

FACTORY TAKEOVERS IN THE EUROPEAN MEDITERRANEAN AREA: SELF-MANAGED COMPANIES IN FRANCE, ITALY AND GREECE

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ABSTRACT

Over the past 15 years Workers Recuperated Companies (WRCs) emerged in several European countries as Bosnia Herzegovina, Croatia, France, Greece, Italy, Turkey and eventually other countries. Exact numbers do not exist. There is no systematic research, nor a common definition of WRCs in Europe. In my article I focus on WRCs corresponding to the Argentinian definition: WRCs are companies that were closed down by their owners or went into bankruptcy, leading to a workers' struggle to restart production under collective and democratic self-management. The transformation is mostly taking place in conflict with the prior or actual owners and/or the state. The individual private property of the means of production is transformed into collective property with a social purpose and with no individual ownership. Most WRCs connect with other social and labour struggles, and eventually adopt more egalitarian payment systems. This article compares three companies in Southern Europe occupied by their workers 12 to 14 years ago: Scop Ti, a tea packing plant in France; Vio.Me, a former chemical construction material factory in Greece; and RiMaflow, a former car parts producer in Italy. I analyse their strategies, struggle, performance, internal structures, and the associational and institutional power the workers build.

KEYWORDS

worker-recuperated companies; europe; scop ti; vio.me; rimafLOW

SCOP TI: FROM LIPTON TEA TO NATURAL AND ORGANIC TEAS AND INFUSIONS

Scop Ti (Société Coopérative Ouvrière Provençale de Thés et Infusions), formerly Fralib, in Gémenos, Southern France, produces and packs a huge variety of organic and natural aroma teas and infusions. The factory belonged to the transnational food giant Unilever and packed Lipton tea and an own brand. The plant, that had been equipped with modern machinery and was supposed to become the main regional production site, was suddenly closed in September 2010. The production was moved to Poland and 182 workers lost their jobs. Shortly after the factory closed, the workers occupied it. The early occupation prevented Unilever from moving the machinery. The struggle was promoted and motivated by several

union delegates and activists of the leftist Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT), with prior experience in labour struggles. Most other workers were not politicized before the struggle, many were not even union members. The CGT supported the workers. The workers claimed the factory with the goal to build a cooperative and produce organic and natural aroma teas and infusions. After almost four years of occupation, Unilever consented to settle the conflict and signed an agreement on May 26, 2014. It paid the workers a compensation of €20 million in machines, buildings, technical training and money. The factory was transferred to the worker cooperative (Azzellini, 2023, pp. 47-51).

Scop Ti reopened in May 2015. The new brand for natural aroma teas and infusion was named “1336,” the number of days the factory occupation lasted, as explained on every box of tea. The organic brand is named Scop Ti. In 2024 Scop Ti offered more than 50 different infusions and teas, an ice tea brand and merchandising articles in its online shop. The tea distribution is mainly regional and conventional. 85 percent of the sales happen through grocery stores. Scop Ti has 47 full time workers. Many workers gave up during the struggle, others have meanwhile retired. The main decisions are made in the general assembly of all workers. The assembly also elects every four years an administration council of 11 workers and a director. The council implements the decisions made by the general assembly, elaborates proposals, makes minor decisions and prepares the assembly. All workers are paid €1,600-1,700 a month, the director €2,000 (the lowest pay by national union contract). More than 70 percent of the production is commissioned by other companies. The goal is to rely on own brands.

Scop Ti's struggle was built upon three elements: the productive project; protest activities and a solidarity campaign; and the legal battle against Unilever. The workers' initiated a boycott campaign against Unilever; protested regularly in the regional capital Marseille and in Paris; travelled the country to make their case known and mobilize solidarity; and founded a band and a theatre group promoting their cause in union and cultural events. In February 2014 the factory hosted the “First Euro-Mediterranean Workers' Economy Gathering.” More than 200 workers from a handful European WRCs and some cooperatives, other workers, researchers and activists, participated in the encounter. On that occasion, and as a tribute to the Argentinian WRCs, ex-Fralib packed yerba mate tea. This was their second solidarity production after organic lime blossom tea. The solidarity productions financed the solidarity campaign, promoted their struggle, and proved that they were able to produce. Simultaneously, the workers engaged in the legal battle against Unilever. They obtained court orders that revoked the closure of the plant and declared their dismissals as illegal, and court orders forcing Unilever to continue to pay the wages. The workers achieved also that the social plan Unilever presented for the closure of the plant (which is mandatory in France) was revoked three times. Scop Ti became a symbol of workers' resistance and enjoyed an overwhelming local and regional support. During the occupation workers from all over came to support the Scop Ti workers. The Scop Ti workers also support other workers' struggles the same way they received solidarity.

