One idea we had was to offer a self-defence course for women in our squatted gym »La Palestra« that we had at that time. Another idea was to offer a consultation session only for women – primarily for medical questions.

Our idea was that if they do the self-defence training for women maybe they'll also start to talk to each other. Because they are not used to being together in an exclusively female group, speaking about their problems. They talk about their problems only face to face. Another problem is that women really do a lot of things in the committee. But problems have not been discussed collectively as there is no real basis for trust. Partially there are internal disputes that for us as comrades seem not comprehensible since we have other life realities.

Perhaps the women's assembly did not work – as important as it is – because of the various living con-

One of the greatest mistakes we can make today is to not be organised. Often we adapt a minimalistic perspective on things, as if everything revolves only around us and our four friends.

»TERRITORIES TO INHABIT, WORLDS TO CREATE«

ditions. There is already the assembly of the committee, and maybe a lot of women can't do another assembly during the week because they go to work, they have to care for their children and so on. It's difficult to deal with real life, full of real problems.

Can you tell us more about the relations in your life amongst yourselves – as comrades – and to other women from the committee?

Arianna: Yes. We're all young people and some of us go to university, some of us work. But we're young people with a lot of freedom. That means: free time, for political work, because we chose this for our life. Many women in the committee have children, husbands, go to work or are without an occupation. They have to do grocery shopping without having the financial means to provide for their families. They have to deal with all kind of problems, which leaves them without time. Seriously. They do not have time because their lives are crazy.

Giulia: The women of the committee are aware – maybe because of our way of talking – that the gender relations among the comrades are different. They know that we claim and demand absolute equality between the genders.

For example, I have a boyfriend from South America. This is why I have a special relationship of trust with other women in the committee. We share experiences, different relationship models and problems, and learn from each other. This can be a good starting point for discussions about equality.

What you describe are long-term processes in which you have to question yourself and find new forms of organisation. So we have two last questions. First, the process is still on-going as you said, but what have you learned from all this until now?

Giulia: One important point is that you are constantly confronted with new situations that raise questions about yourself. Questions you have not asked before. You see these situations and ask yourself: »Is it really like this for us? Are women really like men for comrades?« So we start talking about it. Dealing with new impressions and lived experience raises very fundamental questions about who you really are and what you actually do.

Arianna: And I think we have begun to understand that there is a world out there that needs to be organised – of course, organised differently than it is nowadays. If you really want to create an independent society, you also have to ask yourself how you want to organise the things of everyday life that are now structured by existing institutions. For example, think of justice – the question of punishment or not. How can we punish someone? We don't want to punish people. But how can we decide if we have to punish someone? For example cases of domestic violence or drunken brawls – we have many situations where the police are usually called. And there are many who have learned all their lives that when a person steals something you have to call the police. So now we try to manage this together, without calling the police. The challenge is that we need a new form of justice. Sometimes the people think the committee is like a trial, like »Ok. I have a problem with you, I go to the committee and the committee must decide what happens«. This is linked to the problem that some people in the committee see us as leaders of the movement. We speak a lot about this because it's a small community. But what are we going to do in a bigger community, how can you manage these things? It is a real problem. Therefore, we try to understand in joint discussions that our problems are common problems that we must solve together.



Imagine if we tried the same in our city, what advice would you give us?

Arianna: If you want to address the problems of the people, you have to know what their problems are. Hence, in order to understand what they want and what they need, you have to get access to the real life of the people in the neighbourhood. If you want to establish something that is autonomous, you really have to enter these problems, this reality.

So think about the solutions together, how to build a new life together. It seems stupid, but one of the most important things we realised was, that strictly organising everything is the foundation for everything else that follows, that you can never stop to organ-

ise. One of the most important things is to teach people to engage with everyday conflicts, be it the defence of the houses, or the struggle with the police. That is why it is important to be anchored in a neighbourhood and to meet people. Even if these people are different than you, if they are not squatters, but just locals. The old woman, the old man, or the drug dealer, you have to meet everyone. This kind of anchorage creates a new form of strength, which is important if we want to continue to grow.

1 The *No TAV*-protest is the resistance against the construction of a rail line for the high speed train *TAV* through the *Val di Susa*. Through strong ties between local people and political activists from all over Italy and Europe the struggle has been growing for over 25 years now. There are many similar aspects with the anti-nuclear protest, e.g. the protest in *Wendland*, Germany or the anti-airport protest in *La ZAD* in Nantes, France.

2 Italian: »Qui vivremo bene!«

**»Basically, I help
migrants just like me,
who have no protec-
tion because they
are undocumented«**

First of all, we'd like to hear about your background: how did you come to Giambellino, how did you become a part of the committee, and what kind of activities had you been involved in previously?

Leo: I came to Italy in 2010 and lived in Via Padova, a run-down area in the North of *Milan*, for six months, where there were a lot of conflicts between gangs. Every time I came home from work the cops stopped me to check my ID, searched my rucksack, and so on. So I moved to *Giambellino*, where things were quieter.

I've been here for five or six years now. About two years ago I got to know the people from the committee, who were always handing out flyers against evictions right in front of my flat. After a while we began to say »hello« to each other and got to talking. They asked me how I managed to pay my rent. Then, when they were setting up the community centre in Via Odazio, I dropped by after work one evening. I watched them and asked what they were doing and they explained that they were opening a base for the neighbourhood committee, that they cooked and ate there together, and that they had a football team which they invited me to join. It was through the football team that I really got involved in the committee.

After a while we squatted a former hotel, where I lived for about a month, but because they were always partying there, I went back to *Giambellino* and rented a flat for a while, until I moved into a different squat with two comrades.

In August 2015, I went to Germany and stayed there for eight months. But as it became clear that I wouldn't get a residency permit there I returned to Italy. Since then I've been living in a squatted apartment and attending the meetings of the committee regularly.

Had you ever been part of similar groups before, or involved in political activities in general, before coming to Giambellino?

Leo: No, never. I had been to a couple of demonstrations in Senegal, even when I was in school, but they're pretty different there. People tend to demonstrate against a president they don't like, or they spontaneously protest against an unpopular mayor. For example, I was at demonstrations against the president in 2007. But I never organised them.

So since this is the first time you've experienced being part of an organisation, what impression did you have of the meetings at first, and what aspect did you find the most interesting?

Leo: To be honest, I mainly listened at first and tried to understand what people were up to and how everything works around here. What impressed me most was the solidarity everybody showed, and I liked the fact that they were fighting against racism from the start. Not just by going to demonstrations, but in everyday life, in their ways of interacting with people. At first, I was more interested in this aspect than in squatting. That's why I got involved in the *no-border movement* at first. We help people in getting what they need to survive, getting their kids enrolled in schools and so on. Basically, I help migrants just like me, who have no protection because they are undocumented.

In Italy, refugees live in terrible conditions. Many live in crowded flats and have no access to warm water or food. While refugees get a little over 300 Euro in Germany each month, you get nothing here. No food or decent lodging, simply nothing.

Here, refugees have no chance of building a better life. For many, especially underage refugees, dealing drugs is the only way of earning enough money. I find it terrible to have to see how many young people get involved in crime simply because this is their only option. Just yesterday we had a discussion here in the committee about how the city's administration wants to install CCTV cameras on many corners, claiming to fight drugs. Somebody suggested organising a kind of walk to those places and covering the cameras, since they were just there to repress and control people. But I said that I was in favour of the cameras if they stopped young refugees from dealing. So there are different perspectives on problems, based on different experiences, which we have to discuss together.

Could you describe the committee's activities? How do you operate on a day-to-day basis?

Leo: We're not strong enough to achieve anything big, but for example we offer a people's canteen twice a week, where a meal only costs three Euros. It is popular with many people who live in *Giambellino* who couldn't afford to eat out otherwise. The food is good and so is the company. You can talk and meet people. Those who can't afford the price can eat for free if they help with the dishes and so on. By the way, some of the money we made with the canteen went towards my legal representation when I was unemployed and needed a work permit. So in my case, our activism has also achieved concrete results. Apart from that we also go to demonstrations together.

Could you give us an example?

Leo: The last demonstration we took part in together was the one against Renzi's constitutional referendum on 27th November 2016. It was a great experience for me even though I'm not eligible to vote and the constitutional reform proposed by the government wouldn't have affected me directly. But I think it is important to take a stand about issues that go beyond our neighbourhood. Also, I was glad to see many people from African countries taking part in the demonstration in Rome.

As you have just said, the committee meets regularly, cooks, organises parties and has a football team. What are the biggest obstacles you face, and is there any aspect of your work that you aren't happy with?

Leo: I think repression by the state and the police is a big problem. It's frustrating that our work is hampered or even declared illegal, and that undocumented migrants can be deported for it. For example, when the police raid a squat and you haven't got your papers, they arrest you and take you god knows where. That is a problem we are unable to resolve.

Apart from that, there is the fact that the families fighting for affordable flats here have immediate and urgent needs. They are more interested in satisfying those needs than in long-term political activism.

