

28 Struggling for economic viability and environmental sustainability at an Italian worker-recuperated enterprise

The case of ex-*GKN*

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1 Introduction

The economic and social transformations of the past decades, driven by neo-liberal practices and policies, have generated political instability, market downturns, and recurring crises in mature economies. In particular, the decision of multinational companies to offshore or downscale operations has repeatedly triggered significant disruptions in local economies, leading to plant closures, mass layoffs, and long-term negative social consequences for communities. Workers confronted with the realities of industrial decline and job loss have responded in diverse ways, ranging from labor strikes to the establishment of alternative models of ownership and control (Atzeni, 2010; Delgado et al., 2014; Roelants et al, 2020; Pohl, 2018).

A compelling alternative to conventional capitalist ownership structures has been the workers' takeover (WT), also known as workers' buyout (WBO), alongside other forms of labor-managed firms (LMFs) and worker-recovered enterprises (WREs) (Vieta, 2020). These organizational forms challenge the top-down hierarchy of traditional firms, offering a model in which workers collectively control and manage the enterprise and democratically reconstitute their workplaces, often as worker cooperatives. These worker-led models have proven to be not only expressions of resistance to capital flight and economic displacement but also, in some instances, vehicles for transformative changes in how firms operate in relation to sustainability, community needs, and social equity.

This chapter examines a contemporary case of worker-led resistance and organizational transformation in the context of the former *GKN* plant in Campi Bisenzio, Tuscany (Italy). In 2021, after being informed of the plant's impending closure, the workers at this facility initiated a series of actions aimed at preserving their jobs and reorienting production toward ecologically sustainable and community-oriented outcomes. Their final aim has been to transition the ex-*GKN* plant into a collectively organized LMF embracing both economic viability and environmental sustainability. In generating social and entrepreneurial innovations, the ex-*GKN* workers have also drawn on past and present models, including WTs and WBOs as established under Italy's Marcora Law framework and the more radical tradition of

WREs observed in Latin American countries, particularly in Argentina and Brazil (Azzellini & Vieta, 2025).

This chapter is guided by the following two questions: (1) “How can workers recover a factory characterized by a large workforce (more than 400 employees) that used to be active in the capital-intensive automotive sector and owned by an investment fund?” and (2) “In a comparative perspective, given the common neo-liberal context, what similarities and differences can be observed between *GKN*’s recuperation process and others that took place in Italy and Argentina with regard to economic, social, and environmental sustainability?” As to the first question, findings reveal that workers’ collective resistance and the labor struggle, in conjunction with solidarity from related unions or other workers’ or community organizations, are essential to realize worker-led company rescues. As to the second question, other conflictual recoveries that took place in Italy and in Argentina have also displayed the same environmental concerns central to the ex-*GKN* recovery strategy, suggesting that WREs may be an effective vehicle for bottom-up projects concerned with climate justice and working-class environmentalism (Leonardi & Feltrin, 2024; regards these issues and cooperatives, also see Albanese, 2024).

Specifically in this chapter, we will compare the ex-*GKN* case with similar cases in Italy and Argentina, such as *RiMaflow* and *Officine Zero* in Italy (Azzellini & Vieta, 2025; Orlando, 2021) and *Unión Solidaria de Trabajadores* in Argentina (Vieta, 2020), in order to gauge whether the case of the recuperation of *GKN* is closer to a WBO or a WRE, and whether WTs are adequate for the just transition to more ecologically sound production. Considering that the ex-*GKN* recuperation process is still ongoing as of this writing, we will also recall a similar attempt at self-management from the 1970s, the UK’s *Lucas Corporate Plan*, to argue that the social and environmental orientation of worker-led firms can manifest even before the full establishment of the recovered firm and that there is historical precedence suggesting the suitability of LMFs for ecologically sustainable production.

The socio-political transformations and informal learning processes that workers go through in recuperating their former workplaces (see Vieta, 2014, 2019) open up for them an awareness of the possibilities for businesses to engage in wider socio-economic change, such as environmental justice. These experiences corroborate our argument regards WREs’ economic viability and potential for environmental sustainability, while showing that workers’ collective management of firms is feasible and that WTs and LMFs can be successful in different economic conjunctures. Our contribution here thus complements and extends the emergent WRE literature, which tends to focus on Latin America and solely on issues of workplace democracy (for a discussion and review, see Azzellini & Vieta, 2025), and enriches the ongoing debates about the broader role of LMFs for navigating economic transitions and achieving ecological sustainability (e.g., Basterretxea et al., 2024; Cheney et al., 2023).

The rest of this chapter is structured as follows: We first provide a brief theoretical overview of the literature on workers’ self-management and workers’ takeovers. We then embark on the case of the ex-*GKN* workers’ struggle, homing in on the plant’s worker-led reindustrialization project and the fundraising and

community support strategies pursued by the ex-*GKN* workers. The last section of this chapter highlights the similarities between the *GKN* case and the other WRE and WT cases we touch on, allowing us to draw out some preliminary conclusions concerning their possibilities for creating more humane and sustainable businesses and workplaces that aspire toward transitioning to other, less exploitative and more environmentally just modes of production.

2 Theoretical background

The theory of the firm has long served as a foundational framework in economics to understand the nature, boundaries, and operational structures of businesses. Neo-classical theories of the firm conceptualize it as an entity that exists to minimize transaction costs, exploit economies of scale, and maximize profit for shareholders by efficiently allocating resources in competitive markets (Coase, 1937; Williamson, 1981). Neoclassical models assume that firms are rational profit-maximizing entities with clear hierarchies where decision-making authority is concentrated in the hands of owners or managers (Hansmann, 1988).

This traditional conception of the firm has been subject to critiques. LMFs, worker cooperatives, social enterprises, and other forms of collectively governed enterprises challenge the notion that firms must be solely motivated by profit and controlled by capital owners (Borzaga et al., 2022). They are business models where workers or other member types democratically exercise decision-making power and where the firm's objectives encompass broader socio-economic values. In these firms, the priorities often extend beyond maximizing shareholder value to include securing stable employment, fair wages, and ethical practices that reflect workers' and even a community's broader interests (Dow, 2018).

