

# Workers' Demonstrations and Liberals' Condemnations: the Italian Liberal Press's Coverage of General Strikes, Factory Occupations, and Workers' Self-Defense Groups during the Rise of Fascism, 1919-1922

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Workers occupying a Turin factory in September 1920.

“Torino - Comizio festivo in una officina metallurgica occupata.” *L'Illustrazione italiana*, 26 September 1920, p. 393

*This paper outlines the evolution of the Italian liberal press's coverage of workers' demonstrations from 1919 to 1922. The goal is to show that the Italian liberal middle classes became increasingly philofascistic in response to the persistency of workers' demonstrations during this period. The paper analyzes articles from the Italian newspapers La Stampa and L'Illustrazione italiana, treating their coverage of general strikes, factory occupations, and workers' self-defense groups as proxies for middle-class liberals' interpretations of workers' demonstrations. By tracking changes*

*in the liberal press in this way, it illustrates how working-class radicalism contributed to the rise of fascism in Italy.<sup>1</sup>*

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Historians of Italian fascism often divide the years leading up to the fascists' rise to power—from the immediate aftermath of the First World War at the beginning of 1919 to Benito Mussolini's March on Rome in October 1922—into two periods. The *biennio rosso* (red years) encompasses the emergence of the radical working-class movement from 1919 to 1920, a period marked by numerous workers' demonstrations and significant revolutionary activity from the Italian Left. In contrast, the *biennio nero* (black years) refers to the growth of the fascist movement and of fascist violence against workers from 1921 to 1922, during which Italy witnessed an explosion in both membership in and the number of *fasci* (local branches of the fascist movement).<sup>2</sup>

This historiographical periodization of 1919–1922 into 'red' and 'black' intervals is indicative of a crucial reality of the era: beyond the politicians of the Liberal, Socialist, and other parties who concerned themselves with parliamentary matters, the primary actors in Italy between the end of the First World War and the March on Rome were socialist workers and conservative industrialists, and, moreover, communist reds and fascist blackshirts. Thousands of Italian workers joined labor unions—especially those unions with radical inclinations—during the *biennio rosso*, representing a widespread mobilization of the working-class masses.<sup>3</sup> In response, urban industrialists and rural property owners organized themselves into their own associations, acting in concert to counter the economic and political threat that was the working-class movement and contributing to the anti-labor violence of the *biennio nero*.<sup>4</sup> Throughout both periods, communist and fascist revolutionaries actively sought support from the ranks of labor and capital, respectively. While the fascists were after industrialists' financing,<sup>5</sup> the communists solicited workers' support for their revolutionary program.<sup>6</sup>

The ubiquity of workers' demonstrations in 1919–1922 Italy and the *fasci*'s constant efforts to suppress them reflect the importance of these 'red' and 'black' actors to historical narratives of the rise of Italian fascism. While many more

workers' demonstrations took place during the working-class mobilization of 1919–1920, strikes—sometimes even large ones—remained a persistent phenomenon in the two years of violent fascist reaction that followed.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, while the fascist movement was too small to be a threat to striking workers during the *biennio rosso*, the end of 1920 saw an outburst in fascist violence against workers that continued throughout the *biennio nero*.<sup>8</sup> Reds' demonstrations and blackshirts' suppressions of them thus pervaded 1919–1922 Italy.

Historians have thoroughly documented the impact of these workers' demonstrations on conservative industrialists and the growth of the fascist movement. The *fasci* recruited thousands of new supporters at the end of 1920 and the start of 1921, an accomplishment which both Adrian Lyttelton and Angelo Tasca attribute primarily to the blowback from Italian workers' occupations of factories in September 1920.<sup>9</sup> According to Frank Snowden, those factory occupations, in the context of the heavy strike activity of 1919–1920, also led employers to "[push] industrial conflict to an open [and violent] showdown" and to actively support the fascist movement.<sup>10</sup> In this way, historians have identified the persistency of workers' demonstrations as a boon to the fascists' recruiting efforts and the foremost cause of conservative industrialists' support for fascism.

Yet historians of Italian fascism have paid insufficient attention to the liberal middle classes' evolving interpretations of these workers' demonstrations over the 1919–1922 period. They have instead placed their analytical focus on the actions and reactions of the era's primary 'red' and 'black' actors, those who threatened middle-class liberals from the Left and Right, respectively.<sup>11</sup> As Snowden asserts, "the chief sources of Italian fascism lie in the frontal clash between landlords and peasants," as well as between industrialists and workers, "over the issue of control of the land, the labor market, and the local government."<sup>12</sup> With this analytical framework in mind, historians have inadequately studied the role of liberal middle-class philofascism in the fascists' rise to power, glossing over the precise reasons for which that philofascism formed and the different degrees to which it did so among different subsets of the liberal population. In particular, they have failed to consider the ways in which the persistency of workers' demonstrations changed the liberal middle classes' interpretations of the working-class movement over time, contributing to the development of philofascist sentiments among middle-class liberals and expanding the Italian public's support for the fascist movement beyond Mussolini's

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over the past year and a half, without which I would have been unable to engage in the Italian-language archival research necessary for this paper. Finally, I owe much to Professor Rebecca Rix for teaching me how to properly work with primary-source documents in her historical methods course.

2 Roberto Franzosi, "The Rise of Italian Fascism (1919–1922): Changing Social Relations in Revolutionary Periods," Working Paper (The Italian Academy for Advanced Studies in America of Columbia University, 2013), <http://italianacademy.columbia.edu/sites/default/files/papers/Franzosi.pdf>, 3–5.

3 Angelo Tasca, *The Rise of Italian Fascism, 1918–1922*, trans. Peter Wait and Dorothy Wait (London: Methuen, 1938), 66.

4 Frank M. Snowden, *The Fascist Revolution in Tuscany, 1919–1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 94, 148–150.

5 Ibid., 147.

6 Adrian Lyttelton, *The Seizure of Power: Fascism in Italy, 1919–1929* (Bath: The Pitman Press, 1973), 37.

7 Franzosi, "The Rise of Italian Fascism (1919–1922)," 9.

8 Ibid., 14–17.

9 Lyttelton, *The Seizure of Power*, 38; Tasca, *The Rise of Italian Fascism*, 79.

10 Snowden, *The Fascist Revolution in Tuscany*, 143.

11 Lyttelton, *The Seizure of Power*, 30.

12 Snowden, *The Fascist Revolution in Tuscany*, 2–3.

*squadristi* (armed fascist squads) and the industrialists who funded them.

When historians have addressed the question of middle-class liberals' reactions to workers' demonstrations, they have done so in an analytically sloppy manner. Citing the liberal press as a surrogate for the liberal middle-class citizenry, Lyttelton exemplifies the various problems within the existing historiography when he declares that, in the immediate aftermath of the *biennio rosso*, "the Fascist movement was welcomed by the great majority of the Liberal press as a sign of the revival of the bourgeoisie."<sup>13</sup> First, Lyttelton presents the Italian liberal press of 1919-1922 as homogeneous, when, in reality, different liberal publications diverged in their interpretations of workers' demonstrations. Additionally, in referring to a capital-L "Liberal press," he fails to distinguish between the Liberal-party politicians who focused on the parliamentary implications of fascism and the liberal middle-class citizens who thought about its more general societal implications; Charles Maier makes a similar error when discussing "liberals' [efforts]"—by which he means Liberal politicians' efforts—"to collaborate with Fascists" after 1920.<sup>14</sup> Finally, Lyttelton employs the language of "bourgeoisie," which, though certainly reflective of the jargon that the Italian liberal press used in the 1919-1922 period, leads to carelessness in historical analysis by improperly grouping the liberal middle classes into the same sociopolitical category as conservative industrialists.

Given these shortcomings, the historiography of Italian fascism demands an analysis of the ways in which liberal middle-class interpretations of workers' demonstrations evolved over the course of the *biennio rosso* and *biennio nero*. Drawing on Lyttelton and taking the liberal press as a proxy for the liberal middle classes, I pursue such an analysis in this paper. In the immediate aftermath of the First World War, middle-class liberals condemned general strikes as unpatriotic, economically disruptive, and politically divisive acts that threatened the potential for industrial recovery and national unity in Italy. Though there was disagreement among the liberal middle classes about the merits of the workers' reasons for striking, they were unanimous in their criticism of workers' demonstrations as harmful to the Italian *patria* (fatherland). With the 1920 factory occupations and the concurrent emergence of workers' self-defense groups, the liberal middle classes began associating workers' demonstrations with physical and ideological violence. Finally, during the *biennio nero*, middle-class liberals blamed workers' demonstrations for the continuing armament of the *fasci* and the increasingly popular appeal of fascism. Some even expressed explicitly philofascist sympathies, citing the fascists' successful suppression of disruptive and divisive workers' demonstrations.

