

Italian courts attack opponents of globalisation

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On the morning of December 3, the district court of Catanzaro (Calabria, southern Italy) ordered, on the basis of a review of remand conditions, the immediate release of 18 opponents of globalisation who had been arrested on November 15. Seven of them, including several members of the alternative COBAS trade unions, had been imprisoned in Viterbo, Latina and Trani for more than two weeks; the others had been under house arrest. They have been accused of “subversive activities” and “obstruction of the economic order”. The charges remain in force even though the arrest warrants have been lifted.

On December 4, only one day after the decision at Catanzaro, state prosecutors in Genoa issued arrest warrants against a further 23 globalisation opponents in northern Italy and ordered 45 apartments searched. The victims of this second wave of arrests are charged with being responsible for riots in connection with the G8 summit in Genoa in July 2001.

It has also been announced that the state prosecution in Genoa will not bring charges against the policeman who shot demonstrator Carlo Giuliani during the G8 summit.

Those now released had been arrested on November 15 in the southern Italian towns of Cosenza, Tarent, Naples, Reggio Calabria and Vibo Valenzia and had immediately been taken into high security compounds normally used exclusively for terrorists or Mafiosi.

The wave of arrests occurred barely a week after 500,000 people participated in a demonstration in Florence protesting the preparations for war against Iraq. Some of those arrested had played a leading role in the preparation of this march and the European Social Forum which directly preceded the protest.

Those arrested included trade unionists and well-known members of left-wing organisations. Salvatore Stasi, a leading member of the oppositionist COBAS unions from Tarent; Francesco Caruso and Giuseppe Fonzino, the organisers of the networks “No Global” and “Disobbedienti”; and the leader of the “Rete del Sud ribelle” (“Network of the Rebellious South”), journalist Francesco Cirillo. Other protesters put under house arrest included two sociologists from the University of Calabria, Anna Curcio and Antonino Campenni, and theologian Giancarlo Mattia.

The charges raised against them were political conspiracy with the aim of disrupting the work of the government, as well as subversive propaganda and violent disruption of the state economic order. In some cases, further charges were added,

including attacks on constitutional organs, illegal possession of arms, resistance against the security organs of the state, occupation of public buildings and instigating disrespect for the law.

During the hearing in Catanzaro, state prosecutor Domenico Fiordalisi attempted to fabricate a connection between the accused and the Brigade Rosse (Red Brigades), who bear responsibility for a series of terrorist attacks in Italy. Fiordalisi called for the continued detention of such dangerous “subversives”. Excessive tolerance, he said, would just play into the hands of terrorism. In spite of this, the judges eventually took a unanimous decision to set the accused free.

The trial against the globalisation opponents is a judicial farce. It is directed against political opponents of the government and the ruling class who have expressed their standpoint publicly and through the organisation of social protests. There is no evidence whatsoever of any acts of criminal violence. All the charges relate to the public expression of political beliefs and do not stand up to serious judicial criteria.

The prosecution charges the 52-year-old journalist Francesco Cirillo with heading a supposed “criminal association”. Cirillo is the leader of the organisation “Rete del Sud ribelle”, and is well-known for his articles against corruption and the Mafia. During the ’80s he was arrested and charged as a supposed member of an organisation of the extreme left. At that time, he was said to have been in brief contact with Renato Curzio, a leader of the Brigade Rosse. Apart from this fabricated connection, no charges could be brought against him.

The charge of “illegal possession of arms” boils down to the fact that during a search of his house the police found a gas mask, wooden sticks and a heavy crash helmet. The most spectacular activity carried out by the “Rete del Sud ribelle” cited so far was the non-violent occupation of communal job centres in various towns on July 2, 2001.

Ridiculous charges are raised against Francesco Caruso, the 28-year-old spokesperson of the “Disobbedienti” in Naples. According to the prosecution, he “praised Seattle as a potential for an uprising” in a newspaper interview. A further charge of “unauthorised possession of arms” is based on a video made by the special police force ROS (Raggruppamento Operativo Speciale dei carabinieri) on March 17, 2001 during a demonstration in Naples. It supposedly shows Caruso in the company of demonstrators who were armed with clubs and prepared to use violence.

Caruso commented: "When I saw them getting out these clubs I walked up to them and told them to leave." The ROS is a special police force that collaborates with the secret service and was noted for its provocative behaviour during the demonstration in Genoa.