WREs represent a significant development in the landscape of worker-owned and managed firms, particularly in contexts of severe economic disruption. The concept of WREs gained international prominence during Argentina's economic crisis in the late 1990s when numerous enterprises were abandoned or closed by their owners, many under questionable circumstances, leaving workers without jobs (Vieta, 2010, 2019, 2020). In response, workers began occupying and restarting production in these closed factories, often in defiance of property laws and bankruptcy proceedings, but grounded in the broad social legitimacy gained by these struggling workers with few options left in a conjuncture of a crumbling economy and social unrest (Sobering, 2022; Vieta, 2020). Over time, many of these worker-recuperated enterprises were formalized into worker cooperatives, with legal recognition coming later as a result of further labor and political struggles. In the ensuing decades, the WRE movement has been characterized by a deep commitment to social justice, economic democracy, and community solidarity (Azzellini & Vieta, 2025; Vuotto, 2012). Workers in WREs typically embrace horizontal decision-making structures, and the enterprises are often integrated into broader social movements. These movements are not only responses to capitalist crises but also represent a profound critique of the existing economic system, pushing for more equitable forms of production and ownership (Azzellini & Vieta, 2025).

In the UK, in the 1970s, the *Lucas Corporate Plan* was an experiment in workers' self-management of a capital-intensive firm, the *Lucas Aerospace Company*. The *Plan* set out to develop worker-led and community-centered innovations of new "socially useful" products, in part as a solution to the threat of massive layoffs at Lucas. Through a joint worker–union council, the company's skilled and semi-skilled workers were folded into the management, decision-making, and product proposal and design areas of the company for a time. There, they began to deploy their skills and knowledge for proposing and producing new, technologically sophisticated products in collaboration with the communities (rather than markets) that would benefit most from such technologies (Cooley 1980; Noble 1984).

Through worker innovation and community collaboration, Lucas went from producing jet turbines to co-inventing and co-producing energy-saving domestic products, medical machines, and versatile power generation devices. The relative success of the *Lucas Plan* inspired other experiments in "socially useful production," such as the *Greater London Enterprise Board* and the *London Innovation Network* under the political leadership of then-London councillor Ken Livingstone. All of these initiatives, however, were perhaps too promising for their time, displaying the potential of workers' self-management that overtly threatened the capitalist status quo. Predictably, the conservative Thatcher government eventually shut them all down by 1985 (Vieta, 2020).

The institutional framework in some countries has, in recent decades, further facilitated these company transitions through legal mechanisms, such as Italy's *Marcora Law* framework, allowing workers to use their unemployment benefits and access government funds to acquire and restructure distressed firms (Lomuscio, 2024; Vieta, Depedri, & Carrano, 2017). WBOs represent a pragmatic form of worker self-management, often pursued not as a radical political gesture but as a necessary strategy to save jobs and maintain economic stability. These forms of conversions of conventional capitalist firms to employee ownership (EO) models, including at times innovative uses of employee stock ownership plans (ESOPs) and other EO legal forms (see Juri et al. and Travisani & Cordova, this volume), have hence also been characterized as "negotiated conversions" (Azzellini & Vieta, 2025; Cheney et al., 2023). Unlike WREs, which may be born from more confrontational or extralegal actions and have thus been termed as "labor-conflict recuperations," WBOs tend to emerge in negotiations between ex-employees, exiting owners, unions, local authorities, and the state, and operate within established legal and economic paradigms (Azzellini & Vieta, 2025; Cheney et al., 2023; Vieta, 2020). While they represent different pathways to worker ownership and workplace democracy, both WBO and WRE processes have challenges rooted in the difficulties of transforming a strictly capitalist and hierarchical workplace to a more democratic one. In both WREs and WBOs, workers must learn and acquire new skills related to business management and governance, and they must navigate the complexities of maintaining their businesses' profitability in competitive markets, all the while upholding the principles of workers' self-management, collective ownership, and cooperativism (Vieta, 2014, 2019).

One of the key questions in the contemporary debate on LMFs – whether emerging as *ex novo* startups or as WREs or WBOs – is their viability, both in terms of their economic robustness and their environmental sustainability. Increasingly, LMFs and cooperatives are seen as more conducive to sustainable practices than their profit-maximizing counterparts (see, for instance, Albanese, 2024; Bianchi & Vieta, 2019; Filippi et al., 2023; Preluca et al., 2022). In cases like the ex-*GKN* plant, where workers are explicitly seeking to reorient production toward environmentally sustainable markets, LMFs hold significant potential for leading the transition to a greener economy. The participatory nature of LMF governance allows for the incorporation of environmental and social goals into the strategic objectives of the firm, making them uniquely positioned to address the twin crises of economic instability and ecological degradation. Nonetheless, these enterprises face particular challenges in maintaining competitiveness, particularly in sectors where capital intensity and high value-added production are critical. LMFs thus must balance the need for economic success with the desire to maintain worker control and avoid the hierarchical structures that characterize traditional firms (Cheney et al., 2023).

Grounded in the key theoretical debates we have just reviewed, we now turn to the case of *GKN*, offering empirical evidence for answering the main questions that drive this chapter.

3 Case background

The plant in Campi Bisenzio, formerly a FIAT compound, was acquired by the British multinational company *GKN Driveline* in 1994. In 2018, the British investment fund *Melrose* acquired *GKN Driveline* and, as a consequence, became the owner of the plant in Campi Bisenzio. On 9 July 2021, *Melrose* attempted to close the factory with an email to its workforce of more than 430 direct employees plus around 80 indirectly contracted workers providing the cleaning, kitchen, and security services. Their *collettivo di fabbrica* (the union-affiliated factory workers' collective permitted by Italian labour legislation), organised years before and, already cautious of *Melrose's* interests, entered the factory on that day and launched a workers' assembly that was still ongoing as of this writing. Becoming the longest-lasting workers' assembly in Italian labor history, it also marked the beginning of the ex-*GKN* workers' struggle to save the factory and their jobs. Although the collective dismissal was cancelled by the Florence Tribunal in September 2021, *Melrose* was still able to initiate a new procedure and closed the factory in the following months, complying with Italian law; in that case, the Tribunal's sentence would only represent a setback in the fund's strategy¹. To prevent this closure, the workers' assembly deliberated to block the factory's gates and prevent the removal of machines until the workers were sure that a new production cycle would start and that their employment would be restored; thus, the permanent assembly gained time for the workers to rally support, continue to resist and elaborate a new strategy of struggle.