Regarding our activities, I don't think it's enough to organise parties. There are more important things that we could be doing. Also, our neighbourhood activities and the way they are organised are focused too much on families, so that people without a family can feel excluded.

Considering what you've just said, what should the committee devote more time and energy to?

Leo: I would like to do more for undocumented minors. The conditions they live in here are so bad that dealing drugs is pretty much the only way for them to get by. I see it all the time and I want to stop them from getting involved in that kind of stuff and to help them improve their situation, to show them a way out. It makes me sick to see young refugees standing on street corners, slinging to get by. The committee could be a place for them to turn to. It would make me so happy if we could, say, set up accommodation for a hundred youths. These kids need help and guidance.

If we stop thinking in the division of comrades and the people from the neighbourhoods, we will realise that it is possible to create something much bigger, something that may goes beyond us and shows us a bigger dimension of struggle.

»TERRITORIES TO INHABIT, WORLDS TO CREATE«



»For us this is not
only something very
new, it also became
something very real«

If you look at your political work today, how has it changed compared with what you did in the past?

Giovanni: The idea which I, and probably most of us, grew up with and which shaped our political perception in the 90s and 2000s in Italy – possibly even in all of Europe – is the ideology of the final implementation of capitalism. From our comrades who were active during this time and who fought in the anti-globalisation movement, we have learned that change within capitalism is a very hard and long-term process.

However the situation has changed. In the last four or five years, since the financial crisis, we have been noticing a rapid change in the conditions of capitalism and of how it influences the daily life of people here in Italy. I for example would have never thought that I would practically experience the destruction of the idea of Europe. What I want to say is that the initial point from which we are acting politically is completely different to what it was ten years ago.

Given this starting point, we started to think of ways to organise an autonomous countervailing power, how it could look today, and what role we as comrades would play. Finally, we conclude that our collectivism relies on the common held beliefs

of joy, fairness and a specific lifestyle which is however missing a material reality. We became comrades not because of shared experiences of misery in our lives but because of shared ideals and ethical concepts.

In the past our concept was squeezed between the idea of the workers on the one hand, and on the other hand the fucking capitalists. We ourselves are part of a small group of people who are against the system, who organise demonstrations and so on – even though never having a real social base. Essentially, it is not possible to work politically without a social base. This is how we realised that the construction of an autonomous counterforce has to be more, that it finally has to be about how we live our everyday lives. For us this means that we do not separate our beliefs, ideologies and our membership in a political group from the rest of our life. We have to focus on every aspect of our lives, because autonomy is something people feel, how they go through their daily grind and how they care for themselves and their families. We have to see it as something universal, something all embracing. We have to stop moving back and forth between all these individual identities like »I'm a student, I'm a worker, I'm young«, because all of these identities together form the entity of life.

This is why the work of the committee is not a fight for participation. Our political practice is not to say, »OK, now we have to have a campaign against evictions«. Or »Next, we are going to have a campaign against fascism« or something else. Our perspective is to say, »OK, let us build something au-

tonomous. Let us start the creation of an autonomous terrain in the metropolis«. Because the metropolises in which we live are not made to have relationships with other people, they are made to be inhuman places.

You mentioned that the change of your political practice went along with a changing perception of you as comrades. Can you describe what exactly that means for you?

Giovanni: The most important conclusion was that you as an individual in struggle do not act alone but always in connection with others. This has an impact on how we perceive ourselves as comrades. It means that we don't see ourselves as an avant-garde of any kind who calls themselves comrades. It means to understand and to accept that we don't live outside of capitalism that it is important to act inside of this contradiction. It is obvious to us that in this regard there are a thousand obstacles and barriers, for example through cultural barriers and oppositions. The goal of the formation of a revolutionary movement and a revolutionary collectivity to us is to deal with these obstacles and to find ways for breaking down these barriers, for example through developing a common language.

And what kind of an effect does this have on your everyday work in your neighbourhood?

Giovanni: It makes us look at the spheres of life in which we exist and live, and leads us to understand these as political battlegrounds. For example to say: »OK, here we are. We are in a really poor neighbourhood. So we can start to organise ourselves! Let's see what we can do together«. And this can actually work. It can lead to people organising themselves and these people actually staying with this and getting others to organise themselves in the same way. Once you experience this process it greatly changes your perspective on revolution. The meaning of revolution loses its abstract character, its undefinable nature, through this experience. Four years ago when my comrades and I were thinking about the *Zapatistas*¹ or the Kurdish movement, our only connection was that we supported these fights idealistically. We could acknowledge that out there in the world there were people that really were fighting and organis-



ing themselves and the reason why we supported them was that we shared the same ethical concepts or the same ideology. Now our interest in these movements is mainly in the way that they are part of the formation of an autonomous organisation from which we can learn and exchange experiences. For us, this is not only something very new, it also became something very real.

What do you mean with »something very real«?

Giovanni: Let's take for example the issue of security. A few times within our committee in *Giambellino*, we have had the problem that members would have conflicts with each other. Or, for example, that a man had hit his wife. What should we do? How do we handle this problem and practically solve it? Four years ago, I would have never thought that I would ever ask myself these questions. But these are real questions that demand real answers.

I mean we don't have a book or something that tells us how the revolution will look one day or what exactly self-organisation means. If you are doing this sort of self-organisation, you keep having the challenge of finding solutions for problems that you were never confronted with before. But it is exactly this context inside the contradictions of society that we see as something very necessary for the development of a revolutionary practice. We have to have these debates if we don't want to isolate ourselves any further.

You are talking of the isolation in society of the comrades. What is in your opinion wrong with the current model of political organisation?

Giovanni: Well, over the years we have seen so many collectives and political groups get into fights with each other and finally dissolve or split up because of their very exclusive and elite forms and perspectives on political work. We kept marginalising ourselves instead of supporting existing structures and developing better ones. In contrast, the form of political work that is based on personal needs requires a complete change of our own attitudes. It is not only about your own position or about the need to push through things somehow. You can't just say, »OK, if it won't work my way – I'm out«. It is much more about developing ideas together for how it could work.

And if it doesn't work then we have to think together why it didn't work and find other solutions collectively.

I believe that, if you want to change the status quo within this »civil war«² in which we are few, significant aspects have to be considered and that is the consciousness of the different meanings of time. And thereby naturally the consideration of how far this differs – necessarily – from the meaning of time in capitalism as from the language of capital.

What I want to say is that when you start dealing with these real struggles then you start to have an understanding that the time for you as a revolutionary actually elapses differently – at least we assume that it differs from the time of capital, which is defined by action, reaction, victory and defeat.

To develop a new and different understanding of time within a revolutionary practice and different levels of time itself, it is important not to get caught in the trap of seeing the 70s in Italy as *the way*. This narrative of »Hey look, they were almighty, they had weapons and thousands of people in every demonstration and squats everywhere and so on« – even though this very strong movement was gone after a few months.

We have to build and rebuild whole generations, again and again. Generations that believe in this revolutionary practice, that experience it and above all spread it. The defeat or the revolution won't just happen in one day. But through actually living this idea, this idea of autonomy, of communism and all the rest of it, you are part of a creative process of a foundation for generations to come. And that is maybe the

real core of revolution: The spreading of this new idea of time and this type of understanding of revolution itself.

Finally we want to talk about your personal focus and your position inside the committee. One of your main commitments is to get in touch with other activists especially from other countries. Why is this so important to you and your comrades?

Giovanni: How people are involved in the committee, of course, always depends on their personal situation, their interests, their capacities and their abilities. I'm not the only one trying to connect with other people and struggles. Why we think this is important is obvious: Our fight is difficult and we are still in a marginalised position. So it is important that we continue growing.

Developing an autonomous neighbourhood, in our understanding, can't work as a little island all on its own. This is why for me there are two steps we have to go through:

First we have to find ways of solidarity amongst ourselves and reach out to other comrades. Comrades not with a classical political understanding but more like people who are struggling. Struggles that may differ from our own, such as workers' strikes or ecological struggles. We have to combine all of these, on all levels, even transnationally.

The second important step is to spread the idea of a revolutionary energy and to make clear that it already exists and does not, in any way, have to be brought to us from outside.

If you look at your political work over the last years, what would you say are the points you have to continue working on and where were problems that you had not thought of?

Giovanni: I would say what makes the process of perception and getting to know each other so difficult is the barrier of language. And with that I do not only mean that we speak different languages or that we are not able to articulate understandably with each other in the very same language, much more I mean the different meanings of words and terms. The way we use certain terms and how they are contextualised can be very different. To create a revolutionary movement we have to be able to realise each other and that also means to learn to understand each other. And that is hard work.

We have to be able to explain what we are actually doing here in *Giambellino* and we also want to talk to the people in the neighbourhood who are not yet involved in the struggle. We want to know how struggles in other places look and work, and why it is not so easy to just transfer them to the local situation.

Beyond that, there are a lot of people, especially the poor people here, that have very different perspectives than we have of the world and struggles that are happening in other places. Some of them have maybe never left their neighbourhood or town and when they then join the fight this is a really different experience for them. It is important to keep this in the back of your mind if we want to develop together.

