

Recovering solidarity? Work, struggle, and cooperation among Italian recovered enterprises

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Since the global financial crisis of 2008, thousands of workers across the world have revived bankrupt businesses without—and often against—the involvement of their previous owners. This kind of labor struggle is usually referred to as workers “recovering an enterprise.” Cases of recovery have been reported both in the United States and in European countries, from Spain and France to Greece and Italy. This article looks at the Italian phenomenon by analyzing a case study that shows how a complex history with capital, experiences of labor conflict and cooperation, and the creation of civil alliances are all key to workers’ contemporary solidarity.

Keywords Cooperatives; Deindustrialization; Mutualism; Neoliberalism; Working Class

In 2015 I attended a protest against the thirty-third World Expo in the city of Milan. Since it was first held in London at the height of colonialism, in 1851, the World Expo has accompanied the history of the modern world system with increasing controversy (Harvey 1996). The Milan edition was all about food.¹ With the slogan “Feeding the planet, energy for life,” the event sought to reflect “the huge challenge of finding a balance between human nutrition and respecting the planet” (Expo 2015). Praised relentlessly from most quarters, the exhibition nevertheless attracted criticism for the poor social and environmental records of many of its sponsors (Cospe 2015; Feinberg 2016). The day after the inauguration, a protest in the form of a picnic took place in one of Milan’s main squares, Piazza 25 Aprile. Those present spoke from a microphone in defense of peasant agriculture and quality food, accusing the Expo planners of having jumped on the food bandwagon to line their pockets. Among the organizers were activists from a coalition of precarious workers, small farmers, and concerned consumers called Fuori Mercato (Outside the Market, hereinafter OTM).

OTM coalesced in 2013 on the initiative of a group of ex-workers of an automotive factory outside Milan that had shut down the year before. After the closure, the group decided to create a “recovered enterprise,” a term used to refer to instances in which a failed business is restarted without the involvement of its previous owners. A translation of the Spanish *empresas recuperadas*, the term originated in Argentina during the massive economic crisis of 2001 that led to numerous such recoveries. The Italian factory in question is called RiMaflow (pronounced “Re-Maflow”).² Its workers have not restarted producing car parts, however, as this would be too expensive. Following the occupation of the empty plant, they embarked on a number of activities, one of which is OTM. How a group of metalworkers ended up creating an alliance with farmers is a fascinating story. Drawing on anthropological and sociological approaches to work, political economy, and social movements, this article uses the RiMaflow case to understand recovered enterprises in Italy and to shed light on the conditions under which solidarity against capital—conflict—and solidarity among the oppressed—mutualism—emerges when workers attempt to secure their livelihoods.

The article is structured as follows. The first section discusses the relevant literature, while the second presents the available quantitative data on Italian recovered enterprises. The substantive analysis focuses in subsequent sections on RiMaflow's complex history with capital, its experience of labor conflict, and the political significance of its creation. The conclusions reflect on the case's overall significance.

Understanding recovered enterprises

For parts of the public and academics alike, the term *recovered enterprise* is likely to bring to mind the events that took place in Argentina between 2001 and 2002, when thousands of workers restarted businesses that had gone bust without involving their previous owners. The Argentine case is widely known and extensively studied (Atzeni and Ghigliani 2007; Dinerstein 2008; Kabat 2011; Ranis 2006; Ruggeri 2014; Ruggeri and Vieta 2015; Vieta 2019). Less known is that recovered enterprises are present also in Brazil, Uruguay, Spain, and France, and in smaller numbers in Greece, Turkey, Egypt, South Korea, the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom (Atzeni and Vieta 2014; Azzellini 2015). This presence is generating renewed interest among social scientists because of the important questions it raises at a time of economic stagnation and continuing attacks on labor by capital (Denning 2014; Ranis 2016). A symposium of *Global Dialogue*, for example, featured critical essays on Argentina's recovered enterprises (Rebón 2016) and the Mondragón cooperatives (Kasmir 2016) as possible instances of postcapitalism, with Sklair (2016) commenting that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is the end of capitalism.