The workers' efforts to defend their jobs evolved into an intense and complex legal struggle and mobilization effort, seeking to establish political alliances with

workers from other struggling workplaces, labor organizations, as well as with numerous Italian social movements. We next present and assess the three phases of the ex-*GKN* workers' struggle to recuperate the factory and their concurrent reindustrialization plans.

3.1 *First phase*

The first phase of the struggle, spanning from July 2021 to August 2022, began with the first round of negotiations between the *Melrose* fund, the workers, their trade unions, and the Region of Tuscany. These negotiations took place at Italy's Ministry of Economic Development, which attempted to mediate between the opposing positions, ultimately without success. In December 2021, the economic advisor of the *Melrose* fund, Francesco Borgomeo, legally purchased the factory and created a new firm called *QF²* on *GKN*'s premises. In another round of negotiations, in January 2022, he committed to look for potential investors to reactivate the factory and to restart production himself if none of the interested investors proceeded with the acquisition by August 2022.

Throughout these months, the ex-*GKN* workers began collaborating in parallel with various academic groups, particularly from the School of Advanced Studies of the University Sant'Anna of Pisa, Tuscany. Together with allied legal experts and the supporting academics, the ex-*GKN* workers produced a draft legislative proposal against the plant's delocalization plans, which could be applied to their case while preventing other similar cases from occurring³. The proposed law would apply to all firms with more than 100 employees that cease activity in Italy without demonstrating substantial (in addition to formal), financial difficulties; firms in these situations would have to elaborate an industrial plan to protect the workers' employment, and this plan would need to be approved by public institutions and by the workers' unions, who would afterward monitor its implementation. Unfortunately, this proposal was not taken up by Italy's Democratic Party (then controlling the Ministry of Labour in Prime Minister Draghi's interim government), which instead supported another, watered-down reform that has a more limited field of application, does not require a public approval of the firms' proposed plans, and only prescribes pecuniary sanctions for the firms that fail to comply while not annulling their closures or collective dismissals⁴. At the same time, with the assistance of allied economists and engineers, the ex-*GKN* workers created an inventory of the plant's assets and of the workers' skills: this would form the basis of the first reactivation strategy envisioned by these initial mobilization efforts, presenting the plan to the public in March 2022.

The first reindustrialization plan put forward two hypotheses for reconverting the factory. One hypothesis encompassed an incremental reconversion strategy focused on public transportation, whereby the factory would restart by producing axle shafts for buses, aiming to create a value chain between *GKN* and *Industria Italiana Autobus*, the only Italian-owned bus producer. A more radical reconversion strategy suggested a shift to the production of components for renewable energy technology. Both strategies would require a decisive public intervention

to create new and sustainable value chains and would entail agreements with research centers and smaller firms to perform research and development activities in the factory. However, neither of these reconversion hypotheses was taken into consideration during negotiations with the Ministry of Economic Development, and the ex-*GKN* workers' situation remained dependent on the new ownership's decisions.

In September 2022, notwithstanding previous press announcements, the factory's new owner failed to present a list of potential investors to the workers' group. Moreover, instead of reactivating the factory himself as he had publicly agreed to do, the new owner began complaining about the permanent workers' assembly and sought to characterize it as an illegal occupation of private property – a similar move taken by recalcitrant owners in countless WRE experiences in Argentina and elsewhere (Azzellini & Vieta, 2025; Vieta, 2020). This opened the second phase of the struggle. Fearing that the new ownership had no real interest in the reactivation of the factory, by October 2022, the workers were evaluating a different strategy: taking the path of a WBO. Italy's Marcora Law provisions allow workers to receive public funding to acquire the previous firm through *Cooperazione Finanza Impresa (CFI)*, a cooperative financing agency controlled by Italy's Ministry of Economic Development and the three largest Italian cooperative associations. This strategy was worthy of consideration; with numerous examples in Italy of Marcora Law conversions to draw from,⁵ a WBO solution, it was felt at the time by the workers' collective, could allow the creation of a cooperative firm and restore the workers' employment despite and in response to the new owner's and government's inaction.

3.2 *Second phase*

In order to access Marcora Law support, the workers needed to present a financially viable business plan. Building on the awareness that had been generated by the first reindustrialization plan, two new business activities started gaining traction among the workers: the production of cargo bikes and photovoltaic panels. The first could serve as more ecologically friendly modes of transportation in a new, socially and environmentally sustainable logistics model, as cargo bikes contribute to decarbonizing the “last mile” of delivery while generating employment in the delivery sector. This idea was first advanced in October 2022, following a meeting in Turin, Piedmont, of activists and professionals supporting the ex-*GKN* workers, and was soon found to be a coherent way to recover and reopen a company formerly in the automotive sector in an environmentally sustainable way. The production of cargo bikes required small investments and could be promptly set up by a worker cooperative with finance. Moreover, many ex-*GKN* workers were qualified steelworkers and welders, and, it was reasoned, they could easily gain new skills in this line of production. By January 2023, the ex-*GKN* workers had also been contacted by an Italo-German startup that had become aware of the ex-*GKN* struggle and wanted to collaborate to produce an innovative and environmentally sustainable model of photovoltaic panel, which it was expecting to patent.

The start of the workers' second phase coincided with the formation of a new solidarity group, which, starting from the two ideas sketched out above, would evaluate potential productive activities and their occupational and financial outlooks to develop a second reindustrialization plan. After having participated in demonstrations and other public activities organized by the ex-*GKN* workers' collective, at this moment two of this chapter's authors decided to increase their involvement in the struggle and support the workers' efforts as both activists and researchers in the spirit of participant researchers. Drawing inspiration from the University of Sant'Anna's group of economists who had contributed to the first reindustrialization plan, we entered the newly formed "Reindustrialization Group" and started researching the ex-*GKN* recovery process through a Participatory Action Research approach (Adelman, 1993; Kemmis et al., 2014; Carabini, 2024).⁶ Another source of inspiration was the University of Buenos Aires's *Facultad Abierta* program, which acts as a data collection center concerning the *empresas recuperadas* of Argentina and provides know-how and support to worker-recuperated experiences in the country (Esper, Cabantous, Barin-Curz, & Gond, 2017; Ruggeri, Antivero, Polti, & Vieta, 2018).