The persistency of general strikes, factory occupations, and workers' self-defense groups over the 1919-1922 thus turned Italian middle-class liberals increasingly sympathetic to fascism. Though the liberal middle classes were not unanimous in their philofascist sentiments in the months just before Mussolini's March on Rome, the writer Renato Simoni was accurate in the declaration he made in his summer 1922 column for the newspaper *L'Illustrazione italiana*: "the [workers' demonstration], which was supposed to be a large protest against fascism, has enabled fascism to demonstrate its merits."<sup>15</sup> Not all middle-class liberals were convinced by these merits—that is, by the way fascists violently challenged the radical labor activity and ceaseless workers' demonstrations of the *biennio rosso*—but some certainly were.

### A Word on Method

Though liberal journalists were members of the liberal middle classes, the sentiments that they expressed toward workers' demonstrations in their articles and columns were not fully representative of those of all middle-class liberals in 1919-1922 Italy. These journalists formed a sort of liberal intelligentsia, and the intelligentsia and the masses did not have to agree on all matters political. For that reason, the claims that I make about the liberal middle classes' changing interpretations of general strikes, factory occupations, and workers' self-defense groups are necessarily extrapolations from my analysis of the liberal press's interpretations of those demonstrations.

Yet there remains merit in using the liberal press as a proxy for the liberal middle classes. For the Italian middle-class liberals during the *biennio rosso* and *biennio nero* whose lives did not revolve around parliamentary matters, and who were not the primary actors creating the political realities of the era, the newspapers that they read shaped their interpretation of those political realities. In this way, widely read liberal publications' coverage of workers' demonstrations in 1919-1922 Italy sheds light on the liberal middle classes' reactions to those demonstrations. The liberal press's coverage influenced, shaped, and even determined their reactions.

On this basis, my analysis draws on the historical archives of two newspapers that were popular among the Italian liberal middle classes during the *biennio rosso* and *biennio nero*: *La Stampa* and *L'Illustrazione Italiana*, both of whose historical archives are fully digitalized and freely accessible online. Unfortunately, the historical archives of other major Italian newspapers popular during the 1919-1922 period, including *Il Messaggero* and *Il Corriere della Sera*, are either inaccessible online or are digitally accessible only at a financial cost. However, this paper's limited scope, combined with the complete-

13 Lyttelton, *The Seizure of Power*, 38.

14 Charles S. Maier, *Recasting Bourgeois Europe: Stabilization in France, Germany, and Italy in the Decade after World War I* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 322.

15 Renato Simoni, "Intermezzi," *L'Illustrazione italiana*, 6 August 1922, p. 156. « Così lo sciopero, che doveva essere una grande protesta contro il fascismo, ha dato modo al fascismo di mostrarsi benemerito. »



ness of *La Stampa*'s and *L'Illustrazione*'s online archives and the diversity of viewpoints that they express between them, make it unnecessary to pursue access to these other newspapers' archives.

Founded in Turin, *La Stampa* was one of the foremost liberal dailies in pre-fascist Italy. Since the *Risorgimento*, it had been one of the strongest, most vocal voices for liberalism and democracy in the nation and was thus a favorite of the liberal middle classes.<sup>16</sup> During the war, it generally agreed with the political positions of Giovanni Giolitti, the politician and former prime minister who was against Italy's participation in the First World War<sup>17</sup> and whose "grand design" for the Italian government's domestic policy was that of a "reforming ministry with Socialist support."<sup>18</sup> In this way, *La Stampa* was the voice of what could be called social liberalism—an ideology of liberal democracy that was sympathetic to the social and economic issues faced by workers and the lower classes—in the liberal press.

*L'Illustrazione italiana* was a Milanese weekly that was, on the other hand, more tailored to an upper middle-class readership and thus more skeptical of the working-class movement. Though its popularity suffered a decline in the aftermath of the First World War,<sup>19</sup> it still maintained a large liberal middle-class audience during the 1919-1922 period.<sup>20</sup> The newspaper was unique for the articles that famous Italian writers, like the renowned playwright Luigi Pirandello, contributed to it, as well as for the photos and illustrations that it published.<sup>21</sup> Though its coverage was generally more oriented to the arts than to politics, each issue contained at least a couple pages of commentary on current events, whether in the columns of the aforementioned Renato Simini, writing under the pseudonym *Nobiluomo* (Nobleman) Vidal,<sup>22</sup> or in published series of photos.

Using the historical archives of both *La Stampa* and *L'Illustrazione italiana*, I draw on the various differences between the two publications—one a daily, the other a weekly; the former's social liberalism versus the latter's skepticism of the working-class movement; *La Stampa*'s imageless coverage compared to *L'Illustrazione*'s visual approach—to make claims about the liberal press's general coverage of workers' demonstrations during the *biennio rosso* and *biennio nero*. I also highlight the instances where the two publications diverge in their coverage, demonstrating, for example, that middle-class liberals did not unanimously embrace philofascism by the time Mussolini pursued the March on Rome.

Given the limited scope of this paper, I treat the individual workers' demonstrations that I investigate as case studies of liberal press coverage in 1919-1922 Italy. To ensure the generalizability of the claims that I make for this period, I have selected one workers' demonstration for each of the four years that make up the *biennio rosso* and *biennio nero*. My four case studies are: the general strike of July 1919, the factory occupations of September 1920, the *arditi del popolo*'s demonstration of July 1921, and the general strike of August 1922.

The four demonstrations were not identical. Two (1919, 1922) were general strikes in which workers refused to attend work, another (1920) involved factory occupations during which workers' took command of their workplaces, and another (1921) featured the paramilitary exercises of an armed workers' self-defense group. However, to the liberal press covering these different events—*scioperi*, *occupazioni*, *guardie rosse*—they were all simply *dimostrazioni*: public displays of workers disrupting economic activity, asserting their class consciousness, and engaging in an activity that provoked violence along class lines. The different events also shared similarities beyond the coincidence that they took place in the summer.<sup>23</sup> All of them featured workers engaging in public protest, whether by abstention from the workplace or by workplace occupation, and workers' self-defense groups were present at half of them (1920, 1921).

For these reasons, I classify all four events as manifestations of the same phenomenon—workers' demonstrations—and analyze *La Stampa*'s and *L'Illustrazione italiana*'s changing coverage of them during the *biennio rosso* and *biennio nero* based on this premise. Using the four case studies, I track the evolution of middle-class liberals' interpretations of workers' demonstrations from 1919 to 1922: from their condemnation of it as an unpatriotic, economically disruptive, politically divisive act in 1919; to their reinterpretation of it by 1920 as a cause of violence; and eventually to their belief during the *biennio nero* that it was the reason for the fascist movement's continuing armament and growing appeal to the liberal middle classes.

16 *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, s.v. "La Stampa," accessed 29 November 2015, <http://www.britannica.com/topic/La-Stampa>.

17 Giolitti opposed Italian participation in the war when he was prime minister in the first half of the 1910s and emphasized the war's disastrous consequences after it ended in 1919. *Enciclopedia Treccani*, s.v. "La Stampa," accessed 30 November 2015, <http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/la-stampa/>; Giovanni Giolitti, "Discorso per le elezioni della XXV legislatura," *La Stampa*, 13 October 1919, p. 1; Leonardo Rapone, "Giolitti. Le conseguenze per l'Italia della Grande guerra," *Italianeuropei*, 21 September 2011.

18 Lyttelton, *The Seizure of Power*, 21.

19 "*L'Illustrazione italiana*," Biblioteca Provinciale Italiana Claudia Augusta, accessed 29 November 2015, <http://www.bpi.claudiaugusta.it/en/periodicivari.cfm>.

20 Anna Tonelli, *E ballando ballando: La storia d'Italia a passi di danza (1815-1996)* (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 1998), 148, n. 97.

21 "*L'Illustrazione italiana*," Biblioteca Provinciale Italiana Claudia Augusta, accessed 29 November 2015, <http://www.bpi.claudiaugusta.it/en/periodicivari.cfm>.

22 "Renato Simoni," Fondazione Franco Fossati, accessed 28 December 2015, <http://www.lfb.it/fff/giorn/aut/s/simoni.htm>.