You cannot fight a war without believing in winning it, and in order to win it, it is necessary to believe that we will not be alone fighting.

»TERRITORIES TO INHABIT, WORLDS TO CREATE«



When you are fighting the system, it is important to know that in other neighbourhoods, cities, and countries people exist that are doing the same. You don't start feeling alone in your fight because you know that you are part of a position that already exists in the world.

To give an example from the committee: We talked about participation in a *No TAV*³ demonstration

in December 2015 – and it was really great! Because we as comrades had been part of the *No TAV* campaign for six years but till then it was never a subject in the committee. Because it was an important demonstration for the *No TAV* movement, this time we wanted to take part as the committee. Eventually we went with about fifty people, with kids and families and so on. Beforehand we actually did not have enough time to explain the exact background of the *No TAV* protests. But the best thing was when we talked with the other people on the committee after the demonstration – with people who have never read many books and did not know much about *No TAV* or the *Val di Susa* or even about the possibility of protesting against the construction of a railway line. They told me the following very simple phrase, but it was perfect: »Wow, did you see how many people there were doing the same we are doing: defending themselves!« This phrase came directly from their heart. And they also realised the strategic connection when they said »If we have a problem in *Giambellino* and we need people to help us then we can call these people for help because we were there and they will also come to help us with our fights«.

To not feel alone in this matter is not only an emotional thing, it is truly significant concerning the strategy and the idea of resistance. Because capitalism is powerful and keeps telling you that you are damned to be alone and that you have to constantly take care to keep the little things in life that you still have together – your family, your job and maybe your friends, but that's it. But the most important thing is to experience that you are not alone. I believe that this is one of the most important steps in developing a common understanding of how a new collective force can be: To give yourself and all the others that are fighting with you the feeling of not being alone.

1 Indigenous revolutionaries that live under self-government in the south of Mexico.

2 Whoever wonders about this wording can go more into detail here: »Introduction to Civil War«, Tiqqun.

3 The *No TAV*-protest is the resistance against the construction of a rail line for the high speed train *TAV* through the *Val di Susa*. Through strong ties between local people and political activists from all over Italy and Europe the struggle has been growing for over 25 years now. There are many similar aspects with the anti-nuclear protest, e.g. the protest in *Wendland*, Germany or the anti-airport protest in *La ZAD* in Nantes, France.

Prendiamoci tutto!¹

In order to convey an idea of the recent history of the non-parliamentarian, radical left in Italy, we will outline the ideas of Italian workerism and how they contributed to the development of an autonomist movement. This seems to be useful, since the Autonomia is a theoretical and practical reference point for our comrades from Milan.

In the early 1960s Fordism was established in Italy, a concept based on mass production and consumption, using extreme divisions of labour according to Taylorist principles of Scientific Management. This development led to a hitherto unknown degree of alienation of workers from the production process. The increased demand for labour due to an economic boom led to mass migration of workers from the impoverished agricultural regions of Southern Italy to the industrial centres in the North. In these centres such as *Turin*, *Milan* and *Veneto*, the workers carried out standardised tasks in enormous factories. In these factories the workers were subordinated to the principles of Scientific Management and exposed to a monotone and relentless speed of production line paired with the power wielded by foremen. This together with the lack of traditional class-consciousness, and experiences with trade-unionist activism of the newly arrived workers, led to a profound alienation. However, the discontent among the new class of mass

workers led to completely new forms of class struggle, for which dissident members of the Communist Party developed a theoretical foundation.

This new school of Marxism became known as *operaismo*, i.e. workerism, though not in the sense Lenin used the term. The workers who formed *autonomia operaia* (workers' autonomy) completely rejected the Communist Party and trade-unionism as means of class war, insisting instead on new and self-determined forms of struggle, which no longer took into account the interests of the capitalist class: spontaneous wild-cat strikes and occupations of factories were common, demands were articulated directly by the workers who bypassed the unions and institutional forms of collective bargaining. Moreover, the workers began to understand their struggle to be directed against work itself, sabotaging the assembly line and pulling sickies when they felt like it. This insubordination is one of the defining characteristics of the autonomist movement, which was also directed against the work ethic championed by the *Partito Comunista Italiano (PCI)*, the *Partito Socialista Italiano (PSI)* and their affiliated unions.

New communist organisations emerged, such as *Potere Operaio*² in Pisa and *Lotta Continua*³ in Turin, whose theories were largely inspired by the autonomous workers' struggles. One of their central demands was a »political wage«, i.e. a guaranteed income for all workers, regardless of their concrete task or productivity. In a pamphlet, *Lotta Continua* explains the concept of workers' autonomy:

»We defined the concept of Autonomy as the ability of workers to put their own class interests first, ahead of what the productive process requires, what technology dictates and what the logic of the market demands, i.e. ahead of the needs of capitalist development. [...] We do not understand Autonomy in the sense of limited autonomy of trade unionist and revisionist organisations, which are – and will for a long time be – the tools used to subordinated the workers' struggle under the needs of capitalist development.«

The rejection of reformism, practiced by the official workers' parties and unions, led to the establishment of autonomous grass-roots committees, especially in the factories of the North, the *Comitati Unitari di Base* (CUB), which organised massive strikes, demanding an abolition of pay grades and changes to the pension system. As from 1968, these struggles reached an unheard of scope and intensity. The fact that the demand for an income independent of work and absolute raises for all workers, regardless of their pay grade, became universal, shows how influential the ideas of the *Autonomia* and the CUB were (in the workers movement). Moreover, the workers' struggles became partially linked to the students' movement of 1968: while students manned picket lines, workers joined student demonstrations in turn. These strikes and protests reached one of their peaks in 1969, a time also known as the »hot autumn«. During this time substantial pay increases, the partial abolition of pay grades, and the forty-hour week were enforced. Additionally, in 1970

the Italian parliament passed a law that equipped workers with a higher degree of dismissal protection and granted them the right to organise on a grass-roots level, thus the CUB was politically acknowledged as the representative body of the workers. However, the state also reacted with increased repression, substantially weakening the movement in the early 1970s. In context of the »strategy of tension« parts of the political establishment collaborated with fascist groups, instructing them to commit terrorist attacks, which later on were assigned to the left. One of the most infamous among these was the bomb attack on an agricultural bank in *Piazza Fontana* in Milan carried out by the fascist organisation *Ordine Nuovo*. This attack on the 12th of December 1969 killed 16 people and injured 80.

Following this event, many leftist activists were arrested in raids. One among many others was the anarchist Pino Pinelli. After three days of interrogation, he was tortured to death by police officer Luigi Calabresi. Afterwards, his body was thrown out of the window to cover up the murder and to stage a suicide. This incident clearly illustrates the functioning of the »strategy of tension«: violent acts should intimidate the population, making them fear »chaos« created by the left, and calling for an intervention from the authoritarian state. Simultaneously, a wide range of repressive measures, including murder, further weakened the already discredited left.

At the same time, capitalists reacted to the dynamics of class struggles by intensifying the automation of the production process, outsourcing it from the industrialised centres to more isolated and rural areas, leading to a continuous downsizing of the workforce that weakened the bargaining position of the workers, as they feared unemployment.

From this time onwards, the struggles shifted away from the factories to societal areas in general. In its 1971 published programme, *Lotta Continua* for example proclaimed: »Let's take over the City!« – with the aim to make workers autonomy visible beyond the factories. This proclamation was understood as a contribution to the progressive expansion of struggles to other areas of social life. In many areas autonomous committees were formed, holding close links to the struggles in the factory. These committees became part of broad social network of bookshops, publishing houses, autonomous community centres (*centri sociali*) and artists' collectives, which in the end formed the *Autonomia* movement. In this movement several currents were united, such as the powerful women's movement that fought against patriarchal structures in general, but also within the workers' movement itself. From this point onwards, reproduction gained an increased importance as a battlefield for progress, with the aim of taking back control over one's own life (*politica di riappropriazione*). For example the movement tried to prac-

tice alternative forms of human cohabitation in *centri sociali* and for this purpose squatted empty houses and factories. The idea was that in these centres, everyday life should get politicised and lived in a collective and self-determined way.

The alternatively established structures ranged from pirate radio stations, self-published magazines, street theatre, and painted murals to direct appropriation of goods, doing so-called »proletarian shopping trips« (collectively taking whatever is needed from a shop without payment), boycotting rent payments, and refusing to pay for public transport. Through this people ensured their livelihood without depending on wage labour.

This second wave of the mass movement took shape around 1977, it was no longer addressing typical factory workers, but disaffected students with an uncertain future, the marginalised underclass, unemployed youth and workers without steady jobs, as well as activists from the 60s. The movement developed both very creative and militant forms of protest against the state. The major hubs of this uprising were the universities and again the large cities in Northern Italy.

Regarding strategy, the movement can broadly be divided into two currents: On the one hand, the recently emerged *autonomia creativa*, which rejected all types of conventional protest and organisation as well as coherent political activism, and on the other hand, the *autonomia operaia*, which still tried to organise the different parts of the movement in order to transform the spontaneous revolt into a continuous attack on the capitalist system.

