The first generation of Italian ‘workerists’ studied and elaborated on Marx’s writings between the early sixties and the mid-seventies. It could not have been any other way. Our approach to the writings of Marx did not follow any existing model. Individuals set about exploring certain parts of Marx’s oeuvre – Mario Tronti, for example, devoted himself to Capital Volume II in his essays for the first issues of Quaderni Rossi, later re-published as Workers and Capital. Once broadly received within the political space that was defined as workerism, the fixed reference-points established by such readings and interpretations came to constitute a sort of common ground. They were transformed into a series of ‘mental prototypes’ and underwent the well-known process of vulgarisation described by Geiger in his writings on intellectual labour. They became slogans, eventually finding their way into the politico-ideological discourse that provided the ‘workerist’ group with its identity and public image. Then, a new research-effort would be undertaken, again on the initiative taken by an individual, continuing where the last exploration had left off. Thus we proceeded in fits and starts, by accumulation, re-launches and reprisals, but without any prior plan or programme, without a strategy. The body of work produced by the first generation of workerists and devoted to Marx’s

writings is not very substantial, it consists of only a few texts. And yet that work has left an indelible mark; the path beaten by it remains difficult to avoid even today. What is the reason for this incisiveness? Why have a few pages left a mark so deep as to constitute the basis of a system of thought? I am convinced that the answer lies in the fact that the explorations undertaken by Panzieri, Tronti, Negri, Grillo and De Caro were embedded within a collective labour that was itself of a different nature. Each significant theoretical finding had to be exposed to the reality of the times and the various levels of collective inquiry [conricerca]. The reality of collective labour that the workerist patrol took on in direct contact with the world of factory-production aimed at penetrating the various levels that make up the system of productive relations: the sequential organisation of the productive cycle and the hierarchical mechanisms spontaneously produced by it, the disciplinary techniques and techniques of integration elaborated in various ways, the development of new technologies and processing systems, the reactions to the labour-force's spontaneous behaviour, the interpersonal dynamics on the shop-floor, the systems of communication employed by workers during their shift, the transmission of knowledge from older to younger workers, the gradual emergence of a culture of conflict, the internal division of the labour-force, the use of work-breaks, the systems of payment and their differential application, the presence of the union and of forms of political propaganda, risk-awareness and the methods used to safeguard one's physical integrity and health, the relationship to political militants outside the factory, work pace-control and the piecework-system, the workplace itself and so on. One could easily continue cataloguing the various levels on which 'factory-work' articulates itself. What distinguished the 'workerists' neatly from the political personnel of a left-wing party was their perfect awareness of factory-work's complexity. It is easy to speak of 'class-struggle' or 'industrial labour'; even from a purely analytical point of view, but inherent in these two expressions is a plethora of problems that the ideological language normally used by a socialist or communist party and echoed by its militants is incapable even of evoking. Hence the workerists benefited from an intellectual superiority that resulted from their awareness of how the reality of the factory, its mechanisms and social dynamics, are considerably more difficult to understand than even the most complicated and obscure Marxian text. The workerists had set themselves the task of exploring, one by one, the various levels on which factory-production articulates itself, thereby acquiring a degree of competence that would allow them to enter into a dialogue with workers, to speak their language, without imposing precepts, exhortations or slogans from above. Only the workers themselves – the most politically prepared and combative among them – disposed of a superior knowledge, with the exception of some PCI and CGIL militants from working-class backgrounds who had