23 On the possible casual relationship between the summer heat and working-class radicalism, I have nothing to say.

## The General Strike of July 1919

In the immediate aftermath of the First World War and only a few weeks after the signing of the Treaty of Versailles, the socialist parties and labor unions in Italy, France, and England planned an international general strike for 20-21 July 1919,<sup>24</sup> the aim of which was to condemn and demand an end to Allied governments' military interventions in the new Russian and Hungarian Soviet Republics.<sup>25</sup> Italy had experienced significant radical labor activity during the immediate months prior to the demonstration, with workers' councils emerging in large numbers and general strikes occurring throughout the country since the start of the summer. In line with this growing revolutionary fervor, the vision underlying the planned strike was that of the *scioperissimo*: "the climactic supreme strike" that would unleash socialist revolution in Italy.<sup>26</sup>

In a front-page editorial less than a week before the planned international general strike, *La Stampa* expressed sympathy for the basis on which Italian and other European workers intended to strike. The demonstration was a "protest by the Italian, French, and English proletariat against the Allied governments" for the inconsistency between their words and actions, as exemplified by their conduct toward socialist Russia and Hungary. Despite the Allies' claims to "[fighting] for liberty ... the equality of peoples and classes, [and] the betterment of all," the results of their wartime policies were "the hegemony of some nations over others ... the sharpening of [socioeconomic] differences, [and] the destruction of collective wealth." Praising socialists' opposition to and criticism of Italy's participation in World War I, the newspaper presented itself as united with the workers in their opposition to and criticism of the Allies' interventions in Russia and Hungary.<sup>27</sup>

Yet, in the same editorial, *La Stampa* criticized Italian workers on multiple fronts for their plans to participate in the international general strike. The newspaper questioned the alleged internationalism of the proposed demonstration, noting that, whereas Italian laborers planned to strike for two straight days, their French counterparts planned to do so for only twenty-four hours and the English workers did not intend to at all. It also highlighted the fact that the Italian government, unlike the governments of France and England, was not militarily intervening in Russia or Hungary, casting doubt on the direct purpose of the general strike in Italy and the meaningful changes in policy that could result from it. Above all, however, *La Stampa* emphasized the economic disruptiveness and political divisiveness of the demonstration.

The strike would have "damaging effects ... on the national economy" and "would be a disaster for all ... bourgeois and proletarian alike." Furthermore, it would divide the Italian working class along ideological lines: the "Italian populace [was] made up of innumerable proletarians who [were] not socialists," so the strikers could not truthfully present themselves as a "universal proletarian force." Overall, the strike would make it impossible to achieve the "new society"—in which everyone was of the "same mind" and was "cooperative, informed, and efficient"—that Italy so badly needed in the aftermath of the war.<sup>28</sup>

In this way, *La Stampa*'s editorial condemnation of the planned international general strike embodied the newspaper's visions of national unity in postwar Italy. By sympathizing with the workers' reasons for striking, the newspaper demonstrated the potential for agreement along class lines, namely, for shared political sentiments between workers and the liberal middle classes. By criticizing the actual tactic of the general strike, it also showed how divisive acts like worker demonstrations could undermine that potential for agreement; besides, there was no need for a strike when "parliamentary political pressure alone could easily" change the policies of the Italian government—for example, its official position on foreign socialist states.<sup>29</sup> Finally, *La Stampa* emphasized that the fate of national unity in postwar Italy rested on the economic stability of the country: both workers and industrialists would benefit from the nation's economic recovery after the war, a cause that superseded class-specific interests.

With its praise of the Italian railway workers' later decision to not partake in the 20-21 July strike, *La Stampa* clarified its conception of workers' roles in its envisioned "new society" and of the threat that workers' demonstrations represented to that vision. The newspaper declared that "the renunciation of the strike is a credit to the strong organization of Italian railway workers [and] will be reason for unanimous relief [in] Italy," underlining how important the cooperation of labor unions would be to the stable recovery of the Italian economy after the war. Furthermore, it asserted that the railway workers' decision to abstain from the strike did not contradict their devotion to the cause of the laborers who did participate: "the Union of Railway Workers [did] not go back on its moral solidarity with all the other categories of workers in the international demonstration against the peace of Versailles" and instead merely "[demonstrated] a clear awareness of its own force and responsibility in ... the national life" of Italy. The newspaper thus characterized the railway workers' renunciation of the strike as an act of "patriotism" while condemning the strike for the "serious harm" it would cause Italy's "already grave economic situation." *La Stampa*'s envisaged "new society" would consider cooperative workers

<sup>24</sup> Maier, *Recasting Bourgeois Europe*, 117.

<sup>25</sup> "Il manifesto per lo sciopero del 21," *La Stampa*, 16 July 1919, p. 1.

<sup>26</sup> Maier, *Recasting Bourgeois Europe*, 117-118.

<sup>27</sup> "Come si prepara la manifestazione del proletariato internazionale: La protesta dei popoli," *La Stampa*, 16 July 1919, p. 1.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

patriotic and striking workers irresponsibly disruptive.<sup>30</sup>

The day before the start of the general strike of 20-21 July, *La Stampa* outlined its expectations for how the strike would interfere with everyday life in Rome. During the *scioperissimo*, the newspaper alleged, “the streetcar conductors and coachmen would completely be on strike,” ensuring delays in travel time for Rome’s inhabitants. Additionally, the strike would close down the majority of the city’s retail and entrainment outlets—consumers would lose access to most stores, markets, theaters, and cinemas.<sup>31</sup> The newspaper also engaged in more explicit forms of fear mongering, warning of potential violence by publishing a note transmitted to it by the press agency *L’Agenzia Stefani* regarding crimes that had taken place the day before the planned general strike; in particular, a number of attacks had been made on railway lines since the railway workers’ announced their decision to abstain from the demonstration. In response to these attacks, the “heads of the political and economic organizations favorable to the general strike ... must think about the danger with which their activities coincide” and be aware that the authorities are ready to react against “the agitators of unrest.”<sup>32</sup> By publishing this note and predicting the aforementioned disruptions to everyday life in Rome, *La Stampa* thus propagated the notion that the international general strike would represent an act of patriotic irresponsibility on the part of participating Italian laborers, in contrast to the patriotic and responsible decision of the nation’s railway workers to abstain from it.

However, as a result of much less participation by workers than expected, *La Stampa*’s predictions of the strike’s disruptiveness proved to be exaggerated, as suggested by its front-page headline on the day after the demonstration’s conclusion: “the general strike unfolded without incident throughout Italy.” The newspaper maintained its praise for the railway workers’ decision to not partake in the strike: “if the economic and moral consequences of the strikes were less grave [than expected], one owes it to the fact that the railways continued to function.”<sup>33</sup> It published another note from *L’Agenzia Stefani* that emphasized the normalcy of the transportation situation in Rome, demonstrating the extent to which it had overestimated the strike’s effects.<sup>34</sup>

Yet *La Stampa* also commended the Italian working class as a whole for the fact that “the two days of striking passed with

maximal order, without the smallest incident taking place.” It celebrated the “discipline and sense of responsibility of [Italy’s] working masses,” especially those workers who chose to entirely abstain from the demonstration after realizing that “the Italian proletariat had compelled itself to do the work” to which the French and English proletariats had refused to fully commit.<sup>35</sup> By emphasizing how most public services and private businesses were operating regularly during the two days of the strike, by underlining the “absolute calm” that characterized cities over the forty-eight-hour period,<sup>36</sup> the newspaper showed that, in their mass abstention from the general strike, Italian workers proved themselves capable of being responsible patriots and invested participants in the politics of national unity that *La Stampa* envisioned for postwar Italy. The newspaper’s praise here for Italian workers demonstrates the extent to which it viewed their original plans for the *scioperissimo* as a serious threat to that vision.

In his analysis of the Italian public’s reactions to the general strike of 20-21 July 1919, Maier fails to take into account this emphasis that the Italian liberal middle classes placed on the need for national unity in the aftermath of the First World War. Maier’s narrative is consistent with *La Stampa* regarding the dearth of workers’ participation in the strike and the lack of economic disruption that emerged from it: in the eyes of the socialist agitators and radical laborers who organized it, the strike represented “the failure of the *scioperissimo*.” According to Maier, the strike nevertheless set “bourgeois opinion ... on edge,” mobilizing the various forces of the Italian bourgeoisie—“veterans’ associations, *fasci*, and old conservatives”—into active condemnation of working-class radicalism and of the Italian government’s handling of it. In Maier’s account, the July demonstration, in the broader context of the “cresting and ebbing of the 1919 strikes” in Italy, “stiffened bourgeois resistance” and strengthened anti-socialist sentiments among the bourgeoisie.<sup>37</sup>

However, by adopting “bourgeoisie” as an analytical category, Maier loses sight of the liberal middle classes’ unique perspective on and opinion of the 20-21 July strike and the strikes of 1919 more generally. Maier’s conception of the Italian bourgeoisie recklessly groups together the various socioeconomic classes and political interest groups that actively opposed working-class radicalism: conservative industrialists, fascist militants, Liberal politicians, and middle-class liberals alike make up this classification. In this way, he glosses over the liberal middle classes’ focus on the threat that workers’

30 “I Ferrovieri italiani rinunciano allo sciopero: La decisione del Comitato Centrale del Sindacato,” *La Stampa*, 17 July 1919, p. 1.

31 “Che cosa sarà Roma in questi due giorni: Un comizio con Turati annunciato per lunedì,” *La Stampa*, 20 July 1919, p. 1.

32 “Attentati con esplosivi a linee ferroviarie: Nuovo monito governativo,” *La Stampa*, 20 July 1919, p. 1.

33 “Lo sciopero generale svoltosi senza incidenti in tutta Italia,” *La Stampa*, 22 July 1920, p. 1.