The Reindustrialization Group had two goals. On the internal side, we were to develop the business plan for the future worker cooperative and to provide support to the ex-*GKN* workers in their negotiations with customers, suppliers, and investors, including with the Italo-German photovoltaic startup and other institutional investors. The Reindustrialization Group collected information about both the photovoltaic and cargo-bike markets and their technical features. The goal here was to, on the one hand, help the startup in the development of its product, and, on the other hand, assist the institutional investors in the assessment of the business opportunity. The photovoltaic startup was composed of energy engineers and researchers with years of experience in the photovoltaic market. The Reindustrialization Group, working with the startup, thus had to quickly acquire analogous competencies in order to interact with the startup and verify its proposals, to assess their implications, to coherently construct *GKN*'s new business plan, and to use these plans and proposals for the ongoing negotiations with customers, suppliers, and investors. Given the social science background of the two authors of this chapter who worked in the Reindustrialization Group, we took on a supporting role, assisting the engineers and technicians with the collection of relevant data and with writing up and translating necessary documents and reports.

On the external side, we organized public presentations and discussions to maintain the struggle's visibility against the ownership's declarations and misrepresentations. From a wider perspective, these events also had the aim of rekindling debates about the situation of Italy's industrial infrastructure, a debate whose relevance and urgency had only been reaffirmed during and after the COVID-19 pandemic (Cresti, Lucchese, & Pianta, 2020). All along, we collected the documents produced by the Reindustrialization Group while performing an ethnography of the struggle, which included recording public and internal meetings, interviewing workers and other supporters, participating in the workers' collective's tours or traveling on their behalf to exhibitions and conferences. Our external activities also

entailed meeting other political, economic, and social organizations and looking for ways to increase the social movement-based mobilization and “convergence” initiative called for by the workers’ collective and that was occurring in parallel to the micro-economic strategy that was unfolding.⁷

3.3 *Third phase*

At the end of September 2023, we entered a due diligence process with the Italo-German startup and the investors: we needed additional technical information about the panels and the machinery to produce them, which would enable the consolidation of our business plan and of the financing agreement with the investors. The patenting process had not been completed by then, but the non-disclosure agreements, it was reasoned, should have permitted a sufficient exchange of technical information between the involved actors. Unfortunately, in early 2024, due to difficulties in the patenting process that postponed its completion to an indefinite future, our reindustrialization strategy could no longer rely on the innovative panels, and we had to revise the scope of collaboration with the startup toward R&D activities. In the same period, after the Florence Tribunal cancelled the second collective dismissal attempt by the firm⁸, in January 2024, QF stopped paying the workers’ wages: these changes opened the third phase of the struggle.

The evolution in the negotiations with the Italo-German startup and the investors caused the reindustrialization project to enter a third phase; this, in turn, necessitated a reorganization of our group. We had to redirect the effort toward the production of photovoltaic panels without losing the experience and the contacts that we had gathered in the previous year and a half. Considering the researchers and activists who had left the group during the second phase, it was also necessary for us to step up and take more responsibilities in the group. Rooted in our PAR perspective, we shifted from the participant observation we performed during the elaboration of the second phase to a different, more proactive posture that Seim (2021) calls “observant participation” (p. 3; also see Carabini, 2024, p. 214). The change in approach implied a change in the nature of the data collected as well as in the focus of observation. If, during the second phase, we thought of collecting interviews, we would now direct our observations to the experience of what this struggle entails in a collaborative effort. Also, by the third phase, we had much less time to organize public discussions because we needed to give priority to the reindustrialization’s goals. Lastly, we needed to recognize our emergent positionality as our perspective as researchers became more and more entangled with the experiences of the workers after spending such a long time with them. This last point corroborates Seim’s analysis of the differences between participant observation and observant participation, although it should be noted that we only partly proceeded with this epistemological shift for the reasons Seim describes.⁹ Rather, our shift to observant participation was more pragmatic; we needed to take up more responsibilities because there was urgent and necessary work to do beyond research in order to help secure the future viability of the plant, and we were among the people who were aware of this and could carry it out.

4 **The reindustrialization and fundraising strategies developed**

It is hopefully clear by now that the reindustrialization of the plant represents one of the main objectives of the ex-*GKN* workers' struggle, contributing to securing their jobs *and* the safeguarding of the territory's economic life – indeed, the reactivation of the plant is essential to both preserving local jobs and also protecting the productive feature of the city of Campi Bisenzio from the consequences of speculation, offshoring, and deindustrialization. In response, throughout the struggle to recuperate the factory, the ex-*GKN* workers' collective produced three different reindustrialization plans: the first plan was later published as the *Piano per il futuro della Fabbrica di Firenze* (“Plan for the future of the Florence factory”) (Cirillo, Feltrin, Leonardi, & Salvetti, 2022); the second plan centered around the photovoltaic production line in collaboration with the Italo-German startup; and the third and current plan (as of this writing) adds three new economic axes to the second plan's production activities. We describe their evolution respectively.

The first plan could be *prima facie* described as a “position paper.” It described the productive activities that could be hosted by the plant and argued for their realization from an industrial policy perspective, envisioning the creation of sustainable value chains in Tuscany. The plan also connected them to the decarbonization goals of the *Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza* (National Recovery and Resilience Plan, or PNRR) and to the related funding it provides.¹⁰ This plan connected the plant's closure to the broader delocalization tendency that is taking place in Italy and contained an analysis of *GKN*'s performance leading to its intended closure, which countered the ownership claims about its inefficiency. Coherent with the worker collective's analysis at the time, this first plan called for the Italian state's intervention and advocated for reliable and up-to-date industrial policies at the regional and national levels. This is why the first plan's position paper dedicated much space to the analysis of the industrial context of the factory, starting from the automotive sector at the national level and widening the perspective to analyze Italy's industrial strategy overall or lack thereof. The public presentations of the position paper had the intention of socializing the worker collective's struggle, while providing analysis and proposed solutions, which aspired to create sufficient public opinion to put pressure on the state in order to obtain its intervention. This emulated the political strategies taken on by Argentina's WRE movement (Vieta, 2020). While public awareness was raised, and the position paper still serves as a foundational text, the two reconversion strategies recommended in the plan were not ultimately developed into actual alternative business plans. Their environmental sustainability strategy, moreover, is argued from a purely theoretical angle and with reference to other secondary studies, rather than on the basis of an empirical internal analysis or from assessments of actual undersigned agreements.