The reopening strengthens the local and regional economy. After Fralib closed, many producers abandoned the production of the herbs needed for the infusions. The Scop Ti workers travelled, made contact with farmers, convinced them to produce the herbs again, and even helped harvesting lime blossom for their organic infusions production. They rebuilt

the network of local and regional organic herb and fruit production for their teas and infusions. The pandemic did not seriously affect Scop Ti. In 2020 it achieved for the first time the necessary annual turnaround of €4 Million.

VIO.ME: FROM CHEMICAL CONSTRUCTION MATERIALS TO ORGANIC CLEANERS

Vio.Me in Thessaloniki, Greece, produces a wide range of organic personal hygiene, house cleaning and industrial cleaning products. Originally, Vio.Me produced tile adhesive and industrial glue. It was a subsidiary enterprise of the biggest ceramic tile manufacturer in Greece Philkeram Johnson. In early 2010 the owners told the workers that expenses had to be cut temporarily because of financial constraints. The workers agreed to unpaid leaves. A few months later the owners started to hold back a part of the wages, promising they would be paid soon. After one year without improvements the workers went on strike demanding to be paid. In May 2011 the owners abandoned Vio.Me and Philkeram Johnson. At Vio.Me they left 70 unpaid workers and an allegedly bankrupt company behind. In reality it was still profitable and the bankruptcy was caused by the transfer of revenues and capital from Vio.Me to the mother firm (Azzellini, 2023, pp. 76-81).

In the midst of the deep economic crisis that hit Greece many younger Vio.Me workers left Thessaloniki in search of a job. A part of the remaining workers tried to get their unpaid wages paid. They contacted the major unions and party representatives without concrete results. Three dozen workers decided to occupy the plant to pressure the owners pay their pending wages. Neither the owners nor the institutions or unions reacted. But many people and social movements expressed their solidarity. The workers got interested in the factory occupations in Argentina and decided to do the same.

Without investment capital, the breakdown of the former distribution networks, and considering health hazards, the Vio.Me workers decided to switch the production to organic products. In February 2013 they restarted operations, producing organic laundry soap (liquid and powder) and organic hand and body soap. The informal distribution through solidarity networks did not generate enough revenues to offer the workers a decent pay. Only 20 continued the occupation and built a cooperative. To cover the regular expenses of the plant and allow some planning, Vio.Me created a network of “solidarity supporters,” who pay regular monthly contributions in advance and pre-order Vio.Me products. Sales increased, the production professionalized and the product line was broadened, including different types of laundry soap and household cleaners, and more personal hygiene products. Vio.Me sold its products at markets, fairs, and festivals and began to export to several European countries with Germany as biggest customer. All relevant discussions and decision making at Vio.Me happen at the regular general assembly. Decisions regarding day-to-day issues are made during a brief meeting in the morning. The monthly pay increased to a bit more than the official unemployment benefit, which was around €450. Moreover, Vio.Me bought a van for the transport of the raw materials and products.

Supported by chemical engineers Vio.Me managed to professionalize its production and expand the product line constantly. In 2023, the personal hygiene products included soap bars made out of olive oil, laurel, nettle and different herbs, liquid soaps based on laurel oil or lavender oil, various shower gels and aloe vera skincare products. The household cleaning line included limescale remover, fabric softener, glass cleaner, fat solvent, dishwashing liquid and dishwashing concentrate. Moreover, Vio.Me developed various industrial machine cleaners. All products are strictly organic, vegan and do not involve any animal testing. Even so, the Vio.Me products are sold at more affordable prices than comparable products, so that working class families can afford their products. The number of sales points for Vio.Me products in Greece and abroad also increased constantly. In Thessaloniki they opened an own local store in 2017, a Vio.Me store in Athens, managed by a solidarity initiative, followed one year later. In 2022 Vio.Me had 12 workers paid €600 a month, and its products were available in more than 60 different stores all over Greece.