34 “Il contegno dei ferrovieri superiore ad ogni elogio,” *La Stampa*, 22 July 1920, p. 1.

35 “Lo sciopero generale svoltosi senza incidenti in tutta Italia,” *La Stampa*, 22 July 1920, p. 1. Both English and French workers’ organizations had eventually decided to completely abstain from the international general strike, despite their governments being the ones intervening in socialist Russia and Hungary.

36 “Le due giornate di sciopero: I ferrovieri sono rimasti in servizio,” *La Stampa*, 22 July 1920, p. 3.

37 Maier, *Recasting Bourgeois Europe*, 117-118.

demonstrations represented for postwar national unity.

Maier's use of bourgeoisie as an analytical category also masks the differences that existed among the Italian liberal middle classes in their interpretations of the strike. For example, it causes him to lose sight of a concern of upper middle-class liberals in particular, as epitomized by *L'Illustrazione italiana*'s coverage of the 20-21 July strike: there were dangerously close links between the Italian working class and the new socialist states in Russia and Hungary.

In its coverage a week before the general strike, *L'Illustrazione italiana* adopted a language that was far more critical than *La Stampa* of Italian workers' reasons and plans for the demonstration. Their reasons for demonstrating against France and England's interventions in socialist Russia and Hungary dumbfounded Renato Simoni, the newspaper's weekly column writer on all matters political. While the "English proletariat ... [limited] itself to striking morally" and France's strike "[would] last only for the twenty-four hour that [coincided] with Sunday's work holiday," Italian workers planned to strike for a forty-eight hour period that included a busy Monday, despite the Italian government's complete nonintervention in the new socialist states. In this way, the "strike served the cause of [not the Italian] proletariat ... but certainly the cause of the English and French and Spanish and Portuguese and Swedish and ... German proletariats."<sup>38</sup> It did nothing for the Italian working class, whose government was not intervening in Russia and Hungary. Instead, it merely helped the working classes of other European nations in their fight for a cause for which they themselves refused to strike.

Simoni's criticism of Italian workers' plans to participate in the general strike reflected his concerns about their relationship with Bolshevism, which he considered a foreign threat to Italy's liberal middle classes. He characterized France's and England's military interventions in Russia and Hungary as "languid," implying a preference for a more targeted and inspired intervention in these countries. He also complained that "Italy did nothing to impede the prospering of soviets in Russia," whereas "Russia made use of Angelica Balabanoff,"<sup>39</sup> a major figure in the European socialist movement that was politically active in Italy,<sup>40</sup> "to sticks its nose in the [nation's] matters."<sup>41</sup> While Italian workers wanted to strike against Allied intervention in the socialist states, the socialist states were intervening in Italy and interfering with its politics.

Following Simoni's article in that week's issue were a se-

ries of photos of the events in Hungary that provide further insight into *L'Illustrazione*'s concerns about international Bolshevism. A number of photos depicted Hungarian communists' military struggle against the intervening French and English forces, illustrating the intimidating organization and coordination of the Hungarian radicals. Additionally, one photo noted the presence of Italian socialist deputies in Budapest, demonstrating the newspaper's worries about the Italian Left's interactions with and relations to international Bolshevism.<sup>42</sup>

*L'Illustrazione* thus rejected the basis on which—as a protest against Allied intervention in socialist Russia and Hungary—workers planned to participate in the 20-21 July strike. In contrast to *La Stampa*'s sympathies with the Italian workers' objections to the intervention, *L'Illustrazione* was sympathetic to the intervention itself. Bolshevism in Russia and Hungary and the Italian proletariat's willingness to demonstrate in its defense represented a threat that Italian middle-class liberals needed to take seriously.

Notwithstanding their differing positions on Allied activity in socialist Russia and Hungary, *L'Illustrazione* agreed with *La Stampa* in its condemnation of the Italian workers' actual decision to strike. In the aftermath of the strikes that had already taken place throughout 1919, Simoni expressed a sense of strike-related fatigue: "once again a strike—is it possible that we can be granted a month of tranquility and of work?" Furthermore, Simoni emphasized that, while the strike would disrupt everyday life for the bourgeoisie, the poor and lower middle classes would be the ones primarily suffering the economic hardship it would cause. "There will be a scarcity of goods," the train and streetcar stoppage will force the poorer classes to "stay in their cities, villages, and hamlets as if in prison," and "there will be less food in the marketplace." In this way, *L'Illustrazione* matched *La Stampa* its its predictions of the 20-21 July general strike's economic disruptiveness. Italian liberals were in agreement that war-ravaged Italy could not handle the economic instability that the strike threatened.<sup>43</sup>

In its celebration of German national unity, *L'Illustrazione* also implicitly matched *La Stampa* in its calls for such unity in postwar Italy. In his column, Simoni complained that "we [Italians] strike for others [while] others work for us and prepare goods to sell to us, devouring our wealth." In the same article, while discussing an Italian socialist's recent claim that Italy was "a fatherland that deserved to be defended," Simoni declared that "Italy is not a fatherland, or at least it is not considered as such by the socialists that [tried] to sabotage" its efforts during World War I. Comparing Italian workers to their German counterparts, he praised the latter for their

38 Renato Simoni, "Intermezzi," *L'Illustrazione Italiana*, 20 July 1919, p. 58.

39 Ibid., 58.

40 *Encyclopedia of the Jewish Women's Archive*, s.v. "Angelica Balabanoff," accessed 24 December 2015, <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/balabanoff-angelica>.

41 Simoni, "Intermezzi," *L'Illustrazione Italiana*, 20 July 1919, p. 58.

42 "Il tentativo di sollevazione antibolscevica a Budapest," *La Stampa*, 20 July 1919, pp. 61-63.

43 Simoni, "Intermezzi," *L'Illustrazione Italiana*, 20 July 1919, p. 58.



“steadfastness, activity, [and] earnestness” in their work while condemning the former for their “public demonstrations, frenetic speeches, and constant strikes.” Germany was thus a “fatherland that deserved to be defended,” but Italy had yet to become one.<sup>44</sup> The political divisiveness of the 20-21 July general strike would only make it more difficult for Italy to become such a *patria*.

Overall, the Italian liberal press’s coverage of the 20-21 July 1919 general strike emphasized the strike’s economic disruptiveness and political divisiveness, which together threatened the possibility of national unity in postwar Italy. While *La Stampa* was sympathetic to Italian workers’ reasons for striking whereas *L’Illustrazione italiana* expressed concern about their relations with Russian and Hungarian Bolshevism, both publications condemned the strike as unpatriotic and antithetical to their visions for an Italy united across class lines. The two publications’ coverage is indicative of the Italian liberal middle classes’ unanimous focus in 1919 on achieving national unity in postwar Italy and condemnation of workers’ demonstrations as a threat to such unity, as well as of the disagreements among middle-class liberals about the threat of international Bolshevism and its relationship with the Italian working-class movement.

### The Factory Occupations of September 1920

Between the general strike of 1919 and the factory occupations of September 1920, especially in the early months of 1920, middle-class liberals witnessed an outburst in both the number of workers’ demonstrations in Italy and the number of workers participating in them.<sup>45</sup> This immediate period before the factory occupations represented the peak of the working-class movement during the *biennio rosso*, as the hopes that *La Stampa* had expressed after the failure of the 1919 general strike about workers embracing a politics of national unity proved to be naive. Indeed, it is with these prior months of radical labor activity in mind that, over the course of the 1920 factory occupations, the Italian liberal middle classes began to reinterpret workers’ demonstration as a cause of violence rather than merely an unpatriotic act.

In Tasca’s narrative, the Federation of Metallurgical Workers (FIOM), reacting to employers’ refusal to agree to a new wage agreement and too exhausted to carry out another lengthy strike, “ordered its members [on 30 August 1920] to occupy the factories” where they worked.<sup>46</sup> Amidst the widespread radical labor activity that had taken place throughout that year, many of the workers who participated in the factory occupations were motivated by the ideology of maximalism: the “theory and practice to base an organization [for the working-class movement] on the factory councils [that] had achieved a fair degree of maturity and power” in Italian cities

and whose aims were revolutionary, in contrast to the reform-mindedness of the Socialist Party.<sup>47</sup> The goals of FIOM’s leadership were less ambitious, as they merely wanted to “provoke government intervention” and “cherished the hope that [the occupation’s] political outcome might lead to the socialists taking a share” in the national government. However, the movement to occupy the factories quickly spread across Italy and took on a revolutionary character, as “the control of the factories passed into the hands of workers’ committees [that] did all they could to maintain output” while “red guards” emerged to protect the participating workers.<sup>48</sup>

In its initial coverage of the occupations, *La Stampa* emphasized the surprising ability of the workers’ committees to maintain order and production in the factories. A front-page article from the September 3<sup>rd</sup> edition of the newspaper explained that the first few days of the factory occupations were characterized by a degree of “obstructionism [which became] more accentuated” as time wore on, and that this was to be expected given the workers’ “lack of managerial intellect.” However, the newspaper underlined the commendable efforts of the workers’ councils to maintain production and order within the factories: “the workers [at each factory remained] ... gathered up in their respective departments ... [tending] regularly to their work,” while red guards maintained “scrupulous surveillance” over the factory’s internal order and the security of its entrances.<sup>49</sup> In its early coverage of the factory occupations, *La Stampa* thus expressed tacit admiration for the workers’ ability to effectively organize themselves, as disruptions to production had been minimal up to that point. It sympathized with the workers for their management efforts during the occupations just as it had with workers’ reasons for wanting to participating in the 1919 international general strike.