The second plan was developed under changed circumstances by a different group of researchers; more importantly, this plan would be presented to potential investors, including CFI, with the goal of receiving funding for its implementation

under Legge Marcora provisions. This second business plan hinged upon the creation of a worker cooperative, following the experiences of other Italian WBOs and WREs. The central tenets of the business plan were the production of cargo bikes and photovoltaic panels. The photovoltaic project entailed a collaboration with the Italo-German startup, which was developing photovoltaic cells that did not use rare earth materials, making them extremely competitive and compelling from an environmental sustainability perspective.

As part of this second plan, the Italo-German startup brought a business proposal centered around the panel's prototype, and this helped the ex-*GKN* workers' collective focus on concrete efforts to create a product that could be sold in specific markets, as well as offering a compelling business case in the negotiation with the prospective institutional investors such as CFI. At the core of the startup's patenting process was an innovative type of photovoltaic cell with base materials produced with nanotechnology. In a controlled environment, the cells had superior energy conversion efficiency parameters compared to traditional solar panels. The photovoltaic panels would, moreover, be only one of the potential applications of the nanotechnology – the startup was also planning to develop a battery based on the same material, which could be integrated with the panel as its energy storage component. The battery, in turn, could also provide electricity to an e-bike such as a cargo bike, and this reinforced the idea of having these two avenues of development within the business plan.

The real selling point of the nanotechnology material – also called a “paste” – had to do with its environmental features: since this paste does not require silicium, the value chain we hoped to establish would not require the extraction of this material, an activity which has heavy environmental impacts. Furthermore, once the panels have outlived their lifecycle, they would not require all the waste disposal apparatus that silicium does. Deeming it to be an innovative photovoltaic panel which is sustainable from “the well to the wheel,”¹¹ and trusting in the startup personnel and the patenting process they had already started, we opened the negotiation with the institutional investors with these panels at the center of our business proposal. In hindsight, this choice generated two liabilities in the collective's struggle for reindustrialization.

On the one hand, since the technology was yet to be patented, we had to enter particularly strict non-disclosure agreements and had to pay attention to the possible information leaks even among the *GKN* supporters, which in turn, and in time, reduced the number of people who could be up-to-date with the struggle and participate in the social and political mobilizations occurring at the same time. The innovativeness of the product was the second liability: the startup would not disclose information that could jeopardize their business, whereas the investors needed that very information in order to evaluate the business opportunity. It took us months of research and study of the photovoltaic market to even begin identifying the tests and certifications that could be useful to the investors. However, during this time, more and more *GKN* workers were pressured to find another job. When we had finally collected enough information, we proposed a due diligence process to the startup and the institutional investors. The startup, however, could

not follow through with this in the end, and so we had to restart from scratch and rethink other production projects.

The third and current reindustrialization plan builds upon the second, as it keeps the production of photovoltaic panels and cargo bikes while assimilating the research and market analysis we performed and adding a revised vertically integrated production process in the photovoltaic sector. In addition to the production of panels, this includes their installation and, more importantly, their recovery and recycling. Both new activities are bound, at least initially, to the Region of Tuscany. For the installation of panels, this prudence is prompted by the presence of larger and more experienced players. For their recovery and recycling, this is because the legal framework for recycling and waste disposal in Italy falls under a Region's purview.

The production of panels has also undergone changes. Since we could not rely on the startup's innovative technology, we have started evaluating assembly lines for traditional, silicium-based panels. This, in turn, motivated the addition of the recovery and recycling direction to the plan and pushed us to further develop our commercialization strategy. We now hope to produce both traditional and customised photovoltaic panels for installations that cannot as easily be served by our competitors, namely in the agri-voltaic and building-integrated photovoltaic sectors. Given the social dimension of the struggle, we have also created partnerships with the network of European energy communities and cooperatives and with some of its larger actors, and established collaborations with research, business, and policy-making groups that share the effort toward photovoltaic energy production as a means to an environmentally sustainable future.¹²

Obviously, no reindustrialization can happen without funding, which is the reason why the collective initiated two fundraising initiatives. In March 2023, a crowdfunding campaign was launched with the goal of securing €75,000 within two months; by the deadline, we had actually doubled the initial goal. The popular support for the ex-*GKN* workers was the reason for this success, and this even though the second reindustrialization plan was not yet completely defined. The funds thus collected were used to found *GKN For the Future*, or *GFF*, the legal entity that we hope will reactivate the factory. Considering the amount of total funding needed for our plans, we also decided to make it a joint-stock cooperative, so as to guarantee that the ex-*GKN* workers keep control over the new company while also allowing investor-members the possibility to confer capital, which would further facilitate our fundraising strategy. This strategy taps into the investor-member category for cooperatives that is afforded by Italian business and cooperative legislation (for details, see: Vieta, Depedri, & Carrano, 2017). The second initiative was called *Azionariato Popolare* ("Popular Shareholders") and also made use of *GFF*'s cooperative structure. The goal was to sell at a minimum of €1million of shares by September 2024 to individuals and associations in Italy and beyond. We managed to collect €1,300,000, surpassing by almost a third the initial goal. The geographical distribution of these funds is also telling: more than €400,000 came from abroad, particularly from Germany and other European countries, while even collected funds from the USA and the Philippines, showing the visibility that the political mobilization was able to maintain against the ownership's maneuvers.

While the workers' and community collective were working to recover the ex-*GKN* workers' jobs as well as convert the plant's production line, the owner was also collecting funds. He first requested public funds under the *cassa integrazione guadagni* framework (part of Italy's unemployment and business bankruptcy insurance system). These public funds provide entrepreneurs of ailing firms assistance with employee wages that they are temporarily unable to pay in full. To receive it, the entrepreneur has to provide documentation proving that the company's crisis is temporary and the details of the wages they are able to pay, so that the *Istituto Nazionale di Previdenza Sociale* (National Institute of Social Security, or INPS) may cover the difference. The request, approved in March 2023 by Italy's Ministry of Labour, would retroactively cover the period from 10 January 2022 to 9 October 2022. Previous requests for this funding by the owner had been denied by INPS since he could not demonstrate the temporary character of the crisis. Under questionable circumstances and with the *cassa integrazione* finally secured, the ownership put the firm in liquidation in February 2023, but did not announce it to the workers; the workers' collective would only learn of it thanks to the publicly accessible administrative documentation related to the first phase of the workers' struggles from the period when the *GKN* was known as *QF* (see above).