Cases of recovery are specific to their national contexts, making the phenomenon greatly heterogeneous. There are, however, similarities. Vieta (2019) and Vieta, Depedri, and Carrano (2017) have proposed two tendencies in *empresas recuperadas* globally. The first one is that of negotiated conversions, or workers' buyouts (WBOs; see Vieta 2016),³ in which a failing enterprise is salvaged by its employees as part of a legal process that is supported by a variety of institutional and financial actors. In Italy, WBOs are funded through a specific law that supports former employees who invest their severance pay and unemployment benefits in a newly formed cooperative, with additional funding from the cooperative confederations.⁴ For a time, Argentina had a similar, though less developed, system, but the funds for it have recently been frozen.⁵ The second tendency is that of conflictual conversions, which sees recovered enterprises emerging "in situations with some degree of conflict between workers and owners, management, and/or local and regional authorities" (Vieta 2019, 137). In these circumstances, the conversion of the enterprise often follows the occupation of the workplace, and sometimes the violent confrontation with authorities.

From a theoretical perspective, there is also significant heterogeneity, spanning from decidedly optimistic to somewhat disillusioned approaches. Wishing to keep an open mind, here I draw on selected aspects of the research framework of Ozarow and Croucher (2014), who have adapted to the recovered enterprise phenomenon the four themes proposed by Halford and Strangleman (2009) for the study of labor. Ozarow and Croucher (2014) note how the importance of labor as a topic of research on contemporary society has diminished significantly since the 1980s, arguing that this trend should be reversed in favor of a "broader frame of reference" that follows Marx's ([1844] 1959) theory of alienation. The two authors believe recovered enterprises to be an example of the theory's continued relevance (Ozarow and Croucher 2014, 992).

The first theme—control, identity, and orientation to work (Ozarow and Croucher 2014, 998)—concerns the extent to which workers in recovered enterprises benefit from greater involvement in the decision-making process. This issue is linked to debates about economic and industrial democracy, cooperation, and the role of trade unions in worker-owned enterprises (Atzeni 2012; Kokkinidis 2015; Ness and Azzellini 2011; Ruggeri 2014). Furthermore, it addresses the ways that recovered enterprises influence the links between workspaces and spaces of socialization. The second theme—moral economy and class (Mollona 2009; Ozarow and Croucher 2014, 999)—deals with the extent to which recovered enterprises prioritize creating sources of dignified work through higher wages and social projects over profit maximization, which is typical of private companies (Atzeni and Vieta 2014; Coraggio

and Arroyo 2009; Vieta 2010). This area of inquiry includes the issue of exploitation in cooperative organizations (Kasmir 1996). Ozarow and Croucher's (2014, 1000) third theme is industrial change and the meaning of work, which is concerned with how the classic roles of owner/manager and worker in a conventional production process are (or are not) reconfigured following a company's conversion. It also pertains to changes in attitudes to work among worker-recovered enterprises (e.g., Faulk 2012). The fourth and final theme is linked to the role of social movements, picking up on several points of contact between the latter and recovered enterprises (Ozarow and Croucher 2014, 1001). Following the model proposed by Tarrow (2011), these points can be summarized as the ways that recovered enterprises can bring about social change: through paradigmatic shift, innovation from the margins, institutionalization, or tactical interaction. One specific area of connection is with the "social and solidarity economy" (Hart, Laville, and Cattani 2010), in which many of these enterprises partially operate (Bryer 2012; Coraggio and Arroyo 2009).

In the following sections, I explore the complex, historically rooted but not determined nature of the aforementioned themes by looking at the recovered factory RiMaflow, where I conducted ethnographic fieldwork throughout 2015 and intermittently thereafter. The sampling for the study was purposeful and nonrandomized. Data collection included twelve months of participant observation in a variety of activities and events plus nine semistructured, audio-recorded interviews. Data analysis used grounded theory on field notes and interview transcripts. Prior to beginning the substantive analysis, I provide an outline of the recovered enterprise phenomenon in Italy.

Recovered enterprises in Italy

Until recently, few studies had dealt with the Italian case, and most only cursorily (Lanzavecchia and D'Aurizio 2013; Müntzer 2014; Ventrone 2007). Italy has usually been mentioned in passing in works focusing on the Argentine case, such as by Tognonato (2016, 187), who writes that "the current number of cases [in Italy] cannot be established with certainty." This has changed in the past few years, which have seen the publishing of several new studies focused on the Italian case (Calcagno 2018; Mastrandrea 2015; Orlando 2017a, 2017b, 2018, 2019; Semenzin 2019; Vieta, Depedri, and Carrano 2017).