However, reminiscent of its publication of *L’Agenzia Stefani*’s warnings about the violence taking place immediately before the 1919 strike, *La Stampa*’s early coverage of the occupations also reflected the newspaper’s worries about the unrest that could emerge from them. The front page of the same September 3<sup>rd</sup> issue discussed a number of instances of violence that had occurred during the first few days of the occupations. The newspaper reported that royal guardsmen and the police scuffled with workers outside the Fiat factory in the Turinese district of Lingotto, at whom they later shot after a bomb was thrown from the first floor of the factory.<sup>50</sup> Workers at another Fiat factory allegedly assaulted and shot a factory watchman for writing “Socialist swine” on a union poster.<sup>51</sup> In another case, workers occupying the factory of a

44 Ibid., 58.

45 Franzosi, “The Rise of Italian Fascism (1919-1922),” 9.

46 Tasca, *The Rise of Italian Fascism*, 75.

47 Ibid., 73.

48 Ibid., 76.

49 “Gli stabilimenti torinesi sotto il ‘regime’ operaio,” *La Stampa*, 3 September 1920, p. 1.

50 “L’irruzione della Polizia alla Fiat-Lingotto,” *La Stampa*, 3 September 1920, p. 1.

51 “Clamoroso episodio in Corso Dante: Scambio di rivoltellate,”



French firm operating in Italy took its expatriate senior manager hostage.<sup>52</sup> Thus, despite any appreciation it had for the workers councils' attempts to maintain order in the occupied factories, *La Stampa* flagged the early violence that resulted from them as a cause for concern. Though the occupations as a whole had not yet necessarily become violent, the first days of the demonstration suggested that it contained the potential for widespread violence.

The newspaper's early distress about the factory occupations foreshadowed its increasingly critical coverage of them over the course of September 1920. Ten days after the start of the occupations, the newspaper offered a detailed description of the red guards who were protecting the occupying workers; it called them members of a "Worker Police Corps [that] made use of ... war and military phrases," implying that they were a combative and bellicose group of radicals.<sup>53</sup> A few days later, the publication alluded to the growing "desolation of city streets" and declining financial means of working-class families, highlighting the increasing disruption to the economy and everyday life caused by the factory occupations.<sup>54</sup> By mid-September, *La Stampa* condemned "the hundreds of bullets fired" over the course of the occupations and accused the red guards of "[being] very irritable and very easily alarmed ... when there [was] no real basis for such alarm."<sup>55</sup> Finally, in late September, as it discussed the impending resolution of negotiations between workers and their employers to end the occupations, the newspaper dejectedly listed the names of workers who had been recently killed and declared that it "[hoped] to no longer have to record [the] victims of this sad period."<sup>56</sup>

In this way, over the course of the factory occupations, *La Stampa* reinterpreted the workers' demonstration to be a fundamental cause of violence. While it continued to acknowledge the economic disruptiveness of the occupations, the newspaper's focus turned to the violence that emerged from the demonstration and the red guards' contribution to that violence. Its coverage no longer featured any appreciation for the workers' attempts at maintaining order. Instead, its pages were full of condemnations of the deaths and unrest

caused by the occupations.

*La Stampa's* reinterpretation here of workers' demonstrations as an inherently violent phenomenon is consistent with the existing consensus among historians of Italian fascism that the September 1920 factory occupations drastically altered "bourgeois" sentiments regarding the radical working-class movement. While industrialists had already viewed radical laborers as a threat in the years before the occupations, the disorder and disruptions that emerged from them provoked a previously unseen degree of fear in the Italian bourgeoisie. According to Snowden, "the strength and unity of the Occupation movement" came as a shock to the wealthier substrata of Italian society; "particularly worrying was the solidarity of the working class as a whole in response to the agitation of the metallurgical workers," as well as the organized, armed threat that the red guards represented.<sup>57</sup> As a result of the factory occupations, employers began to emphasize and condemn the violence of workers' demonstrations and the working-class radicalism implicit in that violence.

Lyttelton and Tasca also identify the factory occupations as the direct cause of the rapid growth of the fascist movement at the end of 1920 and the start of 1921. Lyttelton discerns "fear and indignation [in] bourgeois opinion" in the aftermath of the strike, arguing that fascism's rapid growth in the months immediately after the occupations was precisely a result of this fear and indignation.<sup>58</sup> Tasca is even more emphatic in his view of the occupations' causal significance, declaring that "the occupation of the factories gave the bourgeoisie a psychological shock [that] guided" the violent actions they later took against the working-class movement: "the hour of fascism had come."<sup>59</sup>

However, while both Lyttelton and Tasca devote more time to analyzing the reactionary sentiments that the factory occupations inspired in Italian industrialists, *La Stampa's* increasing criticism of the working-class movement in its September coverage of the occupations demonstrates that they had a similar psychological shock on the liberal middle classes. The *potential* for violence that middle-class liberals had previously identified in workers' demonstrations, both during the July 1919 general strike and at the start of the September 1920 factory occupations, had become a violent *reality*, leaving them more hostile to and worried about the working-class movement than they had ever been before.

Expanding on its unsympathetic position toward the working-class movement from the 1919 general strike, *L'illustrazione italiana* covered the events of September 1920 in a way that went beyond *La Stampa's* focus on the physical violence resulting from the factory occupations and that emphasized the mentality of class warfare—the ideological violence—embodied in the demonstration. The newspaper's initial characterization of the occupations suggests that it

*La Stampa*, 3 September 1920, p.1.

52 "Un ostaggio... francese," *La Stampa*, 3 September 1920, p. 1.

53 "Le 'guardie rosse,'" *La Stampa*, 9 September 1920, p. 3. This characterization of the red guards as a military-like band of radicals is ironically reminiscent of historians's later descriptions of fascist paramilitary groups.

54 "La situazione a Torino," *La Stampa*, 13 September 1920, p. 1.

55 "La giornata nelle officine," *La Stampa*, 16 September 1920, p. 3.

56 "I funerali delle altre vittime," *La Stampa*, 27 September 1920, p. 3. It is unclear *who* killed the workers, but the lack of mention of any perpetrators suggests it was the police or some other government security forces whom *La Stampa* did not wish to indict. There also exists the possibility that the killers were early fascist *squadristi*, though *La Stampa* made no mention of fascism or *squadrisimo* in its coverage of the occupation.

57 Frank M. Snowden, *The Fascist Revolution in Tuscany*, 146.

58 Lyttelton, *The Seizure of Power*, 37.

59 Tasca, *The Rise of Italian Fascism*, 80-81.

shared *La Stampa*'s original view that the workers councils were a benign threat. According to *L'Illustrazione*, just as "little boys [played] shopkeeper, grocer, salesman, [and] sailor" to feel what it was like to be an adult, Italian workers were childishly taking over factories in order to feel what it was like to be a production manager. For this reason, the revolutionary aspirations of the maximalist working-class movement represented nothing more than the "infancy of a [naïve] new society [that mimicked] the toils of grown-up society." In *L'Illustrazione*'s view, and as alluded to by *La Stampa*, the occupying workers simply lacked the technical knowledge and intelligence necessary to efficiently run factories on their own.<sup>60</sup> The factory occupations were an inconvenient nuisance to Italian society but were too "childlike" and uncoordinated to pose an existential threat to it.

