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Labour and Ecology in the Venice Lagoon: The struggles against noxiousness of Porto Marghera's workers

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Porto Marghera is the industrial area on the Venice Lagoon. Authorised in 1917, its creation began in 1918-19. Throughout its history, Porto Marghera hosted a wide variety of plants, from a major shipyard (owned today by Fincantieri), to metal manufacturing and food processing industries. For the best part of its existence, nonetheless, Porto Marghera's landscape was dominated by the chemical industry. Large fertiliser plants began operating in the 1920s, while the petrochemical complex known as Petrolchimico was established in 1951 and subsequently expanded. Especially in its early decades, production in Porto Marghera was marked by extreme levels of 'noxiousness', a term used by the Italian labour movement that can be defined as production-induced harm to both human and non-human life. This, combined with the very sensitive location of the industrial area – sandwiched between the working-class neighbourhood of Marghera and the Venice Lagoon – turned Porto Marghera in a key arena within Italy's struggles around work and ecology.

In the 1950s and early 1960s, the unions – the largest being Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro (CGIL, Italian General Confederation of Labour) – often settled for negotiating danger money for the workers allocated to the most hazardous and unhealthy tasks. The labour movement later negatively described this practice as the 'monetisation of health'. However, a new approach to noxiousness emerged in the late 1960s, pioneered by the [group around physician Ivar Oddone](#) as an intervention in health

groups' (*gruppi omogenei*) of workers within the factory, that is, those that had a similar position within the labour process. Then, the workers were asked to fill in a questionnaire about the different risk factors they were exposed to, including those stemming from the 'capitalist organisation of work' (repetitive and deskilled tasks, long hours and nights shifts, etc.). Based on this inquiry, workers' health and safety representatives then formulated their proposals to reform the labour process, and submitted it to the workers' 'consensual validation' (*validazione consensuale*), that is, a collective discussion by the different homogenous groups. It was, in sum, a worker-led approach to health and safety that challenged the technocratic models that had thus far failed to ensure decent standards.

In Veneto, a radical alternative to the monetisation of health was brought forward by the Porto Marghera operaista group. *Operaismo* (also known as workerism), was a New Left current that emerged around the struggles of Italy's factory workers in the 1960s. The most salient points of the *operaista* approach to struggles against noxiousness were: a critique of the neutrality of capitalist technology, the refusal of capitalist work as inherently noxious, working-class 'self-valorisation' as the construction of counterpowers able to influence 'what, how, and how much to produce' also considering ecological parameters, and the connection between struggles at the point of production (workplaces) and the point of reproduction (communities). One of the most remarkable documents on this issue produced by the group is a paper titled 'Against Noxiousness' (1971). Between 1973 and 1980, the group published its views on the local workers' journals Lavoro Zero and Controlavoro.

The Porto Marghera operaista group organised through workers' committees external to the trade union structures, and had a strong impact especially in the late 1960s. The union Left, nonetheless, rapidly recovered much of the ground CGIL had lost in 1968. Under slogans such as 'Health is not for sale', the shop stewards now rejected monetisation and instituted 'Environmental Commissions' (*Commissioni ambiente*), as part of the workers' representation bodies called 'Factory Councils', established in 1970. These Environmental Commissions were tasked with overseeing safety and formulating proposals to minimise noxiousness. Also in the 1970s, Petrolchimico worker Ferruccio Brugnaro became known as a poignant working-class poet, including in his verses issues related to noxiousness.

Porto Marghera's struggles against noxiousness of the late 1960s and the 1970s kickstarted a series of transformations in the productive process that made it less toxic

due to overcapacity and dwindling competitiveness, and it started to give signs of disengaging with Porto Marghera. The strength of working-class organising at the time ensured that restructuring had to be done in a piecemeal and creeping fashion. In 1981, nonetheless, Montedison – the company owning Petrolchimico at the time – accelerated, announcing the furlough (*Cassa Integrazione Guadagni*) of 616 workers in Porto Marghera's chemical factories.

Plummeting employment levels made it harder to wage radical struggles against noxiousness from within the factories. By the 1990s, a fracture had emerged – within Marghera's Left – between a workplace-centred camp prioritising employment and a community-centred camp demanding the closure of the most hazardous chemical production units. The [trial against Petrolchimico managers](#) accused of exposing workers to carcinogenic vinyl chloride and causing an environmental disaster – which lasted between 1998 and 2006 – became a battleground between these two camps. In any case, the trajectory of employment decline in the chemical industry was set, with Petrolchimico's heart – its cracking unit – eventually closing down in 2022. Nonetheless, thousands of workers are still employed today in Porto Marghera's factories. The largest employer is now the [Fincantieri shipyard](#), which has become prominent in the local press for its mass hiring of a migrant workforce – particularly Bangladeshi nationals – through an intricate outsourcing system.