The ownership received public funding in March 2023. In May 2023, the Italian government modified the *cassa integrazione* framework with National Decree 48/2023 and introduced a new situation of eligibility, extending admissibility to firms which "could not implement, during 2022, the reorganization and restructuring plans [...] due to the inaccessibility of the company premises, [...] even if the company is already in liquidation." This law was passed on 4 May 2023 and the owner's request for *cassa integrazione* under this new article was approved on the 15 May, not even two weeks later. Moreover, the reformed law establishes that these requests can only cover periods up to the end of 2023 at most – this was exactly the term of the ownership's request. In short, the new ownership was indeed able to receive public funding to pay the workers' wages for the period between 10 January 2022 to 31 December 2023.

The total amount that INPS and the Ministry of Labour have spent for the plant in Campi Bisenzio is not publicly available, but considering the number of months, it would only take an average of €1,500 per month per worker for 200 workers to surpass €7,000,000 of public funding¹³. Such an amount could have covered the financing needed for the second reindustrialization plan and around 90% of the third, restoring the workers' employment and, in time, Campi Bisenzio's local economy. According to the plan's financial flow projections, moreover, such an investment could be completely repaid by the seventh year of its implementation, generating more than €60,000,000 of public revenues in its first decade.

These plans, however, were not taken into consideration by Italy's national government, which preferred supporting the owner's financial needs even though there was no prospect of using this public funding to restart the factory's production. It is because of these more-than-coincidental circumstances that the ex-*GKN* workers' collective suspects that the current or previous ownership engaged in some form of insider (and perhaps even illegal) dealmaking with the Italian government.

As of March 2025, the workers had collaborated on elaborating a new law for the Region of Tuscany that would allow the creation of an industrial consortium by the Region in the factory, a legal framework in which the reindustrialization plan could be implemented side by side with other economic and R&D activities in the same space. Moreover, such consortia could also be used to recover other productive sites. The law was promulgated at the end of December 2024, and in March 2025, after a positive technical evaluation of the financial dimension of the third reindustrialization plan, the Region of Tuscany began procedures to create an industrial consortium in the factory's building, which could be implemented by the end of summer 2025. The institutional investors have also started their formal evaluation procedures and could deliberate on the agreed funding before the completion of the industrial consortium, which it is hoped could increase the political pressure on local institutional actors toward implementing the plan.

There have also been negative developments. In October 2024, the workers' collective discovered that the ownership had sold the real estate to another firm of the same group in March 2024, thus protecting it from being confiscated by the Province of Florence's bankruptcy tribunal, which it would have imposed on *QF* in that same month. Once the collective denounced the sale, the liquidator claimed it was collecting funds to pay out the workers' owed wages. The workers, however, who are creditors to *QF* based on their unpaid wages, have not to date received any compensation from the sale and had been without pay for the fourth consecutive Christmas, even though the Florence Tribunal has repeatedly demanded that the workers be paid.

5 Discussion and conclusion

From the development of the ex-*GKN* workers' recuperation struggle so far as of this writing, we can begin to draw several insights regarding how workers can recover a large, capital-intensive firm owned by an investment fund in order to potentially repurpose it to other, more just ends. Most immediately, we learn that good ideas are not enough if workers are to have a chance at converting failing firms to LMFs; it is also necessary to organize and struggle against the capitalist establishment, and against often indifferent or antagonistic state institutions. Even the legal recognition provided by the Marcora Law framework and the support offered by institutional players and investors such as CFI do not guarantee that the unemployed workers' business plans will be taken into consideration at the relevant institutional level, which is particularly important when the opposing side is a large financial actor. Like the ex-*Maflow* workers who a decade before managed to organize into the Milanese WRE *RiMaflow* (Azzellini & Vieta, 2025), the ex-*GKN* workers' unemployment was not caused by the inefficiency of their plant (Cirillo et al., 2022). Their unemployment was, rather, caused by the strategies and tactics of global capital, as articulated by equity funds such as *Italian Lifestyle Partner* in the case of *RiMaflow* (Orlando, 2021) and *Melrose* in the case of *GKN*. In both cases, new entrepreneurial owners bearing the flags of saviors of the workers and the local community's economy – and, even after receiving public funding with

the condition of reactivating production toward those very ends – failed to proceed with the reactivation of the factory and the restoration of the local economy. Paralleling similar questionable ways that former business owners and, in some cases, a revolving door of speculative entrepreneurial owners played with the Argentine legal system that make up the backstory of many current WREs there,¹⁴ this marks a clear distinction between the ex-*GKN* recovery and the more common “negotiated conversions” that are prevalent in Italy (Azzellini & Vieta, 2025). In contrast to many WBO cases in Italy, the ex-*GKN* workers’ collective and the ownership have never engaged in a constructive dialogue or “negotiation,” even when the last hurdle for reactivating the factory – and restarting economic activity – was securing the workers’ legal rights to use the factory in order to engage in the new proposed productive activities under a lease contract, as permitted by Italian legislation.

The parallel with *RiMaflow* highlights a second insight. Both plants originally operated in the automotive sector, which has faced a decades-long decline in overall demand that began well before issues of climate change came to inspire debates at the European Parliament on the abandonment of endothermic (i.e., internal combustion) engines. More recently, strong arguments have been made that countries should not continue to subsidize the automotive industry while, at the same time, accepting their delocalization to other less-regulated labor and production markets, thereby generating unemployment and social unrest in the affected regions of the outsourcing country without guarantees that the productive activities that take their place will be environmentally sustainable.

For Italy, in particular, the phenomenon of delocalization has produced a degradation of its industrial base and the impoverishment of its workers, increasingly occupied in low-value-added sectors (Cresti, Lucchese, & Pianta, 2020). Within these new political economic realities, WTs can play a double role: they offer better guarantees toward the effective usage of public money and ensure that local businesses stay local, as workers are reluctant to leave their communities and the firms where they work. Additionally, the solidarity that emerges among workers when their livelihoods are at risk pushes WREs to find, and even invent, new forms of work that both maintain the workforce employed and its well-being front and center (Atzeni, 2010; Vieta, 2014, 2019).