Italy has a rich history of labor struggles, a strong cooperative sector, and a tradition of community occupations and squatted social centers, all of which have contributed to the development of recovered enterprises in the country (Hall 2018; Holmström 1989; Mudu 2018). Before World War II, conversions of companies that had gone out of business were rare. After the war, however, there were numerous cases owing to the difficulties in which companies found themselves and to the renewed strength of the cooperative movement after the collapse of fascism. These conversions took place thanks to the workers, the trade unions, political parties, local authorities, and the re-formed cooperative confederations (Holmström 1989, 24–25). At the time, workers' councils played a decisive role, as exemplified by the famous case of the Officine Reggiane (Amari 2014; Beccalli and Pugliese 2013, 17–18). In the 1970s and early 1980s, there was a new wave of conversions as a result of the extreme instability caused by the oil crises of those years (Carpanelli 1978). Important cases of recovery from that time were those of the Fioravanti, Feda, Fargas, and Balzarotti companies (Beccalli and Pugliese 2013). At the peak of this historical juncture, in 1986, the government passed the Marcora Law, a version of which is still being used to support recoveries (Dandolo 2009). Another upswing in conversions took place in the early 1990s, also a critical time for the Italian economy, which culminated in 1992 with the exit from the European fixed exchange-rate mechanism. The number of WBOs has increased again with the decline that followed the 2008 financial crisis.⁶ As Vieta and Depedri (2015, 228) note, "this decline ... together with a long history of cooperation and the support mechanisms under the amended Marcora Law, has made Italy 'ripe' [for conversions] again, especially in the core manufacturing regions of 'Made in Italy'" (see also Monni et al. 2017, 531).

The most recent figures for the phenomenon show 140 active cases of recovery in Italy.⁷ Sixty-three percent operate in the manufacturing sector, 15% in services, 8% in the commercial sector, and 6% in the construction industry. Seventy percent have between 10 and 49 employees, 22% between 50 and 249, and 7% fewer than 10. Only two have a workforce of more than 250. The average workforce is forty-one, characteristic of small-medium enterprises. Fifty-seven percent of recovered enterprises are affiliated with Legacoop, 19% are affiliated with Confcooperative, and 14% are unaffiliated. Between 1986 and 2016, 75% of all recovered enterprises were established in the regions of Central Italy (Tuscany, Umbria, Marche, and Lazio) and the Northeast (Emilia-Romagna, Veneto, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, and the province of Trento). The regions with the highest numbers of cases over that period were Tuscany (21%) and Emilia-Romagna (20%). Clusters of worker-recovered companies can now be found in the provinces of Ancona, Florence, Modena, Perugia, Reggio Emilia, and Rome (see Monni et al. 2017; Vieta, Depedri, and Carrano 2017). In the vast majority of cases, Italian recovered enterprises have been funded through the Marcora Law and thus represent instances of negotiated conversions. Other cases, such as RiMaflow in Milan and Officine Zero in Rome, are more akin to conflictual conversions (and to Argentina's *empresas recuperadas*).⁸ I now turn to the RiMaflow case.

Murray: A tale of neoliberalization

Originally called Murray, the factory in question was founded in 1973 to produce air-conditioning tubes and power-steering hoses for the car industry. It thus represented a sector that has long been synonymous with Made in Italy excellence: precision manufacturing of steel components (Fara and Attili 2013, 47). The factory was founded in Trezzano, a small town just outside Milan. In contrast to nearby areas of Lombardy that would soon witness deindustrialization and depopulation, at the time Trezzano experienced a commercial and residential boom thanks to a new four-lane road that connected it to Milan and to the southwest province. As part of this “locational seesaw” of development and underdevelopment (Smith, quoted in Vaccaro, Harper, and Murray 2016, 3), the local population increased from roughly one thousand to thirteen thousand in the space of just ten years, from 1961 to 1971, two years before Murray opened its doors.

Murray quickly became one of Fiat's biggest suppliers. As a result, in 1990, a large Italian conglomerate of the plastics industry, Manuli Rubber, bought the company. Manuli expanded Murray throughout the 1990s, opening plants in Spain, France, Holland, and Poland. The headquarters were kept in Milan. Giacomo, one of the workers who helped create RiMaflow, started working for Murray in 1996 and had bittersweet memories of this period. On one hand, he was delighted to have obtained his first permanent job; on the other, he clearly remembered the “heavy atmosphere” caused by constant talks of forced transfers and layoffs during the company's expansion. These fears were stoked in 2002 when Manuli shut down the Dutch plant and transferred the work to the more profitable Polish one, located in the Special Economic Zone of Katowice. Two years later, Manuli sold its automotive division to the private equity fund Italian Lifestyle Partners (ILP), which renamed it Maflow.