Primary sources on the history of Porto Marghera's working-class struggles against noxiousness are scattered across a wide variety of archival institutions, but two stand out: Marghera's Centre for the Documentation of Local History (sited within Marghera's municipal library) and the Venetian Institute for the History of the Resistance and of Contemporary Society (IVESER, located in Villa Hériot, on the Giudecca island).

[Marghera's Centre for the Documentation of Local History](#) is mainly linked to autonomous left-wing organisations. Its most notable collection is the Augusto Finzi Fond. Augusto Finzi was a technician at Petrolchimico and an *operaista* factory leader. Born in 1941 from a Jewish family based in insular Venice, Finzi spent part of his early childhood in a refugee camp in Switzerland to escape the Shoah. After completing high school in 1960, he immediately began working in a Petrolchimico vinyl chloride unit. On 21 December 1979, he was arrested as part of the '7 April 1979' prosecution against 'autonomist' intellectuals and organisers. After Finzi's death by cancer in 2004, Gianni Sbrogiò – also a former Porto Marghera worker and *operaista* militant – established the Finzi Fond with the assistance of other activists.

blue-collar worker at a Petrolchimico vinyl chloride unit. In the 1990s, he conducted a lay research on the health of his former colleagues, suspecting that the high number of deaths by cancer amongst them was due to vinyl chloride exposure. Public prosecutor Felice Casson thus opened the inquiry which would lead to the famous trial against Petrolchimico's managers. Bortolozzo, however, was killed in a road accident while riding his bicycle on 12 September 1995. After his death, his family and the group of activists around him set up the association, which continued to advocate for workers' health and environmental protection until its dissolution in 2013.

IVESER is mostly (but not exclusively) related to the official labour movement, as it hosts the fond of CGIL's federation of chemical workers, called Federazione Italiana Lavoratori Chimici ed Affini (FILCEA, Italian Federation of Chemical and Amalgamated Workers). Another key resource in this archive is the Cesco Chinello Fond. Chinello was a former anti-fascist partisan and an Italian Communist Party leader and MP. He is also known as a historian thanks to his numerous books on the history of Porto Marghera's labour movement. IVESER hosts other important fonds with materials on Porto Marghera's workers, such as the AmbienteVenezia Fond (a local working-class environmentalist association led by former Petrolchimico employee and left-wing activist Luciano Mazzolin), the Franco Bellotto Fond (a former Petrolchimico maintenance worker who presided the Association of Workers Exposed to Asbestos) and the Emanuele Battain Fond (a radical lawyer who defended Porto Marghera's workers and unions in a multitude of trials).

The history of Porto Marghera's official and 'unofficial' labour struggles against noxiousness has been documented in many books (mostly in Italian) and a few documentaries. Some essential resources are listed below.

KEY ARCHIVES

- [Centro di Documentazione di Storia Locale di Marghera](#) (Marghera's Centre for the Documentation of Local History).
- [Istituto Veneziano per la Storia della Resistenza e della Società Contemporanea](#) (IVESER, Venetian Institute for the History of the Resistance and of Contemporary Society).

ESSENTIAL BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Cesco Chinello, *Sindacato, Pci, movimenti negli anni Sessanta: Porto Marghera-Venezia, 1955-1970*, Milan: FrancoAngeli, 1996.
- Lorenzo Feltrin, *Workers and the world: Fighting ecological crisis from within*, London: Verso, 2026.
- Devi Sacchetto and Gianni Sbrogiò (eds), *Quando il potere è operaio: Autonomia e soggettività politica a Porto Marghera, 1960-1980*, Rome: Manifesto Libri, 2009.
- Marie Thirion, *Organiser le pouvoir ouvrier: Le laboratoire opéraïste de la Vénétie (1960-1973)*, Marseille: Agone, 2024.
- Gilda Zazzara, *Il Petrolchimico*, Padua: Il Poligrafo, 2009.

DIGITAL COLLECTIONS

- [Lavoro Zero and Controlavoro](#), from the Augusto Finzi Fond of Marghera's Centre for the Documentation of Local History.
- [Workers and ecology on the Venetian Lagoon](#), a selection of documents produced by Venice's unions in relation to Porto Marghera's fertiliser factories (giving particular attention to struggles against workplace noxiousness and disputes around environmental pollution), from the FILCEA Fond of IVESER.

ESSENTIAL FILMOGRAPHY

- Manuela Pellarin, [*Gli anni sospesi Porto Marghera: Movimenti e percorsi a Porto Marghera*](#), Rome: Manifesto Libri, 2009.
- Manuela Pellarin, *900 operaio. Fabbriche e lavoro a porto Marghera*, Venice: IVESER, 2008.

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