

Italian workers protest threats by government

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Workers in Italy have mounted a nine-day series of work stoppages in protest of the government's plan to attack any future strikes by workers in the occupations designated as "public services."

Officials in the government, which is headed by ex-Stalinist Massimo D'Alema, are considering a revision of Law 146, passed in 1990, which would make it possible to prohibit strikes by workers in many non-industrial fields, including lawyers, transport workers, gas station attendants and taxi drivers. Most of these are "lavoratori autonomi," or nonunion workers, who under Italian law have the right to strike.

The proposed revision of the law, which is being drawn up by Public Finance Minister (and Socialist Party member) Angelo Piazza, calls for steep fines against any worker who defies the government's orders. These fines would be extracted automatically from workers' paychecks.

In addition to widespread promises by workers in these sectors to defy this law if it is passed, the major industrial unions--General Italian Federation of Labor (CGIL), the Federation of Italian Trade Unions (CISL) and Italian Federation of Trade Unions (UIL)--have been forced to organize a series of limited work stoppages and demonstrations that will continue until February 26.

The protest began on February 17 when railway operators staged a 23-hour strike. This was coupled with a one-day work stoppage by all press and journal workers, which meant that there was no print media in Italy the following day.

On February 18 metalworkers staged a four-hour walkout, followed the next day by a walkout of all electricians in both the public and private sectors for four hours. On February 20 air traffic controllers staged a four-hour walkout in all of the airports servicing Rome, halting air traffic into the capital. On February 23 all airport personnel, who are members of all three

labor federations in Italy, halted air travel for four hours. On Friday all bus, tram and metro services will be stopped for four hours.

These actions have angered officials in the Italian government, many of whom had been publicly threatening these workers with heavy fines, as if the law had already been revised. However, anger over these "agitazioni" by the workers has turned to fear, and even Transportation Minister Tiziano Treu, who has been one of the most acerbic in his verbal attacks on the working class, has had to admit that "nothing has been decided yet."

This legislation is one step on the government's way toward erecting a legal framework that could be applied--like the Taft-Hartley law in the United States--to prevent workers from mobilizing to defend themselves from attacks on the economic rights they have won through decades of struggle.

That these measures are being proposed by the government headed by D'Alema and his Democratic Party of the Left (PDS), the renamed Communist Party of Italy, emphasizes how far to the right these so-called left parties have shifted. In the mid-1960s a powerful movement of the Italian working class forced the center-left coalition government of the Socialist Party and the Christian Democrats to legalize virtually any type of strike.

This current attack on the right to strike is being combined with other assaults on the interests of workers, including cuts in pensions, massive privatization of basic industries, telecommunications, transportation and public television and radio. There has also been a continued effort to shift the tax burden from businesses to middle- and working-class families.

Along with the other European Union countries, Italy must carry out deep cuts in social programs and privatization of state-owned industry as a condition for entry into the European Monetary Union and the newly

launched single European currency, the euro. In Italy, as in most of the other countries aspiring to EMU membership, it is the Social Democratic and ex-Stalinist parties that are being called upon to perform this dirty job.



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