On the basis of the workers' accounts, it appears that this sale took the form of a leveraged buyout (LBO), a transaction in which a company is purchased using debt instead of capital. What followed was a brief period of considerable expansion through risky operations and a concomitant worsening of labor relations. In a blog post written immediately after the bankruptcy, another worker, Paolo, recalled, “In the last five years, management kept telling us that in order to remain competitive we had to delocalize, so they began emptying the plant, moving machinery to Poland, and selling the warehouses” (April 15, 2009). The last part of his comment refers to the decision taken by the ILP fund to sell the land and physical infrastructure of the Milan plant to Unicredit, Italy's second-largest banking group, and start paying rent on it. In 2007, the fund bought Codan, one of Maflow's main global competitors, with plants in Brazil, Argentina, Mexico, China, Korea, Thailand, and Malaysia.

Unfortunately, the credit crunch and consumer recession that took hold in the Global North during 2008 had a heavy impact on Maflow's core market, causing the overextended group to go into controlled administration in 2009 with a debt of almost 300 million euros. Soon afterward, BMW announced that it would not be renewing its contract with the company, which alone accounted for more than 80% of Maflow's revenue. Eventually, the state administrators signed a deal with a Polish entrepreneur, who bought the company under a law for large corporate insolvencies, according to which the business had to be kept intact for at least two years. Maflow thus became one of the 437 cases of acquisition of Italian companies by foreign investors that took place between 2008 and 2012 (Fara and Attili 2013, 54). When the two-year clause expired, in 2013, the new owner closed the factory, laid off the remaining workers, and transferred all the machinery to Poland.

The history of Murray/Maflow is a textbook illustration of the changes that have taken place in the world of enterprise under the neoliberal regime of flexible accumulation, a process that can be summed up with the term *disconnection* (Vaccaro, Harper, and Murray 2016). After an initial period that saw it grow organically by successfully manufacturing and selling goods on the market, Murray was acquired by and merged with a much larger group, Manuli, the first step on a path of growth by acquisition that is typical of neoliberal, disconnected enterprises (Milberg 2008). In this brave new world of extremes, success is not achieved through gaining larger shares of the market but through getting rid of the competition, a form of monopoly rent capitalism (Harvey 2003). Financialization is key in creating disconnection and monopoly (Lapavistas 2009). Under flexible accumulation, individual companies are increasingly seen not as producers of goods and services—the old, Fordist view—but as goods themselves, which can guarantee different rates of return on equity in a portfolio of investments. Private equity firms that manage companies to yield favorable returns for their clients are perhaps the best illustration of the tendency toward disconnection. Once shareholder value maximization has become the main goal of management, all fixed costs need to be reduced. Labor is thus seen as a highly unproductive use of capital and must be turned into a variable cost. No other mechanism is better suited to this aim than delocalizing production to areas of the world where workers are paid less and have fewer rights, such as in Special Economic Zones (Vaccaro, Harper, and Murray 2016, 1–4).

From Maflow to RiMaflow

Two years after these events, when I first visited RiMaflow, I was struck by a large display of photographs taped to movable panels placed next to the main entrance. The photographs were grainy, black-and-white photocopies of the originals. Their monochrome and amateurish appearance lent them an aura that only images of historic events possess. The photographs showed the workers at various locations protesting against the factory closure between 2009 and 2010. At the time, the group wasted no time in responding to the controlled administration procedure, initiating a series of protests to put pressure on the administrators, the politicians, and the clients to relaunch the business. This reaction was surprising, because trade unions at the plant had always been oriented toward “normalizing” labor relations, as Giacomo put it. “The unions never openly challenged management, they were always happy with small concessions” (interview, May 18, 2015). Everything changed when Maflow filed for bankruptcy.

The first actions were a picket outside the factory and a meeting with the local mayor. When BMW announced that it would not be renewing its contract, the administrators put the workers on benefits. Faced with a rapidly worsening situation, they organized a permanent assembly and decided to picket the tribunal where the bankruptcy was being processed, the headquarters of BMW in Milan, and the German consulate. They also protested outside the famous La Scala opera house during the lyric season's inauguration. At the beginning of 2010, they started sleeping inside the plant to prevent the machinery from being sold off to repay Maflow's debts. During this period, they took to the roof with banners denouncing their plight, a popular form of protest at the time among Italian factories facing

closure. They also blocked the nearby four-lane road and picketed for seven days in front of the Prefecture and the seats of the provincial and regional governments in Milan, in addition to blockading the railway tracks at the city's central station. They even organized trips to the Ministry for Economic Development in Rome and to BMW's global headquarters in Munich.