The *autonomia operaia organizzata*, as it was also known, rejected the idea of retreating from capitalist reality and instead worked towards the total destruction of the system. It consisted of a great number of loosely coordinated committees, groups, and collectives, including the grass roots structures set up in the factories ten years earlier. Thus, many members of *Potere Operaio*, which had dissolved in 1973, joined the movement. It reached its peak in 1977, when hundreds of thousands participat-

ed in demonstrations organised by the *autonomia*. During this time, the attacks on the state were performed with an increased strength, vehemence, and violence. After a student had been shot dead by the police after squatting the university campus in Bologna on 11th of March 1977, this development even intensified and led to the shooting of a police officer in Milan two months later. In their book *The Golden Horde*, Nanni Balestrini and Primo Moroni provide an insight of the intense atmosphere at demonstrations in the late 70s:

»The demonstration on the 12th of March 1977 was anything but happy and relaxed. Drawn, angry faces. Bags filled with Molotov cocktails and you guessed, you knew that there were guns under people's raincoats. The demonstration slowly moved through the absolutely empty and fearful city, looking for an object on which to vent its anger. [...] Above people's heads, the usual slogans expressing anger and outrage. Some formed pistols in the air with their hands. [...] We let fly with everything we had against the empty, many-windowed building. Molotov's a-plenty, shots from pistols and rifles. [...]

It was instantly clear that the illegal methods we had adapted and incorporated into our movement were about to do us harm: violence was no longer a part of a hard-fought social conflict, but was beginning to be taken over by those who wanted to abandon mass activism, choosing the underground and armed conflict. [...]

This episode happened at the beginning of an escalation of actions and reactions regarding the use of weapons on the streets. An escalation that will prove to be devastating to the movement.«

The increased confrontation with the state and the following repression strongly weakened the movement, because those events led to an isolation of the *autonomia operaia* within the Italian left. With a growing erosion of solidarity, the creativity of the movement dissolved. When the state started to specifically target the infrastructure of the movement, such as their media and squats, many activists but also entire groups of the *autonomia organizzata* joined the armed underground.

The scale of the state's repression on the so-called 77-movement was enormous: in 1981, a quarter of the 4000 political prisoners in Italy were part of the *autonomia*, while thousands of activists had sought political asylum in France.

1 engl: Let's take it all!

2 »Workers' Power« (1969 – 1973): a country-wide organisation of the radical left that was found in the course of the worker struggle in 1969 and whose long term goal was creating a party based on the bolshevik-leninist model. The group considered itself as an intellectual avant-garde that was supposed to lead and control the movement. Among the founding members were among others Antonio Negri and Sergio Bologna.

3 »Continual Struggle« (1969 – 1976): a country-wide organisation of the radical left that was also found in the course of the worker struggle in 1969.

Further reading

- Nanni Balestrini

We want everything (novel)

- Nanni Balestrini, Primo Moroni

L'orda d'oro

The Golden Horde; account of the development of the post-war left in Italy

- Perotti Pietro, Pier Milanese

Senza chiedere permesso

Documentary about the struggles in the FIAT-Mirafiori factory in Turin

»To already build up a new world through and within the struggles«

Luigi, you're talking a lot about the fact that the most important part of your work is to build up relationships between the residents of the neighbourhood and the activists from the committee. You told us that the separation between the families on the one side and you as the activists on the other side needs to be broken down, that you need to become a part of them and their daily struggles. This is what you're calling a »real struggle«. Can you explain your comprehension of »real struggles« and how this differs to your former political work?

Luigi: Just to give you an example: I saw my first »real struggle« when I went to *Val di Susa*, in the Piedmont region, to take part in the *No TAV-protests*¹ against the high-speed train line. When I went there, it was the first time that I did not only see young kids having fun in rioting or theory nerds from university. I saw also other people than those that made themselves comfortable in their own *centro sociale*², those who lost the connection to the life outside of their own little bubble.

It was a completely different picture. There were people who were really worried about the question of how to defend this territory against the cops and the construction of the high-speed train line. Suddenly you find yourself surrounded by old women

and men who are standing behind the barricades, defending them against the approaching cops and you're just thinking: »Wow, what is going on here?«. This was the moment when we started to think and over time, we realized that these protests aren't happening impulsively, but that the broad participation of local residents was a result of a long-term process.

You have to know that the No TAV-movement is a really old and a really continuous movement; it is not just a temporary event. It's a real movement, something that has gone on for a long time, with a lot of people who are joining and leaving the movement at some point. It is something that started around 25 years ago and still exists today, despite all of the turnover. This was something that really impressed us afterwards and that led to some reflections about our own political practice as well. For me, a »real struggle« means that you really get in touch with the people.

We were used to squatting a building somewhere in the city, to build up our *centro sociale* there and to do our thing. We tried out alternative ways of living together and stuff like that. That was quite cool, no doubt. But it was not enough, because you will never get a step closer to revolution just sticking to this behaviour.

The most you get out of it is a happy island for you and your comrades. You will live altogether and you will feel good about this, but think about it, what are you really doing there? If you really want to build up something new, you have to put yourself in the discus-

sion with others and this also implies getting out of the comfort-zone of your subculture.

So, a »real struggle« in your terms is something that isn't limited to your own subculture and your direct environment, right? What kind of people do you want to address with your struggles?

Luigi: Exactly. A »real struggle« for me means that »normal people« – I don't like this term because it implies that you are not »normal«- are involved. People that do stuff that is very different from what you are doing with and in your life. I mean, maybe you study, but they have to work and/or have children. People that have other problems than you do.

For me a »real struggle« means to measure yourself against these people, to not automatically start from your perspective on things. To find out what you and all those people share, what you have in common. And what we can build altogether through this shared moment. It can start with people in the neighbourhood, with people that

It is necessary to start from a territory because it is impossible to connect the communes around the world, if we do not have a territory ourselves where we can experiment what others have taught us.

»TERRITORIES TO INHABIT, WORLDS TO CREATE«

struggle against a train or with people that are in strike. I mean everywhere there are people struggling and by doing so they're starting the base to talk about building a new world.

For me this means revolution: to already build a new world through and within the struggles.

Can you give us an impression how it is for you to live in Giambellino?

Luigi: When we arrived in *Giambellino*, we seemed to be something like aliens for the people. I mean, we arrived in this neighbourhood and started to talk about communism and revolution although these things don't mean shit to the local people here. Most of the people living here are really poor and they don't give a fuck about politics in general and ideologies especially. They just don't care about it. This was the first lesson we had to learn when we arrived here. After the eviction, so before we decided to do a second occupation, we needed some time to realise that we have to manage to learn to speak the same language as the people in *Giambellino*. This meant to not only write texts about how the people in the neighbourhood could develop a political practice, but to try to become a real part of the structural condition of the neighbourhood ourselves. This also meant for us, to step a bit aside from the theoretical discussions that we were involved with at the time in order to be able to develop new perspectives together with the people from the neighbourhood.

And frankly speaking this was the starting point for us and our work within the committee in *Giambellino*. A lot of the people that are coming to

the committee are immigrants. You have people from South America or from Africa. So there are a lot of people with a lot of different experiences. There are people that were already involved in struggles in their countries of origin. But there are also people who weren't ever politically active before, but have crossed the sea to get to Italy, sitting in a small boat with 50 other people of which in the end only five survived. And of course this is a very formative and strong experience for someone. It's something that is far from our own life, it's something that we could hardly even imagine. So the biggest thing for us is mainly to understand and engage in these different experiences and the perspectives arising from these experiences.

For us this means, first of all, to kill our own identity. It means that we take all these different backgrounds from people and try to build something new out of it. Something that we all share.

Can you tell us how it is for you to live in Giambellino and how your life has changed since you moved here?

Luigi: Well, I already told you about that fact that we used to live in a squat near to *Giambellino*, before we started with the committee. It was really cool to live with a lot of comrades altogether, but this also meant that we weren't very open to other people outside of our own circle.

A lot of things have changed since I started to live in *Giambellino*. At the beginning, when we had this first *La Base*, we still lived in the big squat and we really felt like aliens in this neighbourhood.

But when we started to live in spread out squatted flats in *Giambellino* and weren't all piled up in one closed squat anymore, we recognised that at a certain point something started to change, because people started to consider us as people from the neighbourhood. Maybe they didn't like us, but we were part of the neighbourhood. When I moved into a squatted flat in *Giambellino*, there was this bar at the corner, a bar of Italians, maybe fascist or racist or I don't know what. I wasn't in touch with them. I was just sure that this wasn't a place where I would want to hang out. But since this bar was right under my flat I regularly would pass it. So at one

moment I decided to just go inside. We had already met some of the customers when we handed out flyers. The first times I went there to talk to the people it was a bit difficult because they didn't quite understand me.

