

Italy: Strikes, protests against layoffs at Fiat

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Over the last week, thousands of workers have undertaken strike action, blockades of workplaces and motorways and held demonstrations to protest against mass redundancies planned by the Italian auto concern Fiat.

The Italian government, led by Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, agreed December 5 to the rationalisation plan proposed by the Fiat management, which proposes the closure of two factories—Termini Imerese in Sicily and Arese near Milan—and envisages further redundancies at the main Fiat works in Turin. On Monday, 5,600 workers were sacked and a further 2,500 redundancies are planned for the middle of next year.

Last Friday, workers took a full day's strike action at all Fiat factories, including those not directly affected, and at a number of supply companies. Angry workers blocked the north-south motorway close to Naples and Fiat workers and supporters in Turin blocked many main roads and a large Fiat factory. In the course of demonstrations they accused the government of betrayal and capitulation to Fiat management.

Even the seasonal opening of the opera house in Milan, one of the most important events in the Italian social calendar, was hit by the protests. Onstage representatives of the trade unions read resolutions while demonstrators lobbied in front of the building.

The protest continued on Monday. Italy's three biggest three trade union organisations—CGIL, CISL and UIL—called for a four-hour strike by all Fiat workers and further demonstrations. During the summer, the CISL and UIL had underwritten a so-called "Pact for Italy" with the government, but now they are united in their opposition to government plans for Fiat.

Since the beginning of this year, Fiat has recorded heavy sales losses. The heavily indebted company's presentation of its redevelopment plan on October 9

unleashed violent protests. Prime Minister Berlusconi vigorously criticised the rationalisation plan and even spoke of a possible state takeover of the company. His deputy Gianfranco Fini, head of the National Alliance, called for a ban on any closure of works in the underdeveloped industrial region of Sicily.

This has all proved to be just hot air. When the Fiat trade union representatives turned up December 5 for talks in government chambers, they were presented with a proposal already undersigned by the company and virtually identical to the original management concept. The redundancies will go ahead as planned.

Wives of workers from the Termini Imerese plant organized a sit-in in front of the Rome offices of the prime minister, and when results of the talks were made known they began chanting, "Clown, swindler, it's a disgrace."

The only concession made in the latest document is a worthless promise that the affected workers could be re-employed at a later point. They will not be sacked in a formal sense, but instead are to be transferred to the state bank for wage settlements (Cassa Integrazione), which guarantees a worker's income for a maximum of one year. The maximum payment totals only 776 euros monthly, which is insufficient to live on.

In a television interview last weekend, Berlusconi advised the affected workers that they "could look for a second job to earn extra money for their families; under the counter and unofficially." Such an appeal for illegal moonlighting by the prime minister himself only served to exacerbate workers' anger.

Some 2,400 workers who have lost their jobs can begin to draw their pensions early—at the age of 57—also on the basis of state support. In addition, the government will attempt to stimulate the car market. For its part, Fiat has agreed to reopen the factory in Termini Imerese from September 2003, but operating with just a single shift.

It is highly improbable that any of the workers who have now been made redundant will ever regain their jobs. Economic experts regard the rationalisation plan as it stands as inadequate and as merely the first step towards more radical cuts. According to Fiat fund manager Giulio Brunetta, “What Fiat needs is a radical restructuring in favour of competitive products and prices.” There is also some talk of a takeover of Fiat by General Motors, the US company which has also shed many jobs in its European factories.

The conflict over the future of Fiat takes place against a background of steadily growing protests against Italy’s right-wing government, which took power two-and-a-half years ago. According to official sources, 33,600 jobs have been shed by Italian industrial concerns since the beginning of the year. Steadily rising unemployment, continuing cuts to the welfare system and Berlusconi’s onslaughts against the judiciary and media have evoked resistance from broad layers of workers and intellectuals.

In the spring of this year, large-scale demonstrations against the government took place in many cities, with the protests culminating in a massive gathering of between two and three million in Rome on March 23. On April 16, 13 million workers took part in a one-day general strike to protest attacks on workers’ rights. Most recently, a half a million took to the streets in Florence to oppose the plans for a US-led war against Iraq.

However, this movement lacks political orientation and leadership. The official opposition in Italy, the coalition of parties known as the “Olive Tree” alliance, has kept a notably low profile. It has little enthusiasm for a movement which is a threat to its own politics. After all, during its five years in office the “Olive Tree” was also responsible for carrying out huge attacks on the welfare state and workers’ rights.



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