As already mentioned, Maflow was eventually sold. The deal allowed the Polish entrepreneur to rehire only 80 of the 330 Milanese workers, a group that he chose, according to the workers I met, among those who had never taken part in the protests of the previous two years. Those who had were left at home and continued to receive benefits. When it became clear that the factory would finally be closed, the workers who were more politically active, who had been left out of the initial deal, wanted to prevent the factory from being stripped of its machinery, having already thought about occupying it and creating a recovered enterprise. However, the Polish owner promised the eighty workers left an attractive severance package, provided there were no "incidents" during the closure. Effectively, this pitted workers and ex-workers against each other. One of the latter said, "We had to desist, otherwise there would have been blood in front of the gates" (Piero, interview, March 27, 2015). It was therefore only after the plant had been emptied that a dozen of the ex-workers occupied it.

As this account shows, the relationship between capital and labor at the Milan plant went from being one of collaboration — albeit founded more on convenience than actual belief — to one of extreme conflict. When conflict broke out, the workers tried to gain leverage on management by acting across space and at different scales, from the very local to the regional, all the way through to the national and the global (Carbonella and Kasmir 2014, 19–20). Their multiscale struggle reflected of necessity (if somewhat belatedly) the "multiscale" nature of capital (Thorleifsson 2016, 556) and its disorganizing assault on livelihoods (Lembcke 1991–92). What the story also reveals is the impact on workers' solidarity of the power held by capital, and in the second instance by the state, to distinguish between waged and unwaged laborers. When the new owner rehired only eighty workers, he created two groups with unequal rights and diverging prospects. At the time, the word *krumiri* (scabs) appeared for the first time on the blog that chronicled the struggle. The second episode in this exercise of *divide et impera* (divide and conquer) took place when he promised the eighty workers considerable severance pay on condition that the plant be emptied of its machines. Maflow's bankruptcy, sell-off, and eventual closure (in Italy, at least) highlights how extreme events like the crash and recession of 2008 do not happen in exactly the same "space" for all laborers. Rather, "they are important moments in the political process of creating difference and inequality" (Carbonella and Kasmir 2014, 9).

Struggling for hope

The workers met the factory closure with anger and despair. Maria, for example, had worked there for twenty-one years. One day, during a cigarette break from her shift at the bar that has been created inside RiMaflow, she told me, "It was like being bereaved. I saw the gate shut and thought: 'It's the end, that's it'" (interview, May 21, 2015). After the closure, Maria applied for numerous jobs but received no replies, something she blamed on her age and the ongoing austerity. She told me that people from my generation (our age difference is eleven years) were used to having to reinvent themselves for different jobs, but that she belonged to "another world." Her words show that the workers who recovered Maflow faced what Sennett (2006) calls the postindustrial "specter of uselessness." Given these odds, Maria welcomed the idea that a group of them could join forces and find a way out of precariousness, even if this meant doing something as extreme as breaking the law.

Maria's account reveals the sense of determination that guides the occupiers, a sense born in no small measure by indignation and the feeling of having suffered a deep injustice. Another worker, Daniele, spoke poignantly about this condition. He described Maflow's closure as a "death," echoing Maria's "bereavement" and revealing the embodied trauma that often characterizes the loss of employment (Strangleman and Rhodes 2014, 417–18; Thorleifsson 2016,

560). Like Maria, Daniele also admitted that he used to be a person who would never have broken the law, but after all that had happened, he understood that this way of thinking is “part of the great swindle we’re all subjected to” (interview, May 19, 2015):

The owners are all-powerful. They set up and kill off businesses for their own profit, with no consideration for the employees who die with them. *They* can do all this legally. So we occupied. We shouldn’t have, because it’s illegal. But if what *they* do is legal, then perhaps what *we* did can also be considered legal. At least it was for a just cause.