Caruso's lawyer, Giuliano Pisapia, rejected all charges and said that they constituted a violation of the constitution. He pointed out that the charge of political conspiracy was based on the judicial codex of fascism. And indeed, article 270 stems from the period of fascist rule in Italy and illegalises the mere planning of any activities directed against the Italian government or the economic order. Based on this article, it is conceivable that even today defendants could be sentenced to 12 years imprisonment for their political convictions.

The interior ministry of the Berlusconi government has long been trying to silence growing social and political opposition. The recent arrests in southern Italy were in most likelihood a first attempt at repression which is now to be repeated in Genoa and other cities in the North of Italy. At the same time, the fact that a wave of arrests is occurring in the North while people are released in the South points to conflicts within the state organs of the interior ministry and the judiciary.

A senior official of the ministry of the interior, Alfredo Mantovano of the neo-fascist Alleanza Nazionale, had criticised the arrests in Italy with the following words: "This is how you create martyrs, while the real culprits of Naples and Genoa are running free to this day." He predicted that those imprisoned in Cosenza would be released.

Their detention had been supported by the interior minister, Giuseppe Pisanu, a member of Forza Italia who is regarded as a front man for Berlusconi. A week before the anti-war demonstration in Florence, Pisanu had hysterically warned of the "inevitable devastation of Florence" because, as he claimed, hordes of violent hooligans known as the "autonomous" were moving towards the city.

In Cosenza, he finally found a local judiciary prepared to take the political opponents of the government to court based on the penal code from the days of fascism.

State prosecutor Domenico Fiordalisi, who drew up the charges, had been investigating against globalisation critics and political activists in his region for 18 months. He had tapped their phones, intercepted their emails, analysed their web sites and had them followed. He proved his loyalty to the government earlier this year when he boycotted a strike of the Italian judges in protest of an arbitrary change of the criminal code in favour of Berlusconi.

The second representative of the court in Cosenza, Judge Nadia Plastina, who had also opposed the strike against Berlusconi, was now leading the preliminary investigations against the globalisation critics. She readily adopted all the investigation results of the ROS police force and signed the arrest warrants two days before the Social Forum in Florence was scheduled to begin.

Investigations against the southern Italian COBAS had also been going on for months. On May 31, the offices of the COBAS in Tarent had been searched, nine of its members arrested and computers and documents seized. Those arrested included people who had written on the violence of the police during the events in Naples and Genoa last year. They, too, were charged with

violation of article 270 of the penal code.

After his release, Francesco Caruso spoke to the *Il Manifesto* newspaper describing his conditions in jail. In the high security tract in Trani he had first been locked into a 2-meter-square cell without a window or even a chair, forcing him to squat on the ground like an animal. After an extended identification procedure, he was put into an isolation cell for another three days without anything to read, radio or television. When a member of parliament came to see him, he eventually received pen and paper so that he could at least write.

Caruso was then taken to the prison of Viterba, where he spent three more days in isolation before he was finally put into a common cell with other prisoners. He came to know a man named Gaetano: "He was sentenced to eight months in prison because he had stolen eight pieces of mozzarella cheese in a supermarket. That is one month in prison for each piece of cheese."

In Viterba the screams of the inmates could be heard all night. "It is not true that there are separate departments for drug addicts and AIDS patients," Caruso, said. "It is all mixed. One prisoner suffered an epileptic fit, and all the others shouted for help. They shouted from two until five in the morning, but nobody came."

Caruso added: "If you experience this situation in such an immediate way, you realize that this is where the entire misery of humanity is just dumped. This is where the most desperate, the most wretched members of society end up. The real criminals are not in prison."

During the hearings last Friday, several hundred people held a 12-hour protest in front of the court in Catanzaro. There is increasing public criticism of the recent wave of state repression. For weeks, demonstrators have been chanting in several Italian cities: "We are all subversives!"

In Cosenza, 60,000 turned out to demand the release of the prisoners. In Ferrara, 75 university professors and public figures reported themselves to the police as "political conspirators".

Apart from these protests, demonstrations and other actions of Italian metal workers are taking place on an almost daily basis. Some groups among them have declared their solidarity with the imprisoned critics of globalisation. For weeks, Fiat workers have been on strike protesting planned mass redundancies at the major European car maker. They have occupied factories, motorways and railway stations. In a further indication of the build-up of social tensions, on November 30, 200,000 marched against redundancies and cuts in the Naples budget.



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