Like *La Stampa*, *L'Illustrazione* also expressed early signs of concern about the dangers that could potentially emanate from the factory occupations. In its first issue after the start of the occupations, the newspaper took note of the worrisome ideology of class struggle underlying the efforts of the workers' councils and offered a defensive response to it: "not on the side of management is their hatred and contempt for the [working] masses," as the occupying workers so claimed, but rather "in the masses [was] there hatred and contempt for management." Additionally, *L'Illustrazione* discussed the Italian and Russian radicals' shared failure to realize the importance of managerial and engineering knowledge to the successful operation of factories, demonstrating the newspaper's focus on the disconcerting ideological links between Italy's maximalist workers' councils and Bolshevik Russia's soviets. Finally, the newspaper placed emphasis on the disconcerting paramilitary character of the factory occupations, paralleling *La Stampa*'s characterization of the red guards as a "Worker Police Corps."<sup>61</sup>

*L'Illustrazione*'s coverage of the occupations developed over the course of September 1920 in a way that the underlined the ideological violence of the demonstration—that is, the war against the "bourgeois" classes that the occupations represented. During the second week of the occupations, the newspaper detailed how the Italian middle classes were so taken back by the occupations that it feared "irritating the workers with patriotic celebrations [of the recapture of Rome that were] unpleasant to the proletariat." In the same issue, weekly column writer Renato Simoni further captured middle-class liberals' growing sense of class insecurity: "we pass from danger to danger! Oh how tragic is the life of the poor bourgeois in Italy!"<sup>62</sup> Seven days later, he criticized the occupying workers for being "unsatiated and insatiable" in their

demands to their employers and accused them of "wanting the industrialists, after having licked off all the salt, to eat the plate too": the workers "were not content with [mere] control of the factories [but demanded] the factories and the industrialists [themselves]."<sup>63</sup> In the newspaper's view, the occupiers did not merely want to secure a stronger position in wage negotiations or increased workers' participation in management decisions. Rather, their motivating ideology was allegedly a violent one that sought to devour their employers and endangered the "poor bourgeois."

This latter comment reflects *L'Illustrazione*'s view that, with the September 1920 factory occupations, workers' demonstrations attained a new ideological character that middle-class liberals interpreted as a fundamental challenge to the possibility of middle-class life. The same week, Simoni's fellow *L'Illustrazione* writer Ugo Ojetti, a prominent novelist and art critic,<sup>64</sup> echoed the other's commentary on the insecurity of the liberal middle classes, authoring a satirical piece in which a liberal "bourgeois" engineer asked: "the occupation of my workshop, of my machines, of my company, even the appropriation of my persona, are those not tragic?"<sup>65</sup> In Ojetti's conception, the factory occupations were an act of ideological violence by which workers not only took control of middle-class liberals' workplaces but also appropriated their identities as skilled laborers and factory managers. As a demonstration of workers' will to self-management, the occupations threatened to render middle-class life impossible.

In all these ways, *L'Illustrazione italiana* joined *La Stampa* in giving voice to the psychological shock that the Italy's liberal middle classes experienced in response to the factory occupations. While *La Stampa* responded to the occupations by emphasizing the physical violence inherent in workers' demonstrations, *L'Illustrazione* reacted to them by underlining the ideological violence and mentality of class warfare that they embodied. The occupations thus led middle-class liberals to reinterpret workers' demonstrations as fundamentally violent and to become more vocally opposed to the working-class movement than they previously were, just as the occupations galvanized conservative industrialists—those to which Snowden, Lyttelton, and Tasca devote most of their attention—into supporting the fascists. This reinterpretation prefigured middle-class liberals' later assertions during the *biennio nero* that the violence of workers' demonstrations made fascism more appealing to the Italian public.

### The Arditi del Popolo's Demonstration of July 1921

The fascist movement burgeoned in the months after the

60 Renato Simoni, "Intermezzi," *L'Illustrazione italiana*, 12 September 1920, p. 324.

61 Ibid., 324; "Le 'guardie rosse,'" *La Stampa*, 9 September 1920, p. 3.

62 Renato Simoni, "Intermezzi," *L'Illustrazione italiana*, 19 September 1920, p. 352.

63 Renato Simoni, "Intermezzi," *L'Illustrazione italiana*, 26 September 1920, p. 388.

64 *Enciclopedia Treccani*, s.v. "Ugo Ojetti," accessed 30 November 2015, <http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/la-stampa/>.

65 Ugo Ojetti, "La guardia rossa e l'orologio," *L'Illustrazione italiana*, 26 September 1920, p. 392.

factory occupations. As the *fasci* grew in size and strength,<sup>66</sup> they began to undertake “punitive expeditions” against working-class and labor organizations throughout Italy.<sup>67</sup> Mussolini’s *squadristi* terrorized the workers and radicals who had been agitating and participating in demonstrations during the *biennio rosso*, “[looking] on [the] murder [of workers] as a sport.”<sup>68</sup> It is under these circumstances, in the middle of the *biennio nero*’s first year, that the red guards from the factory occupations and other armed allies of the working-class movement formed the *arditi del popolo* (infantrymen of the people)<sup>69</sup> and took up the cause of protecting Italian workers from fascist violence. However, the liberal middle classes would soon blame this self-defensive move on the workers’ part as the reason for the further growth and development of the fascist movement.

On 6 July 1921, the newly unified *arditi del popolo*, comprising “all the proletarian organizations [that were] separate during the war,” organized a demonstration at the Botanical Gardens of Rome to celebrate the recent merger of these workers’ self-defense groups.<sup>70</sup> During the demonstration, a representative of the local labor union condemned “the white reaction supported by the Government and paid for by industrialists and the ruling bourgeoisie.” A spokesperson for another union later deplored that fascists were “making use of the name of the fatherland to perpetrate reprehensible acts of the most savage kind.” In response to the fascists’ activities, the *arditi del popolo* were “making their first appearance” after having recruited “around three thousand young men under their banner.”<sup>71</sup> The Italian working-class movement, which had previously armed itself during the strikes and factory occupations of the *biennio rosso*, now armed itself in self-defense from the fascist violence of the *biennio nero*.

*La Stampa*’s coverage of the *arditi del popolo*’s demonstration in Rome aimed to delegitimize the newly formed workers’ self-defense group, doing so in a manner reminiscent of the newspaper’s condemnation of the red guards that were active during the factory occupations of September 1920. *La Stampa* emphasized the combativeness of some of the workers who were present; for example, the royal guards had no choice but to arrest “the most quarrelsome and hotheaded” of the demonstrators.<sup>72</sup> Additionally, while describing instances of violence involving “a young man struck with a blow to the

head falling to the ground” or “a manual laborer struck and [with] his hands on his bloody head,” the newspaper employed the passive voice and thus obscured the direct agency of the policemen and fascist *squadristi* in the events. It even characterized such incidents as “scuffles” and “skirmishes” rather than as obvious acts of police and fascist violence against demonstrating workers.<sup>73</sup> In this way, *La Stampa* underlined that violence was present at yet another workers’ demonstration while absolving the perpetrating policemen and fascists of their responsibility in that violence. As it had done in its coverage of worker demonstrations in prior years, it presented the outbreak of violence as inherent to the strike rather than the direct consequence of the state and *fasci*’s violence toward workers.

*La Stampa*’s delegitimization of the *arditi del popolo*’s 6 July demonstration went beyond merely the violence that emerged from it; the newspaper also aimed to present the new workers’ self-defense group as an agent of the Left rather than a universal force for the protection of the working class. *La Stampa* declared that “in each category of workers there has ... prevailed the concept of non-participation in the proletarian rally” organized by the *arditi del popolo*, discrediting their claims to fighting for the protection of the Italian working class as a whole. Instead, the newspaper asserted, the Rome demonstration “had clearly assumed the character of reaction by communist and anarchist forces against the *fasci*.”<sup>74</sup> *La Stampa* thus inverted the *arditi del popolo*’s claims to being a protective force struggling against the fascist reaction against workers, identifying in the declarations made at the 6 July demonstration an ideology of far-left reaction rather than one of workers’ self-defense. The newspaper further attempted to present the group as one of radical left-wing militancy by referring to it as the “*arditi rossi* (red infantrymen), as the *popolo* (people) call them.”<sup>75</sup> By applying the adjective *rossi* to the *arditi del popolo* and alleging that the *popolo* itself saw the group as a ‘red’ agent of revolutionary communism and radical anarchism, the newspaper demonstrated its disdain for workers’ attempt at self-defense even when under widespread attack by fascists.

A week after the *arditi del popolo*’s 6 July 1919 demonstration, the National Council of the *Fasci* of Combat, “although declaring itself ready to disarm if its adversaries honestly and completely would disarm,” announced that it “considered untimely, at the immediate moment, any agreement with enemy or hostile parties.” *La Stampa* rightfully detected a “certain contradiction” in this announcement by the fascists, noting that it was inconsistent for “one to declare itself ready to disarm and to exclude, at the same time, any [possibility of] agreement [to achieve] the disarmament.” The newspaper’s explanation for this contradiction was that it reflected a “compromise, between the central leaders of fascism [who

66 Tasca, *The Rise of Italian Fascism*, 90.

67 Ibid., 103.

68 Ibid., 126-127.

69 *Arditi del popolo* literally translates to “the daring ones of the people,” though a more appropriate, historically contextualized translation would be “infantrymen of the people,” as *arditi* was the name given to assault infantrymen in the Italian army during World War II.

70 “La ‘giornata proletaria’ a Roma,” *La Stampa*, 7 July 1921, p. 1.

71 “Tre battaglione di « arditi del popolo »,” *La Stampa*, 7 July 1921, p. 1.

72 “Tafferugli, cariche di cavalleria, arresti e feriti,” *La Stampa*, 7 July 1921, p. 1.