The swindle to which Daniele referred reflects a new interpretation of reality informed by the events of Maflow’s demise, especially its transformation into a global enterprise backed by a private equity fund. Giacomo spoke of the two entrepreneurs who founded Murray in 1973 as “old school,” signaling what he believed to be a positive difference from contemporary businesspersons. Like him, the rest of the workers believed that the ILP fund destroyed their lives. Even though the 2008 recession triggered Maflow’s bankruptcy, the workers did not see this event as the real cause of their problems. Two other matters deeply angered them, the first of which was that ILP purchased Murray in 2004 through a leveraged buyout, creating a debt that ultimately sank what they believe was a solid business. These financial maneuvers, like selling the land to a bank only to start paying rent on it, are morally inconceivable to them. The second matter was that a verbal agreement that obligated the Polish entrepreneur to relaunch the business and hire back the rest of the Milan workforce was completely ignored. According to the workers, this agreement accompanied the written one signed by the unions with the entrepreneur and the state authorities. The Milan workers felt humiliated because in the past they had helped train staff from the then-new Polish plant, only to eventually see their jobs transferred to it.

Recovering Maflow was therefore a way to make right these wrongs and obtain justice from a system deemed broken. These aspects are captured by the term *social compensation*, used by the workers during public meetings, on the internet, and in informational materials. Giacomo explained it by making reference to Article 41 of the Italian Constitution, which recognizes the right to private enterprise provided it does not go against social well-being or damage human dignity. In his opinion, countless cases like Maflow’s prove that the system is “unconstitutional.” Recovering the factory was thus a form of compensation for this tort. Daniele and Paolo both stressed the decades of exploitation that the Milan workers had endured under different owners, only to end up being completely abandoned to their own fate. According to the workers, unemployment benefits, while welcome, cannot make up for the years of exploitation, especially when the system did not offer the opportunity to find new, dignified work. Benefits are seen as a form of *individual* compensation that lasts only for a short period of time (getting shorter with each reform of the labor market), after which there is nothing. Giacomo described them as a “softening of the blow.” RiMaflow is instead a form of *social* compensation. Maria put it thus: “They deprive you of your job, of your life, so you take back what you’re entitled to. I have a right to work. For me RiMaflow means holding on to the hope of finding the dignity of work” (interview, May 21, 2015).

Maria’s somewhat intricate expression—finding *the dignity of work*—is indicative of the moral economy that underpins the actions of the occupiers (Ozarow and Croucher 2014, 999–1000). The workers are reacting against the present neoliberal regime of accumulation while being “trapped in a moral economy of the past that correspond[s] to a previous phase of capitalism” (Narotzky 2016, 87), essentially Fordism and the Keynesian social contract that accompanied it. In this context, the Fordist factory, as a guarantor of stable employment, acted also as an “affect factory” (Muehlebach and Shoshan 2012) by allowing the social reproduction of individuals and their families. The neoliberal, disconnected enterprise no longer guarantees this possibility. The extreme interruption of normality in people’s lives explains why the value of dignity was referred to in so many forms in the narratives I heard, revealing the role of industrial change in the appraisal of the meaning of work (Ozarow and Croucher 2014, 1000–1001).

The hope of solidarity

RiMaflow also represents a *practical* solution to the workers' lack of employment, an aspect which they described by saying that the recovered factory is an example of "mutualism." Daniele's account of the period right before the factory closed shows what they meant by this word. After spending more than three years on various forms of benefits, the workers realized that they would never be rehired. "Eventually we said to each other: 'Instead of staying at home crying, why don't we get together and figure something out, given we can't find new jobs?'" (interview, May 19, 2015), recalled Daniele. Giacomo spoke of a parallel moment of realization when the workers started thinking about how they would pay their mortgages, rents, and other nonnegotiable expenses once social security expired. "Acknowledging that we were no longer immune from the risk of ending up on the streets, we had to recognize that without joining forces we couldn't make it" (interview, May 18, 2015), he said.

What the workers faced (and still do) was the "specter of wageless life" (Denning 2010), which accompanies the specter of uselessness and is constitutive of capitalism at least as much as the wage relation (Carbonella and Kasmir 2014, 9). The future temporality that both specters imply is revealed in the workers' comments about the risk of becoming homeless and, more generally, in the sense of daunt that accompanied their realization of what the end of social security might mean for them. Time is an important element of a worker's moral economy. Fordism and the Keynesian social contract produced a certain kind of time structure, which spanned from the short-term experience of days divided into units determined by the factory clock to the long-term experience of social reproduction and the sense that life was slowly improving (Vaccaro, Harper, and Murray 2016, 10–11). Unemployment and precarity, which characterize life for so many under neoliberal austerity, materialize instead an extreme rupture in this time structure, which begins with losing your job and "staying at home," a condition on which the RiMaflow workers often commented. Changes in the perception of time are thus another aspect of the crisis in social reproduction brought about by the shift from an industrial to a postindustrial way of life (Vaccaro, Harper, and Murray 2016, 4). Mutualism, as self-help, has been the workers' response to this crisis.