Until the moment there was an eviction in the same street and the people from the bar saw how we went there and resisted the cops. Afterwards they told me and a comrade: »Now that we have seen you guys here, we have to admit that we did you wrong. We thought that you were just some leftist organisation that comes here with good words but no actions. That you come here to tell us that we can upgrade the neighbourhood by painting or putting some flowers somewhere. But you are not like this. We saw how you resisted against the cops«. So I started to go there regularly and people started to really get to know me. Every time I passed the bar people were shouting: »Ciao Luigi, how are you?«. The bar started to become more of a problem because of the fact that people kept offering me white wine at ten o'clock in the morning. For me this was a really important experience, because you could see that this people who seemed to be racists and who referred to Mussolini, in the end, weren't convinced fascists. That what they felt and expressed was more a mixture of ignorance and a diffused feeling of »everything was better in the past«. And that is the real problem, the fact that the current situation for a lot of people is really shitty. What I want to say is that, when people start to get to know you, to have confidence in you, it changes a lot. And also for me it changed a lot. Because I would have

never thought that I could so easily become friends with people who are that far away from the world I used to live in.

Nonetheless there are probably still problems concerning racism, or? How do you as the committee deal with this in your daily political work?

Luigi: Within the committee I would say this isn't a problem. Most of the people of the committee are migrants themselves, they know very well the experiences of racist discrimination, which is the reason they try not to reproduce them. But within our neighbourhood it is much more possible that this becomes an issue. In a district like *Giambellino*, racism might be a lot less visible, but it still exists. What I want to say with this is, that we aren't the first ones that came into this neighbourhood to do political work here. On the contrary, the first ones that came here to do so were fascists. And in a neighbourhood like *Giambellino* there was quite the possibility that they would succeed with their stupid speeches of »You italians have this and that kind of problem only because of all the *roma* people that came here and squatted flats«. But because of us being so present inside this district I think, over time, something really changed. I mean, to some extent, everybody here knows us somehow. Maybe not all of them like us, but they know of us. And when we try to deconstruct this racist argumentation we can actually reach a lot of people. For example, sometimes people from *Lega Nord*³ are trying to hand out flyers here at the market. And when we find out about something like this, we go to the market and shout: »Go away, you racists!« and stuff like that. The last time when this happened, we suddenly realised, we weren't the only ones shouting at them. The market sellers were shouting with us, because they already knew us from a collective *free food programm*. As well as the migrants, who were there to buy food. Just like a lot of other people we met during the last two years of our work here, because we helped them, maybe by giving out food, or helped with the homework of their children. Through these kinds of things people get to know and trust you, so that – in the end – they drive the fascists out of the neighbourhood with you.

How can we imagine your life and the situation of a squatted flat in Giambellino? What are, for example, your fears, what are the good aspects of it?

Luigi: First of all, I have to say, that it is quite common to live in squatted flats in *Milan*. On the one hand, this is because *ALER*⁴, the public housing company which is responsible for maintaining and renting the flats, doesn't care at all about the flats. On the other hand, a lot of the empty flats aren't rented out because they claim, that they don't have any money for maintaining them. And because of the fact, that so many flats are empty, but the people in need of a flat just get sent away, over time there was established a certain practice of illegally squatting those flats. Most of the time, the people feel relatively safe in those apartments. Sure this always depends on the district, but at least here in *Giambellino* we all feel very safe. And this is not just because of the total inability of *ALER*, but because we

as a committee, with all those families, have a certain strength here. Step by step we found some very useful forms of organisation. For example, we have a *Whatsapp* group with all contacts from the people of the committee. So when the cops are arriving and knocking on my door to evict my place, I just have to write in this chatgroup and within a short time, there are people coming to help me prevent the eviction. That means, if you are in a squatted flat and the cops are knocking on your door, you know that you always have the support of the committee. Always! As long as you are organised in the committee of course, since we are not the church.



Could you tell us a bit about the problems that you are facing within your everyday work in the committee?

Luigi: When you are part of the committee and doing political work inside *Giambellino*, this also means that you are visible for the public – and that you, therefore, could move into the firing line of repressive organs. Just recently we had a demonstration, in which I walked right at the front, holding and speaking through a megaphone and suddenly one of the *Digos*⁵ comes to me and tells me: »the demonstration is over«. In itself no big deal. Nonetheless, I spoke about it a couple days later in our assembly of the committee. Not because I got more scared of the police or anything, but because to me, it felt like, as if I was the only responsible person for this kind of political work, this form of expression of the committee. So there is actually much more to it. You know, we are doing a lot of different stuff within the committee: Squatting flats, different forms of actions, demonstrations and so on, and for all these different things there are delegates needed that undertake those tasks. At the same time, there are more and more people that don't want to do any of these things. I mean, in the beginning it was also really hard for me to speak publicly at an open demonstration. But those are things we can only learn through experience, right? So when we all share the same struggle, then this also means that everybody has to have the possibility to learn from and with each other. I think I have a lot of things that I can teach someone, from my time as a political activist. Like giving speeches or learn-

ing how to deal with the cops. But also other people from the committee have a lot of different skills, which they can teach the others. For example, when there is a problem with the electricity or the water connection in one of the flats, someone from the committee is coming over and is not only repairing it for you, but in the best case also shows you how it works, so the next time you can already do it yourself. This way it becomes a real mutual learning.

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- 1 The No TAV-protest is the resistance against the construction of a rail line for the high speed train TAV through the *Val di Susa*. Through strong ties between local people and political activists from all over Italy and Europe the struggle has been growing for over 25 years now. There are many similar aspects with the anti-nuclear protest, e.g. the protest in *Wendland*, Germany or the anti-airport protest in *La ZAD* in Nantes, France.
 - 2 *Centri Sociale* are the classical autonomous centers in Italy, which are mostly socially isolated political spaces.
 - 3 Neofascist party in Italy, which moved from their original goal of splitting the economically stronger north from the south to establishing a right-wing force in all the country.
 - 4 *Azienda Lombarda Edilizia Residenziale Milano*, the public housing association of Milan and the region Lombardy.
 - 5 *Divisione Investigazioni Generali e Operazioni Speciali*, the political police of Italy.

»We started with only a few sisters and we became more every day«

Could you tell us how long you have been active in the committee, how you came to the committee, and how the committee works in your everyday life?

Catalina: My name is Catalina and I have been taking part in the committee since the first day. I am a representative of the committee of *Giambellino*. From the very beginning, I have felt in good hands, it is quite familiar here. The committee was – to some extent – a reunion of the families, it brought all of us closer together. We started with only four or five people and quickly became bigger, since more and more people became part of the committee.

When I started to go to the committee, I began with cooking for everyone, mainly dishes from my country of origin. Many people came over, we had many celebrations. I am one of those within the committee that are mostly active in organising celebrations. Once I even played *Santa Claus* at Christmas and gave out presents to the children in the neighbourhood.

Ida: My name is Ida and I have been an active member of the committee for a couple of months. I found out about the committee rather as a coincidence. I have a friend who attended the meetings and she saw the situation that I was in and what kind of problems I had. I had lost my job, my second child had just been born, and my husband does not even

have any papers – I however do. Since I lost my job, I did not know how to pay our rent, which at that time even got increased. So my friend took me to the meeting and introduced me to other people. I immediately felt integrated by all these people. Together with the committee, my husband and I squatted a flat.

When the police and ALER¹ came to evict our house, many people supported us. This support is the reason why I continue to go to the committee as often as I can. I go to the meetings and the demonstrations. For me the committee feels like a family. It does not matter where you come from, here we are all one big family.

Catalina: When there are problems, we need to organise in order to defend ourselves. I am a squatter as well, and a single mother and I cannot complain, because – since the committee was founded and started to grow – we are actually doing quite well.

Our committee is open for everyone who needs help. I see the committee as a family, one that you might have never had. If you need anything, for example when a water pipe is broken, the light malfunctions, or you lack a certain piece of furniture, the committee is there for you, fixes things or deals with the problem. However, it's not that you just go to the committee, and then it simply squats a flat for you. No, the committee is an association of people who support you and help you going ahead. We all support each other. When you come to the committee and ask for help, we will – cross my heart – not say »No«. We are in this together and you will become a part of the committee because you will like

how it works, because people help you. The committee is like a house in which you get together with everybody. It is not one of these places where you go, play, listen and leave again. When you come to the committee and say or ask something, the people are genuinely interested. They answer and tell you what they think, for better or for worse. I think that is important for the committee to grow and keep going.

You just said that you had personal problems and that the committee helped you, or that you helped each other. Could you tell us what this support looks like in practice?

Catalina: My problem began when the woman who I was working for passed away. Her son was interested in the house and simply threw us out. From one day to the next I found myself, together with my daughter and my son, on the streets. I did not know where to go. I was looking for a flat and I was given a squat which I moved into. I had a burn-out but with the help of the committee I regained strength and self-confidence. What happened to me is terrible but other people experience much worse situations. They are forced to sleep on the streets, on the ground, or under a bridge. And this is what the committee is for, so that nobody is forced to sleep on the streets anymore. I have no words to describe how valuable the committee's work is. Words fail me when I am looking at everything they do, at all these projects.