73 “Episodi vari—Colluttazioni,” *La Stampa*, 7 July 1921, p. 1.

74 “La ‘giornata proletaria’ a Roma,” *La Stampa*, 7 July 1921, p. 1.

75 “Episodi vari—Colluttazioni,” *La Stampa*, 7 July 1921, p. 1.



were] favorable to pacification, and the local organizations [who were] against” such a peace.<sup>76</sup> In this way, despite pointing out the self-contradiction underlying the fascists’ refusal to disarm, *La Stampa* did not place much blame on them. Instead, the newspaper attributed the fascists’ decision to what it implies were understandable internal disputes between the sensible, peaceful leadership of the movement and the less reasonable, potentially more violent general membership of the *fasci*.

*La Stampa* also held the *arditi del popolo* at least partially responsible for the fascists’ refusal to immediately disarm. The newspaper asserted that “that which is boiling up, the formation of antifascist forces that took place in Rome a few days ago, and the simultaneous debut of the « *Arditi del Popolo* », have offered fascism a motive to cry provocation and interrupt their attempts” at peace and disarmament.” The public exercises of the *arditi del popolo* in Rome had thus frustrated and angered the *fasci* into continued armament, which they might have considered stopping had it not been for the 6 July demonstration.<sup>77</sup>

Even bearing in mind *La Stampa*’s tendency in the years prior to condemn and criticize all manifestations of workers’ demonstrations—whether general strikes, factory occupations, or red guards—the newspapers’ decision to blame the *arditi del popolo* for the fascists’ refusal to disarm is noteworthy. The workers’ self-defense group had emerged only seven days prior to the National Council of *Fasci*’s announcement, making the fascists’ demand that the *arditi del popolo* be the first to disarm an obvious maneuver to shift blame onto workers for both movements’ taking up of arms. Furthermore, the *arditi del popolo*’s 6 July demonstration had been a protest against the violence that fascists had perpetrated against workers in the months since the September 1920 occupations of factories; it did not represent the start of a violent workers’ offensive. *La Stampa* was aware of both of these facts, so its decision to blame the *arditi del popolo* for the National Council of *Fasci*’s refusal to disarm and stop fascist violence against workers is indicative of an anti-worker, pro-fascist bias on the newspaper’s part.

Overall,<sup>78</sup> *La Stampa*’s coverage of the *arditi del popolo*’s July 1921 demonstration in Rome emphasized the violent nature of the workers’ demonstration just as it had during the factory occupations of September 1920. What was new

about this coverage was that, in the political context of the *biennio nero*, the newspaper blamed the *arditi del popolo*’s demonstration in Rome for the continued armament of the fascist movement. Thus, by 1921, the liberal middle classes began to view workers’ demonstrations as a contributing factor to the growth and development of the *fasci*. They no longer viewed workers’ demonstrations as mere acts of violence but also as a leading cause of the violence that fascist *squadristi* perpetrated.

### The General Strike of August 1922

Fascist violence against working-class and socialist organizations continued into the second year of the *biennio nero*, with the *fasci* launching a new offensive against working-class radicalism at the start of the summer of 1922.<sup>79</sup> In response to this new wave of fascist violence rising throughout Italy, leaders of the various factions of the working-class movement proclaimed a general strike on July 31. According to the “secret action committee” that officially made the call for the nation’s workers to strike, it was acting in “the defense of the political and syndical liberties threatened by the insurgent reactionary forces.” The committee protested “all actions violating the civil liberties protected and guaranteed by [Italian] law,” and it called for workers to “stand in defense of that which is most sacred to every civilized man: freedom.”<sup>80</sup> In its proclamation, the secret action committee thus employed a rhetoric devoid of any allusions to class warfare or labor’s struggle against capital, which is peculiar considering the maximalist ideology that motivated the workers’ demonstrations of the *biennio rosso*.

Contrast the way the secret action committee formulated the strike to the class-based framing of the Communists—“the struggle that is being initiated must carry the proletariat to a position of power relative to the bourgeoisie”—or even the Socialists—“the socialists today as always are with the proletariat”—and the gestures to universalist liberalism implicit in the committee’s proclamation stand out even more sharply.<sup>81</sup> The strike’s official aims were, in this sense, solely “legalitarian.”<sup>82</sup> The working-class movement called for it not in the name of workers’ emancipation but in a desperate cry for the state to bring an end to fascist violence. The proletariat demanded not the end of their oppression by the forces of capital but merely the restoration of their basic liberal freedoms.

The organized fascist response to the proclamation of the general strike was, as one would expect and the working-class organizations should have expected, extremely violent, threat-

76 “La ripresa delle violenza: Il rimedio,” *La Stampa*, 14 July 1921, 1.

77 Ibid, 1.

78 Petronio, “Conversazioni romane,” *L’Illustrazione italiana*, 12 June 1921, p. 712; Petronio, “Conversazioni romane,” *L’Illustrazione italiana*, 3 July 1921, p. 8; “La finanza,” *L’Illustrazione italiana*, 3 July 1921, p. 22. For whatever reason, none of the June and July issues of *L’Illustrazione italiana* made any mention of the *arditi del popolo*. I therefore limited my analysis of the liberal press during the *arditi del popolo*’s demonstration of July 1921 to *La Stampa*’s coverage of the events.

79 Lyttelton, *The Seizure of Power*, 80-81.

80 “I documenti che proclamano lo sciopero,” *La Stampa*, 1 August 1922, p. 1.

81 “Gli appelli dei comunisti e dei socialisti,” *La Stampa*, 1 August 1922, p. 1.

82 Tasca, *The Rise of Italian Fascism*, 216.

ening to “take the place of the [impotent] state” and bring an end to the workers’ demonstrations by whatever means necessary.<sup>83</sup> According to Tasca, despite the fundamentally liberal rhetoric used by the secret action committee in their proclamation of the strikes, the fascists received support from liberal newspapers, many of which had originally “blamed the fascists for contributing towards socialist participation by their excesses.” However, at this point in what had become a de facto civil war, “the conservative and ‘liberal’ press,” along with the Italian bourgeoisie more generally, “congratulated the fascists who were containing and extending, in the name of the state, the work of destruction” and suppression of workers’ strikes.<sup>84</sup>

*L’Illustrazione italiana*’s coverage of the August 1922 general strike is consistent with Tasca’s claims about the philofascism that had taken hold of the liberal press by this period. In its printed issue for the week during which the general strike took place, the newspaper directly addressed the question of fascism’s appeal to middle-class liberals. The publication castigated workers for their decision to go on strike, yet again detailing the costs that society incurred as a result of the workers’ demonstration: according to *L’Illustrazione*, “the tyranny of the reds” temporarily shut down public services, wasted public funds, and destroyed the national credit. Yet the weekly also mocked the strikers for their inability to significantly disrupt everyday life in Milan, describing the ways in which the city’s trains, telegraphs, and postal system remained functioning throughout most of the strike despite what it claims were the striking workers’ best efforts: “the strike is dying in front of a laughing public.”<sup>85</sup> In this way, the magazine condemned the disruption that the strike caused in Milan while simultaneously making fun of its inability to paralyze life in the city, a pair of remarks whose inconsistency is indicative of the newspaper’s continued disgruntlement with and hostility toward the working-class movement.

*L’Illustrazione*, however, went beyond criticizing the striking workers and condemning the economic disruptiveness and violence of the strike, using that criticism as justification for its praise of the actions taken by fascists against the strikes. Explaining how the “the fascist reaction [to the general strike in Milan] produced a broad and immediate consensus in public opinion” that was sympathetic to the fascists, the issue included an entire page favorably depicting “black-shirts [replacing] workers on train platforms and other public services.”<sup>86</sup> The publication thus not only offered an account of increasing public advocacy for the fascist response to the general strike but itself expressed support for the fascists. It also provided an analysis of the Italian public’s philofascist

turn to the Right, declaring that “fascism has protected our right to feel Italian” and that, while “we, the masses, we, the tranquil population ... are threatened with thirst and hunger by the activity of the red organizations ... the fascists focus only on responding to those who cause it.” Thus, in *L’Illustrazione*’s conception, with the proclamation of the general strike on the evening of July 31<sup>st</sup>, “the public [was] called to judge [between] the two disagreeing parties ... the fascists and the socialists”; since “there [was] no government” left to resolve the people’s problems, the public ended up siding with the fascists, who emerged as the ones “who [helped] us, [defended] us” from the industrial sabotage perpetrated by the working-class movement.<sup>87</sup> The workers’ demonstration, which in the summer of 1921 was perpetuating fascist violence by merely giving existing fascists further reason to be violent, was in August 1922 turning middle-class liberals into explicit supporters of fascism.