RiMaflow's aim has been achieved—very precariously—through a number of activities, none of which relate to the automotive industry. The reason for this is that all the necessary machinery was removed from the plant. Left were four huge warehouses and a small two-story building next to the factory gate. After much internal discussion, the group decided that the factory's vast spaces were its strongest asset and could be turned into something resembling a mix between a community center and a coworking space. The recovered factory has witnessed significant changes during its existence, with various activities taking place for some time, then ceasing.

Up until 2018, the warehouse closest to the road was a polyfunctional space used by local groups for concerts, meetings, movie screenings, plays, and courses. It also hosted local artisan workshops that sold items ranging from furniture to homemade clothes, a "lab" that reconditioned electronic appliances, and one that repaired pallets for local businesses. The second warehouse was turned into a parking space for camper vans. The third one was rented to an enterprise that obtained plastic and paper from the sorting of wallpaper waste. The fourth was a storage facility used by people who could not afford garages or commercial storage. Other spaces were rented out to music bands and model train enthusiasts. On the ground floor of the two-story building was a bar and a kitchen that served food to those who visited and worked inside RiMaflow. Finally, the workers ran a food delivery scheme for groups of ethical consumers in and around Milan, using the site to stock the crates of produce sent there by organic farmers in the south of Italy. Thanks to their efforts, this scheme has grown into the national alternative food network called Outside the Market. The workers physically maintained the site, cleaning it and modifying its interior according to need, and managed the bar and the kitchen. The various activities that took place inside it generated a meager income for the cooperative through the fees that groups and individuals paid to use the space; the sales of tickets, food, and beverages; and the fees of the delivery service. Occasionally, the workers ran specific fund-raising campaigns. Once, for example, they sold several hundred bottles of homemade tomato sauce and lemon-flavored liqueur to fund the purchase of an air compressor.

In 2018, the local magistrates included RiMaflow in an investigation into illegal waste trafficking because of its collaboration with the enterprise that recycled—illegally, it transpired—wallpaper scraps. While the workers vehemently denied any knowledge of unlawful activities, Unicredit, the bank that owns the site, filed to have the group evicted. These events generated a considerable public response in favor of RiMaflow among the Milanese civil society and Catholic Church establishment, which led the Prefecture to mediate a negotiation between the workers and the bank. In 2019, the authorities agreed to let RiMaflow relocate to two nearby warehouses, which the cooperative purchased thanks to financial help from local nongovernmental organizations and co-ops and from Italy's oldest real estate company, headquartered in Milan and owned by a family of devout Catholics.

Given the heterogeneity of RiMaflow's activities, it is difficult to say exactly what the recovered factory currently "produces." RiMaflow represents a space where the formal and the informal economy meet, but also where labor—or what is left of it—intersects socialization. For five years, the occupation of their old workplace meant the workers operated in a condition of illegality that made their arrangements at best void, at worst possibly criminal, despite the fact that they had registered the new cooperative. This condition of illegality, however, created an opportunity for a great many people whose livelihoods are extremely precarious, while also offering local community groups a place to meet outside the private rented sector. The people who trade from the recovered factory and the groups who meet there have in turn supported the occupiers on many occasions, a dynamic that appears to be based on a form of "grassroots universalism" (Carbonella and Kasmir 2014, 4–5), or what one worker once described as "the second-last helping the last" (fieldnotes, October 13, 2015). This dynamic is not just a local one. The workers maintain international contacts, including regular face-to-face meetings with Argentina's *empresas recuperadas*, Brazil's Landless Workers' and Peasants Movement, and with a growing number of Euro-Mediterranean recovered factories (especially Fralib in France and Vio.Me in Greece). In 2019, the workers finally managed to secure a space legally, which means that all their existing activities are now on a much stronger footing and that new ones can be planned more coherently. The way they achieved this result—by mobilizing a cross section of the local society—points to what Ozarow and Croucher (2014, 1001–2) call "embeddedness in communities."