Ida: As I said, I had a job before I had the baby. The problem is that people often think that a baby is disturbing, so they fire you. When I was fired, I still had some money in order to pay the rent. However, my landlord wanted me to pay more rent because of my new-born child. Then, in winter, the electricity and warm water was cut off, and I was told not to use the washing machine and many other things anymore.

So we did not have any place to live anymore. It became unbearable for us. Then I found accommodation at my friend's place and started to go to the committee meetings, where they helped me and squatted an apartment for me. At first, I was very anxious and did not want to do anything. When the police and ALER came to evict us, I was terrified, but my family gave me strength

in order to withstand this situation.

In the neighbourhood there are people who say terrible stuff to you, but also many good people. When the police and ALER came to my home, many neighbours helped me. I wrote messages to all kinds of people and they all came by. Eventually the people from ALER left and the eviction was successfully prevented. This gave me strength and I told myself that I would stay and I did. I still live in this apartment.

I have been active in the committee ever since. For instance, when the »palestra popolare«, our sports room, was being evicted, I went there in order to prevent it. A cop who had also been present at the attempted eviction of my apartment followed me that day and wanted to have my mobile phone. He said he would seize my papers and my son if I did not give it to him. I was terribly frightened. The *Chicos*² said I should not worry, as I did nothing wrong and that he won't be able to get to me. Well, my fear passed and I am still here; together with everyone else.

Do you think that the committee has changed the neighbourhood?

Catalina: At the beginning, the people did not really take the committee seriously. But little by little the committee grew, as it became clear that we actually mean what we say and indeed help the people without demanding anything in return. South Americans, Africans, *Roma* – people from everywhere. We organised celebrations for the kids in the park and handed out sandwiches and sweets. We gave clothes that we did not need any more to people who were living on the streets. We do this *free food program*, where we give out free food. At the moment, we are organising a kitchen with which we tried to cook food for people who cannot afford it. The committee has changed a lot. The neighbourhood was in a miserable state some parts of it were even abandoned. There was nobody who would fix or clean things. The committee organised groups that, for example, cleaned the streets or the park. We showed that it is not about taking advantage but about helping each other. You always meet nice people. People from other cities came as well, from Venice, Bologna and Turin. Many people came from very different places and in the end this was the starting point for the committee to organise together with other committees. Here in *Milan*, we have built up connections with the committees in the neighbourhoods of *San Siro*, *Portello* and *Romolo*.

Out of one committee many more have emerged. And that is exactly what I like; we started with only a few sisters and we became more every day. Today you can see where we stand, and we will continue to fight in order to move on. It is our right.

We should realise that we failed thus far
to initiate struggles, to make change desirable
for people. We were the ones that didn't take
care of the world we wanted to build and of the
strategy we needed to develop for doing so.

»TERRITORIES TO INHABIT, WORLDS TO CREATE«

Of course, there are also some people in the neighbourhood who see us as bad people that only squat apartments and do not want to pay for anything – but it is not the case that we do not want to pay. We also fight for an affordable rental agreement. Also many of us do work; they pay both social security contributions and taxes. But we do not have the right to do anything. I have lived in Italy since I was 17 years old. And the only entitlement I have is to get support for my child until they are 15 years old. That is all.

Ida: And they do not only see us as bad people. It gets even worse, for example when people say »you are a foreigner, and we do not want foreigners«. Here in Italy, this kind of racism exists.

Regarding racism we have heard that there are problems with the police in the neighbourhood, too. And you have also said that there are problems with racist neighbours. What are your experiences in this respect?

Catalina: The first time I entered my squatted apartment a woman called the police and ten police cars arrived – *Carabinieri*³ – as if I was a terrorist. They accused me of selling drugs, being a prostitute, abusing my children, and other things.

The next day some of my racist neighbours came over and spat in my face. They grabbed me and told me to go away. They destroyed my kitchen. They did all sorts of things in order to put me down and to make sure that I would move out. They threw vegetables at my windows and insulted my children, saying stuff like »fucking foreigners«, »bastard«, »go back to your home country« – I would rather have left this house. But I depended on this apartment, so I just endured that situation and tried to look ahead. Another day, I screamed back at them that if they ever touch us again, if they ever insult our children, I would kill them. They have not messed with us ever since.

Ida: The same woman called the police some days ago and accused me of selling drugs. I did not know why the police came and luckily people from the committee came quickly. The police broke my front door down but then left. When we talk about situations like this in the committee it is always said that we shall not give up and shall never listen to these people. As far as I am

concerned, the committee will further grow and become even better and more important in the future.

We have one more question for you: What do you think should improve within the committee? And what are the most important things you have learned in the committee, things that you would like to give us as a piece of advice?

Ida: I think it is problematic that some people only come to the committee to get an apartment as it is actually about real participation. It is also about going to demonstrations, and that you come to the meetings if you are not able to attend the demonstrations. If you are not able to attend the meetings, then you help out somewhere else. We just talked about this problem today, and from today on we are going to tackle it.

Catalina: One piece of advice that I can give you: Do not give up. Look ahead, and fight for what you want to achieve. If you really want it then you will achieve it. I can really only tell you to not give up fighting; it is our right to fight. We are all equal. We all have the right for everything. If we demand something, we do it because we need it. That is my advice, coming from Catalina.

1 Azienda Lombarda Edilizia Residenziale Milano, the public housing association of Milan and the region Lombardy.

2 The term *Chico* (span. the boys or the kids) is one example, how residents themselves divide between »them« and the »political activist«. This division is often found in such neighbourhood organisations and a matter of intense debates.

3 Formally a part of the Italian military, but under control of the interior ministry now. Used for policing mission f.e. on demonstrations. Over the past decades the *Carabinieri* gained a reputation as excessive perpetrators of violence

»Political work is more than just a part of your life«

In previous interviews we have spoken with friends and comrades of the *Comitato Abitanti Giambellino-Lorenteggio*. It is very interesting that despite your different political pasts you have now developed a similar political strategy and cooperation. It is great that you have agreed to speak to us! To begin with, we would like to know how you would retrospectively describe the beginning of your work in the *Comitato Autonomo Abitanti Barona*?

Alessio: The comrades from *Giambellino*, but also the comrades with whom we are organised here in *Barona*, come from different political structures. Because of the political strategy which has changed, but which also unites us, we are connected through our work in the territory but we are also personally linked to each other and have created a special relationship. Most people in *Barona* were previously in communities organised by *Centri Sociale*¹.

Our work in this neighbourhood and the foundation of the committee started with the desire to stop forced evictions. That started in October and November 2014, when the municipal government announced compulsory mass evictions of occupied flats. At that point in time, we had spent a lot of time in the neighbourhood but we did not live there. Though it did not take long until we had the idea to occupy houses for the families and ourselves.

More and more people have moved here and we started to do politics within a defined territory. That was a conscious decision, the strategy for doing politics we had before was completely different. We initially started conversations about the profitability of empty houses. Through



these conversations we started to build relationships with the inhabitants of the neighbourhood.

Why did you choose that particular path?

Gabriel: Because at that moment in time it was the right thing to do. When you organise a *Centro sociale* properly, then you can get to know and connect with various people, for example students. In a relatively short period of time, you can organise a fast-growing group of people. I believe that it is important to be in touch with the struggles, such as those of the students or pupils. But the strategy of a *Centro sociale* was developed about 20 years ago and, in some respects, a *Centro* is a closed space. I think the time has now come to go further. Today, in this historic moment, it is important to construct other forms of resistance. As comrades we have to provide answers to the many open questions of the lives of the people here.

The example of *Barona*, one of *Milán's* proletarian neighbourhoods, shows the serious problems of the housing situation and other social conditions. That is no coincidence. *Barona* was constructed during the time of Fascism, for the migrants of South Italy who came here to work in the factories. With the construction of social housing, certain social problems were concentrated and intensified. For us, the situation in this precarious neighbourhood is both part of a long history and of current gentrification process. These neighbourhoods and the way in which people live here are organised by the town and *ALER*², and they leave lots of flats empty and do not take

proper care of them. In theory, they would have the job to give these flats to the people, to keep the neighbourhoods clean and so on. But they do not do that. And we believe there is a reason for that. It is part of a political and economic strategy. It is an organised administration of misery, which becomes visible in specific places such as *Barona* through the social problems of the people who live there.

Alessio: That is why we are working on the re-appropriation of flats and the creation of resistant territories on the basis of the right to housing. With our work in the neighbourhood, we want to show the contradictions of capitalism in its very concrete forms. Our message is simple. It is unacceptable that there are houses without people and people without houses. We want to connect the problems of the neighbourhood's inhabitants with wider global problems. We say: »You are not alone. There is a connection between your problem and the economic and political conditions. And we can create a community that resists«. It is about creating something new, something that we could call real social housing.

Gabriel: That is why here, in the periphery, we have not tied ourselves to a specific place. We are part of a neighbourhood. We are in close contact with the people. That is what the *Centro sociale* is for me; the backyard, each and every street in *Barona*. That is important for our self-understanding as comrades: political activity is not part of your life, which you live in the centre or in a social institution, it is the way you live your life. That is why I live in an occupied house. Just the fact that I am living here is a political reaction to the current situation.