Lastly, we turn to environmental sustainability. Compared to both the majority of contemporary workplace recuperations and negotiated conversions, the ex-*GKN* workers are an exceptional group in this regard. From the beginning and consistently, they have pushed for an ecological reconversion of their plant and have taken on the risks of such a move, especially in the second phase we described, by betting on an innovative line of production in renewable energy technology. This sustainability and climate change focus brings to light the underutilized possibilities for WREs as projects that not only save jobs and local economies but also can transition firms into environmentally sustainable ones. There is historical precedent for this, as mentioned earlier with respect to the UK’s *Lucas Corporate Plan* and other related initiatives in the 1970s and 1980s.

LMFs’ potential openness to consider environmental concerns and their appropriateness as business forms for the transition to a more just economy also resonates

with other WREs today, prefiguring the conversion and transition of production into more sustainable processes and outcomes. In the first months of their struggle, for instance, many ex-*Maflow* (now *RiMaflow*) workers started repairing electronic appliances as a source of both employment and revenues to sustain their struggle, as well as out of an interest in recycling and converting to a more ecological mode of production. Moreover, their new productive activity helped other families in the local community reduce expenses and, from a systemic perspective, reduced the flow of electronic waste into local dumps (Azzellini & Ressler, 2014; Azzellini & Vieta, 2025).

Similarly, *Officine Zero*'s workers, a former rail yard in Rome converted to a cooperative in 2013 by its workers and members of a local social center, also began their WRE by dedicating themselves to the recovery and repair of appliances, which in time led them to opening their space to craftwork and the organization of dedicated workshops that currently contribute to the economic sustainability of their cooperative and the surrounding community (Azzellini & Vieta, 2025). Both of these Italian examples of earlier WREs have embraced what we can now characterize as a circular economy perspective and parallel the sustainability initiatives proposed by the ex-*GKN* workers (for fuller accounts of the *Officine Zero* and *RiMaflow* cases, see Azzellini & Vieta, 2025).

Argentina also has at least one case of a WRE focused on environmental sustainability, preceding the Italian cases by almost two decades: *Unión Solidaria de Trabajadores (UST)* (Vieta 2020). The *UST* workers had previously worked in the waste management sector under the auspices of a private-public partnership between the Argentine state and the Argentine multinational *Techint*. The previous firm, *SyUsa*, a branch plant of the *Techint* group, had won a concession to manage one of Buenos Aires's massive waste landfill sites in Villa Dominico, an outlying neighborhood of Buenos Aires. Faced with increasing criticisms and public outcry over the pollution of its waste management sites, the *Techint* group decided to abandon the Villa Dominico site in 2003, and it came under the sole responsibility of *CEAMSE*, a public waste-management utility firm.

After threatened layoffs, the workers formed a cooperative to take over the plant that managed the waste dump and, with the intervention of Argentina's Ministry of Labour and their union, would eventually win in 2004 a multi-year contract to continue managing the Villa Dominico site; eventually, the *UST* workers were even able to address and solve the very issues giving rise to the critiques *Techint* had faced. In the ensuing years, the *UST* workers have converted the waste dump into a flourishing and multi-hectare ecological park for public use, started a community recycling program, and spearheaded numerous new cooperatives dedicated to local socio-economic development, including a high school equivalency project for the community, a community bank, a sports and recreation center for local youth, and other socially and ecologically sustainable initiatives (Vieta, 2020, pp. 62–76). *UST* is now continuing the task that had been assigned to *Techint* and in more efficient and ecologically sound ways, all the while maintaining over the years the concrete solidarity to the neighborhood that the Villa Dominico community first showed the *UST* workers when supporting their struggle early on.

The cases of *UST*, *RiMaflow*, *Officine Zero*, the *Lucas Corporate Plan* we introduced earlier, and now the case of *ex-GKN*, all help to highlight the potential that WREs hold for rethinking and carrying out an inclusive and ecologically sensitive industrial transition. Organized workers, we learn from these cases, can collectively restore the economic viability of a productive entity after experiencing crises. They can also do so while also maintaining and further developing the skills acquired and learned by workers over years, all the while preventing the closure of the firm, the subsequent loss of local knowledge and industrial capacity, and the socio-economic depletion that layoffs and unemployment would entail. The relations of reciprocity and solidarity these workers have established between themselves, with the surrounding community, and even with the environment, all guarantee that the revenues will be used for the joint well-being of their firm and the surrounding communities.

Even from a liberal economic perspective, WREs make sense, since these workers, via the self-management of their own productive capacities, save jobs, keep workplaces open, and sustain local economies. This also benefits society at large, as the workers do not become recipients of unemployment benefits, but rather continue to be contributors to productive and consumer activity that generates tax revenues for public coffers. This is particularly relevant when, as in the *ex-GKN*, *RiMaflow*, *Officine Zero*, *UST*, and *Lucas Plan* cases, there is no viable alternative business plan by the former owners to reactivate the factory.

Lastly, the case of *GKN*, as with the other WRE cases we have reviewed, also shows how LMFs can be adequate business forms for more efficaciously aligning industrial activity to ecological sustainability compared to their capitalist counterparts. As worker-owners, WRE workers have vested interests in both securing good working conditions while, at the same time, securing the long-term viability of the firm, which today must include environmental concerns. Moreover, by living in neighborhoods close to their jobs, worker-owners also have deep commitments to maintaining the business locally and in its sound management, touching on both ethical issues (i.e., creating less exploitative and more democratic firms) and ecologically sound results (i.e., ensuring more sustainable production processes and products).¹⁵ Through workers' self-management, LMFs emerging from WTs and WREs are able to pursue an economically viable and a satisfactory balance between the oft-conflicting goals of feasible production, saving jobs, and ecological sustainability.

Notes

- 1 In the Tribunal's determination, Italian law and the applicable national contract require the owner of a firm with more than 150 employees to communicate the decision to cease business activities to its workforce and to its union representative's months ahead. This is in order to evaluate alternatives to the closure and to prevent subsequent unemployment (Frosecchi, 2021). Given this required communication, the factory's closure by *Melrose* was still possible in the following months.
- 2 QF is derived from the Italian name of the new firm: *Fiducia nel Futuro della Fabbrica di Firenze* (Faith in the Future of Florence's Factory), made up of four words starting with an F, hence *quattro effe* (four Fs) and QF.