Conclusion

The RiMaflow case allows reflection on the conditions under which conflict and mutualism emerge when labor tries to recover a failed enterprise. In contrast to most cases of Italian worker-led recoveries (Vieta, Depedri, and Carrano 2017), RiMaflow is almost entirely built on solidarity against capital and solidarity for the workers. The reason for this characterization appears to be the very complex demise of the factory, which politicized labor and set it in motion to find, first, a voice in the struggle and, second, an alternative livelihood. WBOs do not usually go through this kind of history. Here the effects of the recovery process on the issues of control, identity, and orientation to work are apparent (Ozarow and Croucher 2014, 998–99). The RiMaflow workers did not simply *react* to events, though. Rather, a new consciousness is present in the workers, and they have become more than just employees who lost their jobs. Similarly to what Thompson (1963, 9) wrote about the English working class, RiMaflow "did not rise like the sun at an appointed time. It was present at its own making" (see also Ozarow and Croucher 2014, 999–1000).

In their less extreme trajectories, WBOs are able to take advantage of state support. Production can thus restart, and while WBOs do usually entail a downsizing of the labor force and pay cuts, the jobs that are left generate levels of income that are not too dissimilar from those of the former private enterprise (Vieta and Depedri 2015, 234–39). From this point of view, the RiMaflow group found themselves in an empty plant (literally) and with their hands tied (metaphorically). Lack of machinery, as a form of capital, is usually the main limiting factor for recovered enterprises (Atzeni and Ghigliani 2007, 664). This lack in turn rendered accessing state help unviable. Far from being an instance of technological determinism, however, RiMaflow's situation is the consequence of the actions carried

out by the ownership to divide the workers into groups of (relatively) privileged and deprived. The workers have therefore been prey to what might be called accumulation by differentiation, one-half of a two-pronged process that inevitably also includes dispossession, since the actions of the Polish owner allowed him to retain the machinery for his new business (Carbonella and Kasmir 2014; Harvey 2003). As a result, the livelihoods that the workers manage to put together yield only a very meager, intermittent, and precarious income compared to that of a WBO.

Like other recovered enterprises in Europe and Latin America (Azzellini 2015; Mastrandrea 2015; Ruggeri 2014), RiMaflow manages to subvert the dispossession of neoliberal capital through political action—to a limited degree. Initially, it did so by cooperating in protests, partly alongside the unions, though the workers' direct actions were never really representative of a classic union struggle, having more in common with community unionism (Mollona 2009). This facet highlights the issue of the influence of social movements on recovered enterprises (Ozarow and Croucher 2014, 1001–2). When this form of cooperation proved unsuccessful, the workers rediscovered self-help through the occupation of the plant. Their actions thus run counter to the widespread substitution of individual strategies for collective ones by working people seeking to escape the precarization of life. They are also an example of the emergence of something new, and yet reminiscent of something very old—mutualism—from the remains of deindustrialization. The occupation, and the activities it permitted, were subversive of the dispossessing power of neoliberalism because they allowed the workers to command, however precariously, space and place against capital's strategies to do the same (Carbonella and Kasmir 2014, 20–21). The story's latest turn of events—the legal purchase of a new site with help from other activists and powerful philanthropists—appears to be both a vindication of the struggle and suggestive of the limits of this kind of worker solidarity.

Notes

- 1 See Teughels and Scholliers (2015) for a detailed analysis of the place of food in World Exhibitions.
- 2 I am using the factory's real name because the story would inevitably make it identifiable. All personal names have been changed.
- 3 The term *workers' buyout* started being used after the economic crises of the 1970s (Lindenfeld 1982).
- 4 For an in-depth discussion of this law, see Monni et al. (2017) and Vieta, Depedri, and Carrano (2017).
- 5 The issue of state help for *empresas recuperadas* in Argentina is investigated, among others, by Dinerstein (2008), Rebón (2016), and Vieta (2019).
- 6 The number of recovered enterprises in Italy positively correlates with the country's unemployment rate, with three periods of growth (1980–85, 1991–94, and 2007–14) and two of contraction (1986–90 and 1995–2006) (see Monni et al. 2017, 534–35; Vieta and Depedri 2015, 227).
- 7 This figure is drawn from data provided by the main institutional investor in WBOs in the country, Cooperazione Finanza Impresa (CFI; see <https://www.cfi.it/trasparenza.php>). While CFI funds most business recoveries in Italy, these numbers should be considered an imperfect estimate.
- 8 In an analysis of twenty-four recovered enterprises, Vieta and Depedri (2015, 235) found that only five cases had witnessed sit-ins and strikes. In contrast, Ruggeri (2014, 48) reports that in 2001, Argentine workers struggled for an average of nine months before being able to create a recovered enterprise and for five months in subsequent years.

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