In 2015-2016, when thousands of refugees were blocked at the border with Macedonia, the workers drove once a week one hour to the border and brought the refugees donated clothes and Vio.Me cleaning products. They also regularly donate soaps to refugee camps in Greece. They see it as their duty to support the refugees who they consider also workers. Since 2015 Vio.Me also hosts the Social Solidarity Clinic Thessaloniki in one factory hall, providing free health services and medicine. In October 2016, Vio.Me hosted the “Second Euro-Mediterranean Workers’ Economy Gathering.” The workers participate also collectively in various social movements.

The solidarity Vio.Me experiences is what made it possible to resist constant attempts to be auctioned, evicted or shut down through legal procedures. The ownership question remains unresolved and the authorities try regularly to auction the plant. The leftist Syriza government 2015-2019 did not support Vio.Me. Nor did the right-wing governments that followed. The pandemic did not affect the Vio.Me production, but the local markets where Vio.Me sells part of the production became unreliable. The workers launched regular sales tours with their van. The stops are preannounced and people place pre-orders delivered without extra fees. The sales tours proved to be successful and were maintained also after the end of the lock downs.

RIMAFLOW: FROM CAR PARTS TO ORGANIC FOOD AND LIQUOR

RiMaflow in Trezzano sul Naviglio, in the industrial belt of Milan, Italy, was the main plant of the Italian transnational automotive parts manufacturer Maflow. The company declared bankruptcy in 2008 and was put under forced administration for bankruptcy fraud in 2009. The 330 workers in Trezzano organized protests to save their jobs. In 2010 the plant was sold to the Polish Boryszew group, that reduced the workforce to 80 workers. The dismissed 250 workers received an increased unemployment benefit. Some of them continued to meet to discuss further steps, among them also Massimo Lettieri, former delegate of the left-wing rank-and-file trade union *Confederazione Unitaria di Base* (CUB, Unitary Base Confederation) at the Maflow work council *Rappresentanze Sindacali Unitarie* (RSU, Unitary Unionist

Representations). The remaining 80 workers only trained Polish workers on the machines and never restarted production. In December 2022 the owner closed the plant and moved the machines to Poland. The UniCredit Bank became the legal owner of the plant. The workers set up a protest camp and then decided to occupy the plant in February 2013. Their plan was to build a cooperative for upcycling of computers and electrical household appliances. One month later they registered the RiMaflow cooperative. Computers were sold or donated to schools and social institutions, and household appliances sold at a weekly second-hand market at RiMaflow (Azzellini, 2023, pp. 57-67).

An industrial plan to turn RiMaflow into a professional recycling facility was developed. Free office and workshop spaces were offered to independent workers and 70 moved into the RiMaflow space. A cafeteria for workers of nearby industries was opened. RiMaflow connected with organic farmer cooperatives from Southern Italy, that pay fair salaries to migrant crop-pickers, to produced organic tomato sauce and lemon liquor and started sales through solidarity networks. It soon turned into RiMaflow's most successful activity. The repair and upcycling activity did not generate enough revenues and was abandoned after the municipal administration prohibited the second-hand market. RiMaflow transformed into an "open factory," at the service of the neighbourhood, trade unions, refugees, and theatre and music groups, connecting with critical consumer initiatives, solidarity economy, and even with the Catholic relief, development and social services organization Caritas. An attempt to evict RiMaflow failed because of the strong support RiMaflow received.

In July 2018, the courts charged RiMaflow with being part of a criminal waste trafficking network. The workshops and offices were closed, computers confiscated, and bank accounts and the cooperative's registration frozen. Lettieri, president of the cooperative, was arrested and spent several months in jail and in house detention. The charges were a setup. All accusations turned out to be unfounded and Lettieri was condemned to do some hours of social work (he did at RiMaflow) because of minor irregularities in RiMaflow's accountancy. RiMaflow could only carry on because of the strong support from its networks. In November 2018 the next eviction attempt failed. UniCredit gave in and offered RiMaflow to buy the plant, what RiMaflow rejected because of its poor conditions. The workers had spotted a smaller former Maflow plant in much better shape a few blocks away. Finally, UniCredit agreed to pay RiMaflow €300,000, and grant the workers until April 2019 to move. With that money, and additional €1.9 million from a solidarity economy foundation, Caritas Milan, the solidarity bank Banca Etica (which contributed €700,000 as a loan RiMaflow began paying back at the end of 2021), and a private entrepreneur with sympathies for their cause who paid for storage space, RiMaflow bought the former factory. During the "Third Euro-Mediterranean Workers' Economy Gathering," hosted at the old plant in April 2019, the RiMaflow workers led a demonstration to enter the new factory before the legal handover.