This narrative of increasing liberal middle-class support for fascism in response to the general strike appears to confirm Tasca’s account of the liberal press during this period. Simoni asserted that “the strike, which was supposed to be a large protest against fascism, has enabled fascism to demonstrate its merits”: the workers’ demonstration itself became one of the primary factors triggering increased liberal middle-class support for the fascist suppression of work stoppages.<sup>88</sup> In a similar fashion, Tasca argues that the general “strike, which was to have made the state enforce respect for the law and protect workers from fascist violence, only succeeded in uniting the legal and the illegal forces of reaction—the state and the *fasci*” by galvanizing liberals into supporting the fascists.<sup>89</sup> However, both *L’Illustrazione* and Tasca overstate the general strike’s influence on liberal sentiments toward fascism. Even after the proclamation of the general strike, liberal middle-class discourse had not yet entirely given in to philofascism.

For example, *La Stampa* reacted to the proclamation of a general strike in a manner critical of the working-class movement but not explicitly sympathetic to fascist violence. The August 1<sup>st</sup> edition of the newspaper declared that “intransigent socialism and communism ... with their senseless proclamation ... of the national general strike ... [compromised], in a manner still incalculable but certainly grave, the possibility of pacification and of equilibrium about which the entire proletariat ... felt a sense of urgency and for whose immediate realization they begged.”<sup>90</sup> *La Stampa* therefore agreed with *L’Illustrazione* in its characterization of the general strike as an instance of the working-class movement failing to anticipate the unintended consequences of its actions: the strike

83 Ibid., 220.

84 Ibid., 221.

85 Renato Simoni, “Intermezzi,” *L’Illustrazione italiana*, 6 August 1922, p. 156.

86 “Nelle vie di Milano durante lo sciopero: I fascisti provvedono ai servizi pubblici,” *L’Illustrazione italiana*, 6 August 1922, p. 165.

87 Simoni, “Intermezzi,” *L’Illustrazione italiana*, 6 August 1922, p. 156.

88 Ibid., 156.

89 Tasca, *The Rise of Italian Fascism*, 220.

90 “Lo sciopero generale proclamato in tutta Italia dall’Alleanza del lavoro: La crisi orientata verso una reincarnazione Facta,” *La Stampa*, 1 August 1922, p. 1.

hurt the workers more than it helped them by inspiring liberal middle-class support for further fascist violence against them.

Nevertheless, unlike *L'Illustrazione*, *La Stampa* did not express explicit support for fascist suppression of striking workers. Instead, it encouraged fascists to “not [oppose] violence with violence, to not [threaten] ... to replace the State” in their attempts to maintain law and order in Italy. The de facto position of *La Stampa* may have been limited and tacit acceptance of the fascists’ activities; its favorable acknowledgment of the “fervent patriotism” to which the fascists aspired suggests this possibility.<sup>91</sup> However, *La Stampa*’s rhetoric, devoid of any explicit praise for fascist violence against workers, differed considerably from that of *L'Illustrazione*, which unequivocally declared that the emergence of the general strike in the summer of 1922 made fascism more appealing to it and to the Italian public.

The differences between *L'Illustrazione italiana*’s and *La Stampa*’s coverage of the general strike demonstrate that, though some middle-class liberals had turned to philofascism by the summer of 1922 in response to the persistency of workers’ demonstrations over the *biennio rosso* and *biennio nero*, others remained unwilling to express explicit support for the fascists. Though, by 1922, all middle-class liberals characterized the general strike as an act of workers’ violence against the Italian *patria*, only some believed it necessitated a more violent fascist response and thereby endorsed the fascist movement.

## Conclusion

The 1922 general strike represented the “Caporetto of Italian socialism”: the Italian working-class movement collapsed in the summer of 1922<sup>92</sup> in a manner reminiscent of the Italian army’s “disaster [at the battle] of Caporetto” during the First World War.<sup>93</sup> By 28 October 1922, with Mussolini’s entry into power with the March on Rome, the fascists were victorious.<sup>94</sup> The ‘black’ actors of *biennio nero* had crushed their ‘red’ rivals of the *biennio rosso*.

In this paper, I have tracked the evolution of *La Stampa*’s and *L'Illustrazione italiana*’s coverage of general strikes, factory occupations, and workers’ self-defense groups from 1919 to 1922, taking it as a proxy for the liberal middle classes’ changing interpretations of workers’ demonstrations over the period. By the general strike of July 1919, middle-class liberals viewed workers’ demonstrations as a source of economic disruption and political divisiveness and therefore considered them unpatriotic acts that threatened national unity in postwar Italy. As a result of the factory occupations of September 1920, they reinterpreted workers’ demonstra-

tions to be fundamentally violent, both in the physical violence that emerged from them and the violent ideology that underlay them. With the *arditi del popolo*’s public exercises of July 1921, middle-class liberals began to hold demonstrating workers responsible for the continued growth and development of the fascist movement, blaming them for giving fascist *squadristi* further reason to perpetrate acts of violence against the working class. Finally, with the general strike of August 1922, middle-class liberals acknowledged that the persistent strike activity of 1919–1922 had rendered fascism appealing to them. Though they were not unanimous in their philofascist sympathies, some had explicitly endorsed the fascist movement by the summer of 1922.

Beyond acquiring a more diverse collection of sources from the liberal press of the *biennio rosso* and *biennio nero*—for example, articles from *Il Messaggero* and *Il Corriere della Sera*—one could extend the analysis in this paper to account for not only changes in liberal middle-class interpretations of workers’ demonstrations but also any precise actions taken by middle-class liberals in response to such demonstrations. How many middle-class liberals left the Liberal Party after this or that general strike to join the ranks of the *fasci*? Did any liberal middle-class organizations—for example, societies or working groups of the liberal *intelligentsia*—formally endorse and enter the fascist movement? One can only answer such questions with a different set of sources than those that I use in this paper. For example, the diaries and private letters of middle-class liberals who witnessed the events of the *biennio rosso* and *biennio nero*, as well as the membership records of the local *fasci*, would be necessary to evaluate the specific actions taken by the liberal middle classes in response to workers’ demonstrations.

In general, it remains important to further analyze the precise reasons and ways in which Italian liberals became increasingly philofascistic from 1919 to 1922. This topic is relevant not only for the historiographical debate on the rise of Italian fascism but also for understanding far-right antiliberalism—whether in the form of fascism, traditionalist conservatism, or racist xenophobia—as a more general phenomenon. Under what conditions and in response to what events do these various reactionary ideologies grow more appealing to middle-class liberals?

I have shown in this paper that economically disruptive and politically divisive expressions of radicalism—in this case, workers’ demonstrations in 1919–1922 Italy—have the potential to estrange the liberal middle classes into supporting the antiliberal Right. With the reemergence of far-right movements throughout the Western world today—from France’s National Front to Donald Trump’s campaign for the U.S. presidency to the Northern League in Italy—these questions will become increasingly relevant to European and American politics and government. To help prevent the reemergence of fascist and other far-right regimes, historians can and must endeavor to inform society about the circumstances under which middle-class liberals have historically sleepwalked into supporting the forces of reaction.

91 Ibid., p. 1.

92 Tasca, *The Rise of Italian Fascism*, 232.

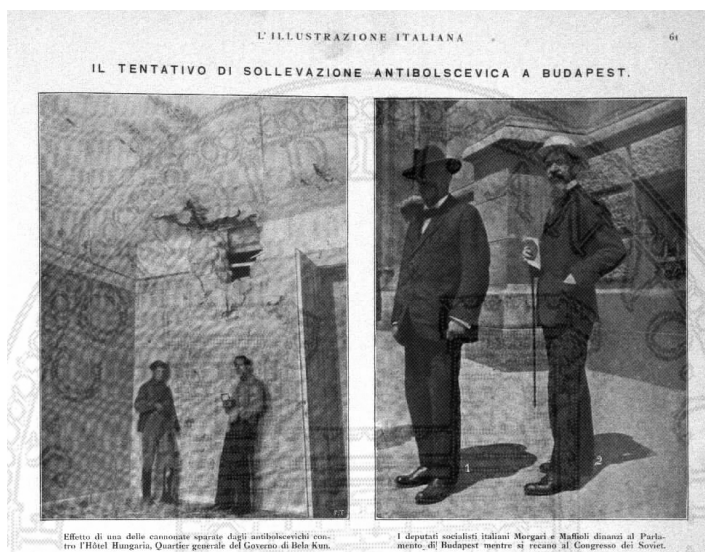
93 Lyttelton, *The Seizure of Power*, 27.

94 Ibid., 77.



# Appendix A: L'Illustrazione italiana's Coverage of the July 1919 General Strike.

"Il tentativo di sollevazione antibolscevica a Budapest." La Stampa, 20 July 1919, pp. 61-63.italiana, 26 September 1920, p. 393



# Appendix B: L'Illustrazione italiana's Photo Journalism during the August 1922 General Strike.

"Nelle vie di Milano durante lo sciopero: I fascisti provvedono ai servizi pubblici." L'Illustrazione italiana, 6 August 1922, p. 165