And how exactly does that look in practical terms?

Alessio: We meet once per week as a committee. Only comrades attend. We also occasionally try to meet with everyone living in an occupied house. But there is no regular political meeting with all the people and families here in the neighbourhood. Yet we organise different activities. For example, we regularly organise a breakfast against forced eviction on the streets. We meet early in the morning so that everyone is ready in case the eviction takes place. We also provide Italian lessons to migrants and assist school children with their homework. The

Bunker – our assembly point and place where these activities took place – was however, evicted by the police a few days ago. We are currently looking for a new place, also for the children's break-dance and theatre groups.

After the eviction of the *Bunker*, we tried to call a political meeting with all the families from the neighbourhood to discuss what we could occupy next. But it was very difficult as hardly anyone showed up. This means that the relationship with the people is not yet strong enough. People do not come to an assembly so that the next steps of an occupation are planned collectively. We know that there is a certain consensus in *Barona* that occupations are accepted, but we are not going to just occupy a space. We do not just need their approval, we want to organise the occupation with the people collectively. We want that the whole neighbourhood together takes a new space. Then our most important activity, which we organise regularly, is the occupation of houses for the people from this neighbourhood.

The eviction of the *Bunker* was a massive, militant operation: ten big vans and more than 100 cops. It was not a good situation. The next day, the children came and asked us why the *Bunker* was closed. They said they wanted to return and if it would be open tomorrow. One of the children said: »Ah, shitty police, if they come again, then I will take a stone and throw it!«.

Gabriel: »...because I am young and they cannot put me in prison«.

Haha, clever...

Alessio: Yes, the youngsters here are strong. From day one the children grow up with the reality of constantly having issues with the police. They grow up with hate.

Gabriel: The contact here with the inhabitants is not tied to an assembly, but to the way they conduct their lives. I mean, the people come here, here to our balcony, and say: »Come, we have a problem. Toni needs a flat because he and his wife have broken up and they do not have the money for a divorce«. We live here, and we are a community. The connection with the neighbourhood comes as we are part of it.

Alessio: The resistance started with people saying: »Look, there are empty houses. That house has no toilet or this flat is perfect«. We do all the activities, such as the gardening not because we like it – well actually I like gardening – but especially because of the reasons that I mentioned already.

It sounds as if this is easily implemented. Is there anything that you would describe as the key issue or challenge?

Alessio: Many things. We see the limits of our work every day, as we are not sure how we can most effectively get our message across. I mean, we talk to the people here; we talk a lot with previous comrades, who are no longer organised, and with many other solidary people. But that does not suffice. We have a lot of work ahead. I would like that the people would accord more with what should happen and make them understand that when we work together, we can achieve whatever we want. But despite this key problem there are four other problem areas.

First, the insufficient practice of a community life through which one can for example tackle other issues such as racism in the neighbourhood and the hate against people that live in occupied flats.

Gabriel: Connected to that is the issue of the current organisation of the community life. We are just a group of organised activists. That is insufficient. We live here, we talk to each other and we share the same daily issues, such as the need of a place to live in. We have a lot of people requesting flats but then they do not return. But that is not all. There are lots of things that might seem

small, but are massive issues: from where do we get a bed, warm water, a fridge or work?

Alessio: The third problem is the police. For example, the eviction of the *Bunker* had over 100 police officers, which was really hard for the neighbourhood. The people who blocked the streets had to show their identity cards. Those things are problematic because they intimidate the people. But fortunately a lot of solidarity was shown when the police came. But I believe that state oppression will become a true problem in the long-term. We are always there when the police comes to the neighbourhood. And they remember that.

Gabriel: The fourth issue is the involvement of mafia-style structures. Since we fight against forced evictions, this problem has become less pressing, as they are not present in this area anymore. That is because the people know that the houses are open and, in contrast to the mafia-style structures, we do not ask for any money. But in the past we had a lot of issues and conflicts, also physical ones. I once got into a fight with a guy. Fortunately we could solve the issue.

And what are the solutions? What strategies have you developed?

Gabriel: We did not start the physical disputes. But we show physical resistance in that we stay here, we are present, and we show that we have more strength than they do.

Alessio: These structures are not like the *Camorra* or so, they are not in contact with the real mafia. They are not a big organisation; they solely consist of a few families and a pimp in the neighbourhood.

Gabriel: We eventually provided a political solution. We explained to the people how those structures function and that they only prey upon the needs of the people. Many people that approached them previously then stopped.

How do the people in the neighbourhood perceive you? Is there a separation between you and the other neighbours?

Gabriel: The people say »you« when they refer to us. There is a division. They know that we are a group.

Alessio: For example, there was one time when a woman said: »Before you arrived, there was no Italian class for the migrants, no Bunker, and no help for homework«.

Gabriel: Yes, the other inhabitants identify us as a group. But they also identify us as part of the life in the neighbourhood. It is not entirely the one or the other.

When we speak of inhabiting, we do not merely refer to housing struggles or squatting, but to the fact of creating new geographies, of turning territories upside down. Territories that seemed uninhabitable and changing them into desirable places.

»TERRITORIES TO INHABIT, WORLDS TO CREATE«



Despite the issues that you have just described, what is your motivation for your work to date and the new strategy of your organisation?

Alessio: That the people start to think differently about poor people, about people that occupy houses, and about migrants.

Gabriel: The fruit of our work can be seen every day in my view. It could be the newly occupied flat, the success of stopping a forced eviction, or the improvements seen through the homework aid. But the most important change is not immediately visible, but will be after a few years. If you look at the children that grow up here: they would not have had access to a lot of things. They

now grow up differently. They will become adults in a different setting and be part of the neighbourhood, a neighbourhood that will be different to the one today.

1 *Centri Sociale* are the classical autonomous centers in Italy, which are mostly socially isolated political spaces.

2 *Azienda Lombarda Edilizia Residenziale Milano*, the public housing association of Milan and the region Lombardy.

»Between simply talking about it and actually doing it, there lie worlds«

When we visited the assembly of the neighbourhood committee a few days ago, it was important for you that we also participate in it. Why?

Marco: On the one hand, I wanted you to stay there so you get to know the people. On the other hand – and this is more important to me – so you see the difference between this assembly and the assemblies we know from our previous political experience. The »classical« mode of political practice always presupposes a certain view on things; that there already exist ideas, positions or ideologies. Here this is different; here politics are done on the basis of concrete needs. I wanted you to see how diverse the modes of political practice can be, with people who are not used to organising themselves politically and holding plenaries. Because that is a difference, it is slow but it works. And I believe it is the only way for people to become directly active.

We have certain experiences behind us, we have certain skills, for example, because we have studied and because we have fought our battles and these are now things we can make available to other people. And on the other hand, we learn from the valuable experiences of the people, including their culture and all that they have learned in the course of their lives. So a reciprocal learning emerges, not only do we teach them some-

thing or they teach us something, but we learn together. This is something new. It is something new for us and it is something new in Italy. We hope that in this way we can change the conditions. Because we are in a phase in which we are paying for a lack of strategy in recent years. This has provoked the political catastrophe in Italy we are experiencing right now.

What is the role of the neighbourhood committee in Giambellino, the quarter in which you work?

Marco: Most of the people who contacted the committee at the beginning needed an apartment. They could not pay the rent, or no longer wanted to pay the rent, because they simply had no more money to get a bottle of water or send money to their families. A lot of immigrants live here – I am one of them myself – and most have migrated to Italy to be able to send money to their families.

Many people in the committee have come to Italy to build a better life, but often this is just a dream that collapses quickly. If you find work, you will be humiliated and paid badly, but in most cases, you will find no work at all and you will be in a hopeless situation quickly. The migrants in the proletarian quarters are the last in

the local system, the most marginalised. But at the same time, these are the people who are willing to do a lot because they have nothing to lose.

In Ecuador, where I come from, it was different: there you have your family, your friends, your life is there. There, maybe, you have a place that supports you, from where you can search for a job or from where you can choose another path. If you do not know anyone here, this is completely different. In a Western country in which the interpersonal relations are practically non-existent.

But of course here such communities exist too, for instance a South American or a large Ethiopian community. The connections within these communities are good, the one calls the other and so word spreads quickly that one can come to the committee when one needs help. And so the communities have also grown within the committee. The first people came from Ecuador, who brought other people from Ecuador, then the first from Peru and so on. And this is new in the quarter.

Our work also has an effect on the people outside the committee. Even though they do not organise themselves directly with us in everyday life, they also often join us when, for example, the police come to evict an apartment. They, too, can identify with what we do and find it just. The committee is not the quarter and the quarter is not the committee. The quarter consists of so many things, and we are an important part of it, but only one part of it.

The most difficult task for us is making Revolution attractive and desirable for the people around us, developing a common language with the people inhabiting a territory and looking for ways to gain peoples trust.

»TERRITORIES TO INHABIT, WORLDS TO CREATE«

And what exactly has changed through your practice?