RiMaflow 2.0 combines various activities. The backbone is the *Workers' Society of Mutual Help – Social Cooperative RiMaflow-Fuorimercato* for organic food processing and distribution in one hall with 22 full-time workers. Decisions are made in a general assembly. The second hall harbours 40 autonomous workers in the "city of trades," a space with craft shops and workers offering different services. They have their own assembly. 20 of those workers are also members of the *RiMaflow Cooperative of Production and Labour* along with all members

of the food cooperative. It administers the whole RiMaflow space through a regular general assembly. The roofs of RiMaflow are covered with solar panels that generate more energy than needed so that RiMaflow sells energy to the regional electricity network.

RiMaflow's most successful activity is the organic liquor production. It started in 2014 with the Southern Italian lemon liquor Limoncello made of organic lemons from a cooperative in Rosarno that pays fair salaries and offers decent working conditions to migrant workers. Rosarno, Calabria, has a strong presence of the mafia-like 'Ndrangheta. The mainly African crop-pickers live in squalid conditions. In January 2010 a major migrant uprising occurred after armed racist attacks. Investigations revealed that local 'Ndrangheta families had orchestrated the attacks. RiMaflow's *Rimoncello* became a big success. By 2021 the array of liquors included five products and RiMaflow sells tens of thousands of bottles. The Rimoncello was followed by the bitter *Amaro Partigiano*, supporting an archive of partisan resistance, and the antisexist *Vodka Kollontai* co-financing feminist and LGBTQ initiatives. Next, RiMaflow launched the orange liquor *Riace*, named after a town in Calabria famous for receiving refugees with open arms and who's former leftist mayor was criminalized. Most recently RiMaflow and the workers of GKN created the *Workers' Sambuca "Insorgiamo"* (let's rise up). The GKN plant in Florence produced powertrains for the car industry. It closed in July 2021 leaving 422 unemployed workers behind. The workers occupied the factory and have plans for an industrial transition project under workers' control. In 2023 they started a crowd funding to begin to produce cargo bikes, solar panels and batteries for energy storage.

During the severe lockdown periods of the pandemic in Italy, RiMaflow packed and distributed food boxes to 5,000 families in need in three adjacent working-class neighbourhoods. The activity was based on donations and RiMaflow earned very little doing it. In 2023 RiMaflow had 22 fulltime workers paid monthly about €1,400 after tax. The average workers' salary in Italy is €1,469.

DIFFERENT CONTEXTS, DIFFERENT OPTIONS

The strategies employed by the three WRC during the struggle and the decisions made were mainly shaped by context, circumstance and the specific experiences in the struggle. An overarching analysis is therefore crucial to understand the different trajectories, while it also proves that WRCs can be successful despite adverse conditions and in different contexts.

The workers' negotiation position and production options are strongly determined by the previous production and the availability and situation of the machines. Scop Ti could continue the same production because tea has a market independent of the former brand name or specific clients; because the immediate occupation kept the machinery in the factory, which also provided them with a strong negotiating position; and because the machines were new and the factory was in good shape. Vio.Me was left by the owner with deteriorated machinery and plant. The workers had neither investment capital nor the clients to continue the prior production. RiMaflow was occupied late when all machines had been removed, weakening their power of negotiation significantly. Restarting the prior production

was anyway impossible. No car manufacturer would buy air conditioning ducts from a cooperative occupying a plant.

