

Demonstrations to protest Italian government plan to end free access to universities

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12 November 1999

Demonstrations are planned for November 17 in all the principal cities throughout Italy to protest a government plan that would deny university education to hundreds of thousands of students. The Union of University Students has called the demonstrations.

The protests were prompted by a newspaper interview with Ortensio Zecchino, the minister of education, who announced that the government would terminate Italy's policy of free access to universities next autumn.

Currently in Italy, any student who finishes the equivalent of secondary education is granted a space in the university system, and the majority of students go on to attend. Under the new law, students would no longer be guaranteed a space, and admission would be based on a series of exams.

Zecchino defended the plan by saying that working class students should stop deluding themselves that they will be able to attend university and get a decent job. "We want to help students, and to stop fooling them with the demagoguery of a free university only in a nominal way, which in reality will expel the less privileged ones; thus, we will save more money, and we will help them by not giving them illusions that they can make it."

Furthermore, the new law obligates all students to attend classes. This will penalize full-time workers who attend university by doing independent studies at home and frequent the university only during exams.

The change in education policy is being made as part of Italy's integration into the European Union. Under the EU plan, social programs such as education and health care must be standardized throughout Europe.

The education legislation was passed in 1998 under the former government of Romano Prodi, but was never put into effect. Zecchino pursued the issue after the fall of the Prodi government and says the plan will be

implemented no later than the academic year 2000-2001.

Ortensio Zecchino, considered one of the most left-leaning ministers of the five-party center-left collection government headed by Prime Minister Massimo D'Alema, has emphasized that the government has no connection with the reformist past. In fact, Zecchino has recently argued that his generation should not have fought for open university in 1968: "The misunderstanding of the left in '69 was to think that it was enough to open the doors to everyone."

According to Zecchino, 1.7 million students enroll at the universities each year and most of them never graduate. Rather than propose programs to assist students in finishing their studies, his proposal is aimed at preventing most from even beginning. "I don't agree with the center-right, but we have to face reality," he commented.

The reality is that it takes most university graduates three years to find a job in their field. New rules are also being developed to make it more difficult to change from one field of study in secondary school to another at university.

The Italian government has also decided to cut programs in the secondary schools, channeling students into fields demanded by the job market. This will also make it more difficult for students to gain the academic knowledge needed to pass the university entrance exams.



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