

Poverty and unemployment in Italy

Conditions for workers deteriorate under the centre-left D'Alema government

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Statistics on poverty in Italy for the year 1998 were recently released. According to the report there were 2,558,000 poor families in Italy last year. This figure translates to 7,432,000 poor people, or 13 percent of the population. ISTAT, the organisation releasing the data, defines the poverty line as a monthly combined income of slightly less than 1,500,000 lire (about \$800) for two people.

Another 8 percent of the population lives barely above the poverty line. About 5 percent of the Italian poor live in conditions of “absolute poverty”, with a combined monthly income of about 1,000,000 lire (a little more than \$500).

It should be noted that the social misery described by these statistics does not fully capture reality. The data cannot factor in the underworld of illegal immigration. This sector of the population, one that remains invisible to studies addressing Italian citizens, suffers from the most wretched forms of exploitation and unemployment.

The geographic distribution of poverty is very uneven. In the richer northern part of the country, 5.7 percent of families are poor. In the central region the figure climbs to 7.5 percent. It is in the economically depressed South, however, that the figure soars to 23.2 percent. Moreover, an astounding 65 percent of all families in the South are considered “at risk”. They stand, that is, either below or barely above the poverty line.

On July 14 the head of the Italian government, Massimo D'Alema, visited Naples, perhaps the most important southern city. Among the events on his schedule was a meeting of 700 industrialists and entrepreneurs. Try as he might, D'Alema could not

avoid manifestations of the misery and inequality over which his government presides and which it maintains. A group of unemployed people greeted him by throwing batteries and bottles against the car which drove him to the meeting. The city had already seen street riots on July 5 between the unemployed and the police.

As D'Alema wines and dines the capitalists, conditions for the Italian working class deteriorate. On the same day in Turin, a northern industrial centre, an unemployed person attempted suicide by filling his apartment with gas. This resulted in an explosion that sent the person to the hospital in serious condition, gutted two floors of the apartment building and injured a total of eight people living in it.

Just a few days earlier in the city of Palermo an unemployed man hung himself on the scaffolding of the building standing next to city hall. The deceased man chose a place high enough to be visible—finally, one might add—from the window of Leoluca Orlando's office. Orlando is the mayor of the city and another famed “leftist”, whose budget cuts have triggered protests even from the local representatives of the Catholic Church. The death of the man sparked public protest and an attempt to set the wooden door to City Hall on fire.

Italy has an unemployment rate of 12.4 percent. The rosier predictions on the part of bourgeois economic organs forecast a small increase: 0.1 percent this year and 0.2 percent next year, provided, that is, that the neo-liberal “flexibility” policies of the centre-left government, aimed at reducing the cost of labour, are fully implemented. Such are the prospects for the Italian working class offered by the best minds of the

“reformist” left.

Meanwhile, even those lucky enough to have a job are dying. “White death” is the name given to fatal on-the-job accidents in Italy. In the last few weeks three workers on the Genoa docks have lost their lives. Authorities claim that the new procedures regulating working conditions legally instituted in January do not need to be changed. “Flexibility” not only addresses wages and working hours, but also prescribes the modification of workplace regulations when their “rigidity” gets in the way of profits.

An anecdotal list of these tragic occurrences could continue. In late June of this year, two workers died in an explosion in a factory producing fireworks near Rome, and another worker died as a result of a fall as he was repairing electrical lines near the Northern city of Brescia. The agency Eurostat reports that Italy has the highest number of workplace deaths among European nations: eight instances for each 100,000 workers.



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