The union support the WRCs receive, and who they can mobilize differs too. The workers of all three WRCs succeeded, because of their power as mobilized workforce, stemming from their collective organization. The cooperation among the workers beyond union identities and coalition building with other workers, unions and social movements, instead of competition, is the base of their *associational power* (Silver, 2003; Wright, 2000). The existence of different unions and differing union identities played in favour of the workers offering a path of struggle while they acted and identified mainly as company workers' collective. Nevertheless, the differences in legal terms, and in industrial relations and political context, led to different forms of institutional and associational power. Scop Ti was supported by the CGT because the union had a significant presence in the plant and its members demanded support. The workers could rely on a nationwide structure, which again facilitated coalition building. RiMaflow developed its struggle through the company's works council RSU with the support of the CUB, to which several of the main leaders of the struggle belonged, and built coalitions starting with rank-and-file workers' organizations, social movements, neighbours and with sectors of the social and solidarity economy. The workers at Vio.Me had a company union. In the Greek context, they could not mobilize any major union. The communist union PAME (Panergatiko Agonistiko Metopo, All-Workers Militant Front) disapproves workers' takeovers and accused the Vio.Me workers of striving to become capitalists. Vio.Me built its coalitions with other groups of workers affected by company closures or dismissal, social movements, some cooperatives, the solidarity of a highly mobilized population during the crisis, and with a much stronger international mobilization than the other WRCs.

In all three WRCs, the workers see the means of production as collectively managed commons and not as the property of individuals. The form of collective ownership entails the workers are only owners all together as long they work at the WRC. New workers do not have to acquire shares to become cooperative members and when they leave, they cannot claim any compensation related to ownership. The ownership and the right to decision-making are exclusively linked to work. The workers of all three WRCs place a strong emphasis on direct democracy and decision-making in general assemblies with the active participation of all workers, equal voting rights and the goal to achieve consensual decisions.

CONCLUSION

The three factories face very different contexts and embraced diverging strategies in their struggle. They share the characteristics of WRCs. The struggles aim at collective self-management with a social purpose. The internal management and governance structures, ownership, decision-making and remuneration systems underwent a radical process of democratization. The economic success, the ability to produce and sell, to pay the workers decent salaries, is crucial, but also strongly connected to the democratization, the dignification of work, overcoming workers' alienation, class solidarity and alternative value

production. WRCs are not constrained to continue with the same production. The production of alternative values based on solidarity and mutualism shows the transformative potential of WRCs. The equality and democracy lived during the struggle, and the reorganization of the labour process, dissolve former social and organizational hierarchies and make it unlikely that they are reintroduced (Azzellini, 2023, pp. 119-56). All three WRCs have an equality of remuneration. Small bonuses might be added depending on the family situation (or if required by law, as in the case of the Scop Ti director). The key to a possible success lies in transforming an apparently merely legal question –the closure of the company and dismissal of workers– into a political issue. The three case studies show, that political and social mobilization influence strongly the outcome. The struggle is based on three pillars: restart production, broad popular mobilization and legal struggle (Azzellini, 2023; Henriques, 2014; Ruggeri et al., 2014; Vieta, 2020).

It is important to restart production as soon as possible. There is no better argument to show that the workers can run the factory and it also provides some urgently needed income. Moreover, machines have to function regularly, or restarting production will face technical problems. All three WRCs develop campaigns in support of their goals based on networking with social movements and political and social organizations. The campaigns provide public visibility, and material and political solidarity. Solidarity and relationships built during the shared struggles with other workers and social movements reinforce class consciousness. Most workers of the three WRCs were not politicized before the occupation. To further their cause, WRCs try to establish institutional contacts and exercise pressure on institutions and political actors. The outcomes range from ignoring the WRCs' illegal status, stopping an eviction, political pressure on the owner and active mediation, to access to institutional support programs. Simultaneously, they engage in ongoing legal battles. Often entrepreneurs, liquidators and state institutions do not comply with the law. Only Vio.Me. could not build any institutional contacts.

The three WRCs have to enter hegemonic capitalist market relations, nevertheless, they favour economic relations with other cooperatives and the solidarity economy. Ecological concerns and sustainability became central, production was reoriented preferably towards organic products, and suppliers are now mainly local and regional. The pressure to abide by the rules of capital is not only external; internal conflicts are most often linked to payment, social hierarchy at work, working hours and commitment. But social relationships of trust and solidarity among the workers, built up during the struggle, reduce conflicts and provide WRC workers with better skills to solve conflicts. WRCs have proven their viability despite disadvantageous circumstances, while they still maintain their values of worker self-management and democracy at work. WRCs provide dismissed workers with a concrete perspective in a situation of economic crisis in which the market, the state and the traditional trade union strategies do not offer a response. Although restarting production, legalizing it, and being able to pay acceptable incomes can take several years and there is no guarantee for success, workplace occupations represent an option for workers to engage in a struggle for their own future.

NOTE ON CONTRIBUTOR

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