- 3 In an assembly at the end of August 2021, the workers defined the main contents of a law proposal aimed at contrasting delocalization cases like the one threatening their employment (<https://poterealpopolo.org/fermiamo-le-delocalizzazioni/>); these were further elaborated in collaboration with the *Potere al Popolo!* party and were presented as an amendment to the 2022 Budgetary Law by senator Matteo Mantero (<https://www.senato.it/leg/18/BGT/Schede/FascicoloSchedeDDL/ebook/54522.pdf>).
- 4 The differences between the two law proposals can be found here: <https://poterealpopolo.org/delocalizzazioni-differenze-emendamento-governo-mantero/>, while a broader reconstruction of the debate surrounding the government's proposal and its evolution can be found here: <https://poterealpopolo.org/dl-antidelocalizzazioni-critiche/>.
- 5 Dating back to the mid-1980s, by late 2024 around 380 WBOs had been created across Italy using Marcora Law provisions (Lomuscio, 2024; Vieta, Depedri, & Carrano, 2017).
- 6 For more on the role of participatory action research (PAR) in researching cooperatives and worker-owned firms, see Carabini (2024).
- 7 At the same time that the reindustrialization negotiations and planning were occurring, the ex-GKN workers and their supporters were involved in a political movement, working with various social movement actors in what has been called the *Insorgiamo* (Let's rise up) initiative. As Azzellini and Vieta (2025) have recently summarized in their analysis of the *Insorgiamo* movement that has emerged since in Italy and throughout Europe from GKN's struggles: "On 26 March 2022, 25,000 people marched through Florence in a demonstration for the convergence of struggles initiated by the GKN workers under the slogan 'For this, for that, for everything – we rise up.' In addition, the GKN workers have been cooperating closely with the environmental movement Fridays For Future Italy and have reached out, worked with, and supported the struggles of other workplaces, precarious workers, farmers, students, feminist organizations, and the LGBTIQ+ movement" (p. 160).
- 8 QF had started another collective dismissal procedure at the end of October 2023, with the layoffs becoming effective on 1 January 2024, but the Tribunal of Florence was able to overcome this outcome by emitting a sentence on 27 December 2023 (<https://www.toscana-notizie.it/-/sentenza-gkn-giani-vittoria-dei-lavoratori-e-del-sindacato->); before, in the uncertainty about the Tribunal's decision, the workers had also called for a mobilization on Year's Eve which included 5,000 supporters (https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/cronaca/2024/01/01/in-5.000-hanno-partecipato-a-capodanno-con-gli-operai-ex-gkn_d85eb1fb-70dc-4629-ba5c-563de581cbc1.html).
- 9 Writes Seim (2021): "Where participant observation presents more opportunities for mobile positioning, outward gazing, and inscription, observant participation presents more opportunities for fixed positioning, inward gazing, and incarnation" (p. 121). Seim thus ultimately calls for a mixed-methods hybrid approach for a more self-reflexive and ethical ethnography. For similar arguments, merging anthropological research approaches with PAR and cooperative studies, see Carabini (2024).
- 10 The *Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza* (National Recovery and Resilience Plan, or PNRR) is the Italian application of the NextGenerationEU initiative (https://next-generation-eu.europa.eu/index_en), which supports economic recovery, platform digital transformation, and sustainable development geared to the EU's economic recovery (PNRR, 2021). Specifically, and in the spirit of the PNRR initiative, the first plan connects the incremental reconversion strategy to the decarbonization of the public transportation system, promoting the production of battery-powered buses by an Italian firm, while the radical reconversion strategy would contribute to the decarbonization of the energy production system.
- 11 This expression refers to a framework, called Well-to-Wheel (WTW), used for comparing the environmental impacts of different energy sources for vehicles: "Life cycle analysis (LCA) addresses the environmental aspects throughout the life cycle of a product, from raw material acquisition, through production, use, end of life treatment and

- final disposal. Well-to-wheel (WTW) analysis is an application of LCA which is used to compare drivetrains/vehicles from a global perspective. Such an analysis gives the overall picture of the energy resource utilization and its emissions involved right from the point of primary energy source extraction (well) to its point of utilisation (wheels). This analysis shows not only the emissions caused by burning of the fuels, but also takes into account the emissions involved in production, transportation and distribution of the fuels” (Ramachandran and Stimming, 2015, p. 3314).
- 12 In particular, we attended the May 2024 meeting organized by *Rescoop*, the European federation of energy communities, in Prague (<https://www.rescoop.eu/news-and-events/events/save-the-date-european-energy-communities-forum2024-prague>), which helped us sign an agreement with the energy community *Energia Bonita* (<https://clean-energy-islands.ec.europa.eu/news/energy-community-and-factory-collaboration-sparks-hope-sustainable-industry>), as well as the Integrated Photovoltaic Conference 2024 that took place in Florence, in November 2024 (<https://www.ipv-conference.com/ipv-conference-2024/#report>), among other initiatives.
 - 13 Estimates about the actual spending vary: in April 2025, the workers’ collective calculated a minimum of €13 millions (<https://www.novaradio.info/2025/04/02/ex-gkn-ok-allo-statuto-del-consorzio-industriale-polemica-sui-costi-il-collettivo-ricorda-a-qf-regalati-oltre-13-milioni-di-cigs-ascolta/>), while in a previous interview Prof. Pasquale Tridico, former director of INPS, estimated the total expense at €22 millions for 2022 and additional €33 millions for 2023 (<https://jacobinitalia.it/la-gkn-nel-paese-che-non-cresce/>). Beyond the actual amount, it should be recalled that this money comes from the Italian workers’ social contributions and that it was used to support a firm already in liquidation.
 - 14 See the Argentine cases of the health clinic *Salud Junín* (in Azzellini & Vieta, 2025; Vieta, 2020) and the construction firm *Unión Solidaria de Trabajadores (UST)* (in Vieta, 2020).
 - 15 For a theoretical analysis of the benefits of cooperative ownership for local economies and the environment, see: Albanese (2024). For further case studies supporting these claims, see Bianchi and Vieta (2019).

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