

A Comment on “Working Conditions within Italian FCA Group Plants” by Matteo Gaddi

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Abstract

The article is a commentary on the report by Matteo Gaddi (2020) on working conditions within Italian FCA Group. It reviews the commented paper with regards to research methodology and the presentation of the cases studied. It points to the need to explore the developments in the FCA in a broader institutional context of the Italian industrial relations as well as the global spread of the lean production as ideology and practice.

Keywords: Automotive sector; lean production; industrial relations; trade unions; Fiat Chrysler Automobiles.

The article by Matteo Gaddi (2020) included the analysis of several aspects of working conditions in the FCA factories in Italy, such as working conditions, work organisation, health and safety, ergonomics and the functioning of the WCM system which is the Fiat version of lean production. As such, it is a contribution to the ongoing debates on the impact of lean production on the working conditions (Durand, 2019; Stewart et al., 2009; Stewart et al., 2016). The relevance of this contribution lies in particular in very detailed and up to the date discussion of several aspects of work organisation and employment relations based on 167 in-depth interviews in sixteen FCA plants. Such a research has not been — at least recently — carried out in other locations; our own study in Poland was conducted in 2015–2016 and concerned only the dimension of collective labour relations in the Polish FCA plants (Kajta & Mrozowicki, 2016).

Given the novelty of research, it would be good to know more about the complete research design — also including the sampling method used for the purpose of questionnaire in part II

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to which some of results seem to allude. Also, in the case of part III — reported in the article — it would be good to know if interviewees were solely trade union members or they were also non-unionised workers. Certainly, the level of knowledge and critical capacities to assess the impact of the WCA are greater in case of trade union members but the same characteristics also influence their assessment of the management system.

For international audience, some more details of the Italian context of industrial relations would really be beneficial. It is known that Fiat bypassed national collective bargaining and left the Italian employer federation in 2010–2011 and that FIOM-CGIL refused to sign the imposed FCA collective agreement as result of which it was excluded from the FIAT plants (Meardi, 2012). Gaddi also refers to the consequences of this fact, but it would be good to know more if such undermining of trade union rights has not directly contributed to the possibility of extending the WCA and Ergo-UAS systems to all WCA group plants. In fact, in Poland the WCA was also implemented in the context of rising conflicts between trade unions in the FCA group plants which were skillfully managed by the management to the company's goals. It is different method than excluding trade unions from the plants, but it seems that the goal of the managerial cadres was similar: to minimise trade union influence in the course of the introduction and expansion of the lean production system.

In order to situate the results in a broader context, it would be good to know a bit more about the shape of collective labour relations in the plants studied: union density level, the number of trade unions, the relations between trade unions, the number, scope and character (strike, protests, informal actions) of workers' protests. For an external reader, it is also very difficult to understand the changes in work organisations if previous conditions (pre-lean?) are not discussed at least in some detail regarding each of dimensions studied. I would suggest adding such information to each of the section (if possible). In terms of description of plants studied, I also missed any discussion on differences among them in terms of their production profile (e.g. labour- or capital intensive) and the socio-demographic characteristic of workforce (average age, gender, ethnicity, migrant status, etc.).

Another aspect which I think is missing is any debate on workers' consciousness and strategies vis a vis changes which were implemented. As far as I understood, qualitative, in-depth interviews were collected with workers (or just trade union representatives?). How did workers talk about the changes of working conditions? Were they unanimously critical of them? This would present an interesting difference as compared to our own study in the GM and VW plants in Poland in which ideological effects of lean — in terms of making at least some workers supportive of some aspects of changes — were noted (Stewart et al., 2016). It would also be interesting to know how did management justify in its official discourse the introduction of the WCA system. Last but not least, even if the control of management over workers and labour process increased as result of changes, one could expect some — at least informal — forms of workers' resistance against such increased pressure on them. The article could have discussed the presence/absence of such resistance.

Without serious discussion of internal diversity within the FCA group in Italy, collective labour relations in the plants, and the forms of workers' resistance, it looks as if the results of introducing lean production principles were homogenous across the plants. Even though the research was commissioned by unions, the article reads as if social agency — in terms of making difference within the plant — was only assigned to management while workers were just the passive recipients of managerial strategies.

Finally, I think it makes sense to emphasise and clearly state that the article gives additional, empirically very strong argument to the claim that lean production systems do not fundamen-

tally change the Tayloristic model of work organisation in terms of repetitiveness of tasks, time and motion studies, pressure on reduction of time, separation of job design and execution of work (Edgel, 2005). The new focus on maximum "saturation" does not fundamentally differ from the old emphasis on "efficiency" achieved and legitimised through "scientific" measurement of minimum time needed to achieve production goals, perhaps except for the new elements of computerisation and digitalisation ("the robot is in charge"). Thus, the promise of greater autonomy of worker — as a part of ideology of lean production — does not seem to be fulfilled in the FCA nor in other plants we studied earlier. In this sense, the article gives additional arguments that the problems created by lean (including those having impact on workers' health) cannot be reduced to the wrong implementation of its principles by management, but that its principles cannot be better implemented and remain effective only at the ideological, but not practical level (Stewart, 1996; Stewart et al., 2016).

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