Eight-hour general strike in Italy

Peter Schwarz in Florence
17 April 2002

Large parts of Italy came to a standstill yesterday, when 13 million workers followed a call by the three main union federations for an eight-hour general strike. It was the first such national stoppage in Italy for twenty years. The entire transport sector, most public services and large parts of the private sector were on strike.

The strike was directed against a number of government decrees affecting workers' rights and social conditions. Central is a change in Article 18 of the labour laws, which has in the past given a high decree of protection against arbitrary redundancies to Italian workers. The dispute over Article 18 has become a symbolic rallying point for the defence of worker's rights in general. But a number of other measures and plans of the government under also at issue, covering as wide a field as pensions, education, taxation and funds for southern Italy.

The government of media tycoon Silvio Berlusconi intends to undermine the public pensions system in favour of private schemes. It has plans to replace the progressive income tax by a system with only three tax levels—no tax for an income of up to 7,500 euros ($6,700) a year, 23 percent taxation for incomes up to 30,000 euros ($27,000) and 33 percent for all incomes over 30,000 euros. The effect would be a huge tax cut for the rich and a corresponding decline in funds for social and other public expenditures. The government is also pushing projects for funding private schools at the expense of the public schools. Schemes for the development of the *Mezzogiorno*, the impoverished south of the country, have all but been abandoned.

All of these measures are meant to be implemented by decree, the so-called *delega*, a procedure that delegates the legislative process to the executive. All that remains for parliament is to rubberstamp the decrees of the government within 60 days.

Opposition to the Berlusconi government—a right-wing coalition of Berlusconi's Forza Italia, the neo-fascist National Alliance and the racist Lega Nord—has been mounting since January, very much in contrast to the passivity and compliance of the official parliamentary opposition, the so-called Olive Tree alliance. One impetus for the build-up of popular opposition has come from intellectuals and artists, who have organized protests against Berlusconi's authoritarian attitude—his monopoly over private and public television and his attacks on the independence of the judiciary. Starting from Florence, these protests rapidly mushroomed over the entire country. Another impetus has come from the trade unions, angered by Berlusconi's refusal to collaborate with them.

On March 23 this movement culminated in a mass demonstration in Rome, attended by 3 million people. For the first time all of the parliamentary opposition parties, the biggest trade union federation (CGIL) and various protest groups marched together. Absent were the other two union federations, the UIL (once close to the now defunct Socialist Party) and the CISL (Christian Democrat). CGIL General Secretary Sergio Cofferati was the main speaker at that March 23 rally.

After the success of the Rome demonstration, the UIL and the CISL joined the CGIL in calling for yesterday's general strike. The strike was accompanied by huge rallies in 21 different cities, involving different sections of the movement against Berlusconi. Some of the biggest rallies were in Milan, Bologna and Rome, each with 200,000 to 300,000 participants.

I attended the march and rally in Florence in Tuscany, where 400,000 instead of the expected 200,000 turned up. The narrow streets of the medieval city centre were blocked for hours and Piazza Santa Croce, where the final rally was held, was packed before the last section of the march had left the starting point. The speeches were transmitted to two other major squares in the city centre.

As on the previous Rome demonstration, a large cross-section of the population was represented—blue-collar as well as white-collar workers, coming from private industry as well as the public services, young people as well as pensioners. The march was dominated by trade union banners, indicating where the marchers came from and to which organization they belonged. But there were also many banners denouncing the government and its policies.

A dominant theme, heard over and over again, was that the older generation had a responsibility to defend its rights and gains not only for itself, but also for future generations. As Antonio, a retired worker from the Carrara quarries, told the *World Socialist Web Site*: "What we are doing here today is of particular importance for the youth." Elisabetta, an office worker in her twenties carrying a poster in defence of Article 18, said, "This is a magnificent event. I hope this will lead to a change in society."

The main speaker at the final rally was CGIL leader Sergio Cofferati. He has been built up as a charismatic figure in recent

© World Socialist Web Site

weeks, with crowds gathering and applauding wherever he appears. When he moved to the microphone amongst chants of "Sergio! Sergio!" hundreds of red balloons rose into the air and the flags on the piazza began to wave.

Cofferati spoke for almost one hour, dealing in detail with many of the measures planned by the government. He received most applause when he insisted that the union would not accept any social retrogression. The government, he said, was abusing political terminology. It spoke of reform when it was, in fact, implementing regression and a policy like that of Reagan and Thatcher. The term reform was always bound up with political progress, he said, but there was nothing progressive in the policy of the present government.

He argued for better education and more money for research and science as an investment in the future. "A better future is possible," he said, in a phrase borrowed from former German Social Democratic leader Oskar Lafontaine.

But he also made clear in his speech that one of his main grievances was the government's refusal to collaborate with the union leaders. "Berlusconi is denigrating the persons he should be speaking to," he complained bitterly. "A dialogue is only possible if they respect us," he added. He went on to accuse Berlusconi of provocative behaviour and ended his speech with the words: "We will not stop before we have achieved our aims."

When the Olive Tree alliance was in power, Cofferati took a different attitude and collaborated closely with the government in implementing regressive social policies. Himself a member of the Left Democrats, the successor organization to the Communist Party and a major component of the Olive Tree coalition, he supported an economic policy aimed at meeting the Maastricht criteria for Italy's entry into the European Monetary Union. As historian Paul Ginsborg points out in his latest book, *Italy and its Discontents*, Cofferati and other trade union leaders "played an invaluable role in persuading their members to accept the austerity measures" of the Prodi government.

Moreno Verdi, leader of the CGIL branch at the local university, to whom I spoke the day before the demonstration, was very blunt in this respect. "Labour flexibility was introduced in this country by a centre-left, not by a centre-right, government," he said. "Also, tax decreases for the big capitalists were first introduced by the centre-left, not by the centre-right. But now this government changes the modalities. It wants to do it in an aggressive way, with two aims: for its own class interests and in order to dishonour, to incapacitate the organized representation of the workers. It is not just pursuing specific aims—education, taxes—it wants to discredit the unions."

In other words, as long as the government was only pursuing the class interests of the big capitalists and not harming the unions in the process, it was possible for the union leadership to go along. Verdi readily admitted that "as a union secretary, I could not for five years [under the centre-left government] oppose measures similar (but not equal) to those now introduced by Berlusconi."

Cofferati, whose term as CGIL leader expires this summer, is widely seen as a possible candidate for the leadership of the Left Democrats, and even for the post of prime minister, should the Berlusconi government collapse under the impact of a growing mass movement. Under these conditions, his credentials as an opponent of Berlusconi would be very valuable to a corporate and political establishment seeking a means to control such a movement and keep it within the framework of the bourgeois order.

Up to now, however, Berlusconi has shown no signs of giving way. He has scorned the opposition movement and, in a demonstrative act, called a vote of confidence in parliament on the evening of the general strike. In Italy, a confidence vote is usually combined with a vote on a specific law. In this case the law is an amnesty for tax evaders, opposed by the unions and the Olive Tree. Because Berlusconi has a safe majority in the house, the vote did not entail any political risk for his regime.

In 1994, the first Berlusconi government disintegrated after a series of strikes and mass protests by the unions. It finally collapsed when the Lega Nord left the right-wing coalition. Some elements in the unions hope that something similar will happen again.

Today, however, the conditions are very different. The Lega Nord is not inclined to risk a new election. It did very poorly in the last election and has a strong parliamentary representation only because of a pre-election arrangement with Berlusconi.

Berlusconi is not inclined to lose power a second time. He has already demonstrated that he knows no scruples when it comes to securing and defending his rule.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site