Marco: I think, above all, we have changed. One example: in the Peruvian community, there is the practice of *Pollada*¹, similar to a solidarity-meal. The idea is to create a dynamic of solidarity, to sell self-cooked food and, with the money raised, to support someone who is in trouble or a collective project.

At the beginning we discussed a lot about whether it is okay to sell meat and back and forth. What we did not understand, however, was the materiality of the whole. It is not primarily about whether or not people eat meat, but that there is a process of organising beyond our concepts that we had to learn to read. It is something that is already inscribed in the practices of the communities that were transported with the migration to Italy.

One day when we had to organise money for our activities and thought about organising a party, inviting this or that band and selling drinks, the people said: »No – *Pollada!*«. And then they organised this party and we made more money than with the parties that we organise over a month, and that actually stress us all, even though one can have fun organising them. So it was something much more organic, something that already existed. When we arrived at *Giambellino*, there were already these other forms of collective life beyond our ideas, which we had to get to know first.

Another change is that self-organising is at the centre of our work. When we started working on the subject of living space, it was clear that we should not repeat the mistakes or what we did not like about the work of other political structures that have done this work for years already. In Rome, for example, this movement is very big – several thousand people are involved and it has existed for more than twenty years. In these spaces much was controlled and decided by the experienced comrades and we did not want this dynamic. It is about contributing according to your capacities, but there must be a balance – that is everyone has to do something to make things work. If you say it like this, it seems to be a simple matter – but it is not. It is something that needs to be spoken about constantly and can be improved over time – especially when things are not going well. Over time, various tasks have come up, for

example, that we need a treasurer who manages the money of the committee and decides how we invest it. Likewise, we need an electrician, a carpenter or someone who organises the breakfast on days when we have to be on the move before the police for an imminent eviction.

This is more effective than telling people from above what they should do. Of course, you can put pressure on them by saying: »If you do not do this, then you are no longer part of the committee«. Then people may even come. But in this way, there is no real direct activation of the base that is the people with whom you are fighting. The goal is to have an organisation in which every person, every family, every member of the committee has her place. From the beginning, we have tried to work towards this goal, but ultimately this is now happening from the base of the committee, from the people who always come and from whom you know that you can count on them one hundred percent.

But what exactly leads people in the quarter to join you and to become part of the committee?

Marco: We try to motivate people on the basis of their concrete needs for active participation and to create opportunities, through the solidarity of the community, for facing up to political discourses in an appropriate and just manner. For this is what is missing. The problem is that for the past few years we have believed that it would be enough to simply say that something is just or unjust, so that people join together. We have forgotten that there is a lack of both, material and social con-

ditions needed for people to have the courage to decide to organise themselves and to fight. People do not organise themselves because they are too cowardly or too bourgeois. They do not do it because they are not used to it. That is why the key issue of our political work is the transition from unsatisfied needs to political activism.

And it works, when we say: »We help each other; today you, tomorrow the other and we do it together. You squat a house because you will not get one otherwise, because there is no justice in politics«. It is not that the comrades organise a house for you, we get them all together. And we also defend them together.

And gradually it starts to work. People start coming to the assemblies and then going to the demonstrations. People gradually realise what is happening. At the beginning, they perhaps get active because they pursue a personal goal, namely that of having an apartment. But our work does not cease there, otherwise we would be on the same level of charity work as the church or other organisations. But that type of work is, at most, only able to appease one's conscience.

Starting from the territory in which we live, we want to reinterpret life in our quarter. That is why our discourse is no longer only about living space, but about the entirety of life here. There exists already a social life here, to which we as activists often haven't found access, since we always approach it with the big questions and ideologies. But if you live in a neighbourhood and try to get to know the people, to grow with them, you have to ask yourself whether you are part of the territory, whether you are in this territory in which problems arise and solutions are found.

Being part of a territory or an entity is something that we have missed in recent years. We have always criticised the importance of identity among activists². But I think it is important to identify with the place where you live. There is a big difference between identifying with a political group or a neighbourhood committee. If you are part of the quarter in which the social relationships exist that are important to you and that do not find anywhere else in the city, you defend it. No one is ready to defend something with which they cannot identify. There are a few collective contexts that fulfil this function in a positive sense; a solidarity organi-

sation in your quarter is one of them. One might say we are interested in a politics of life. This would mean that people can identify with what they have created together and defend it if necessary. This is the starting point for all further changes.

You have outlined the conditions of your new practice, but where do you want to go with it in the next years?

Marco: At the beginning, we were thinking a lot, back and forth, and did not really know what to do to get in touch with people with whom, ultimately, we wanted to squat. There is so much vacancy in *Milan*, and within this vacancy we can create something new. Shortly after we had squatted the first house, the city initiated a large media campaign, threatening 200 immediate evictions. That intimidated us. We thought, now that we have finally started and the whole thing is working, something like that happens and we are not yet in a condition to oppose such an attack. But it was the ordinary people themselves who went to the streets, attacked the police and resisted the evictions. And it was this resistance that led to the plan of these 200 evictions being stopped. And with that a kind of spontaneous union of the quarters was born, which had not really been organised until then.

After that we said that the primary goal must be that more committees are founded in other quarters and a common organisation between the quarters is created that one day could lead to a common organising of the proletarian quarters. This organisation would be able to take collective political steps in



the city in order to transcend a minority position of a single committee to become an organisation of the committees that builds up autonomy and political means to improve life.

Parallel to that the second goal is to connect the struggles of the committees with other already existing ones, for example, with the struggle of workers in the logistics sector. A large proportion of these workers are migrants and members of the trade union *Si Cobas*³, which appears much more confrontational than the traditional trade unions and which is also essentially more grassroots democratically organised. The workers, who fight like this, always face a great economic risk. They may have to provide for a family, pay rent and so on – so many people often give up the strike at a certain point because the risk of being without money is too great. But if there was an or-

ganisation, saying: »Hey, do not worry; we will help you with rent problems!«, then this gives you strength and security. To create such a practical union, a practical unity, not one between different groups and organisations, but a unity that is realised in everyday struggles, would be an incredibly big thing.

Another example would be the students who organise themselves. We do not want to isolate ourselves at the peripheries and say: »Ok, the police no longer enter our quarters – we stay here«. But the rest of the city still looks completely different, and how are we supposed to get in contact with, for example, the young people then?

No matter how different the struggles may seem, we must try to connect them, to create a bloc that acts together politically. For in the end capitalism is our enemy. This also includes those who have the power and those who claim the monopoly of violence. Such a bloc is missing, because the only things moving here are the *Centri Sociale*⁴, in which political groups are sitting who have lost their connection to reality and to the territory. Because of that, the more committees exist, the more collectives exist, and the more organising of workers exists, the better.

And in respect to yourself?

Marco: A third goal is our own change, also in everyday life. It is the attempt to create spaces in which our lives can be reproduced in a different way and through that, we come closer to each other. This happens, for example, in the form of »kitchens for all«, solidarity clinics and medical consultations, self-organised gyms, the collective childcare or our self-organised football team *Ardita Giambellino*. All these places and interactions help us to create a territory that allows us to form that identity of which I spoke at the beginning. And it is not you, the comrade, who builds up something, but all of us together. But – as I said – it is easy to tell this all, but between simply talking about it and actually doing it, there lie worlds.

What would be a piece of advice or a message you would give to those who really want to do something?

Marco: Do not be too rigid about your ideas. This is something we have learned here. What I have told you surely will be modified over time and surely, better ideas will come from the quarters. Our work, as it is now, is a different one from the one at the beginning and we are trying not to set ourselves too fixed goals. Rather, we are trying to follow guidelines, with a willingness to deviate from them and to embark on new paths to arrive somewhere together eventually. If we do not have skills to read changes, to have patience and to listen, and then in the crucial moment to get together, then we are doomed to lose.

The majority of people have accepted the feeling of defeat: »What are we

to fight for? So we get the next charge? Why do we fight if we cannot change anything anyway?«. And that is exactly what we have to change! In particular, we must give the impression – no, not the impression, the certainty that it is worth fighting. Because if you fight, then there will be successes; if you fight, you can become happy. There not only will be charges and prisons, but a life that you won't have tasted until then. This feeling of certainty, this desire to face up to the world, that is something that everyone should experience.

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- 1 Latin American style grilled chicken, derived from the Spanish word pollo (chicken).
 - 2 This refers primarily to subcultural, isolating identities with regard to a »political scene«.
 - 3 Italian grassroots trade union whose practice is based on the experience of worker councils for self-administration in the metal processings industry/sector in the 1980s.
 - 4 *Centri Sociale* are the classical autonomous centers in Italy, which are mostly socially isolated political spaces.

**The strength of a struggle is determined
by the level of involvement of its members,
of who inhabits the territory.**

**May it be a university, a factory, a border
or a neighbourhood. By the collective force
that allows us to be together, in facing
and going beyond our fears, in growing
collectively. In connecting with each other,
in learning from another and in creating
bridges of our different experiences.**

**In sharing what we have learned at the local,
the national, the european and the
global level.**



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