

Italian opponents of war block US military transports

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Since last Friday, thousands of Italian war protesters have been blocking military trains used by US armed forces to transport soldiers, weapons and tanks from a north Italian base to Livorno, where the materials are due to travel on by ship.

Italian Defence Minister Antonio Martino gave the US military permission to utilise the state infrastructure beginning February 21 to transport military equipment, troops and provisions for a war against Iraq. Anticipated were a total of 26 convoys to move weapons and other equipment from the barracks at Ederle near Vicenza to the American base at Camp Darby.

Camp Darby has been one of the most important US bases in Europe since the Second World War and lies between Livorno and Pisa on the Italian Riviera, with links to the port of Livorno and the military airbase at Pisa. This is the Italian endpoint for further transportation of troops and materiel to Turkey and the Persian Gulf.

According to the Italian constitution, decisions regarding the use of Italian airspace, use of facilities and infrastructure (streets, railways, ports, airports, etc.) by a foreign power have to be agreed by parliament. However, the Berlusconi government has given permission without a vote by the Italian parliament and was then supported in this action by the Italian president, Carlo Azeglio Ciampi.

On February 21, as the first convoys set off from Padua to travel to Pisa, they were held up for a number of hours in Monselice near Padua. A group of about 100 blocked the tracks until they were forcibly moved by Italian special police units (Digos).

The special units known as Digos (Divisione Investigazioni Generali e Operazioni Speciali) gained a gruesome reputation following their actions at the G8

summit in Genoa in July 2001 when they violently stormed the Diaz school building housing summit protesters. They demonstrated similar brutal methods in their treatment of the protesters blocking the tracks. Many of the demonstrators were attacked with truncheons, kicked and punched. In Monselice, police took personal details of protesters who have since been threatened with prosecution.

It has been left to the deputy state attorney, Dr. Gaetano Santomauro, to decide whether to accept the charges made by the Digos and proceed with the prosecutions of those taking part in the blockade.

There were further actions, including symbolic blockades, near Vincenza and in Padua, Verona, Brescia, Bologna, Florence and Pisa. On a number of occasions trains were forced to either turn back or switch directions only to be confronted with fresh blockades. Spontaneous demonstrations in solidarity with the antiwar activities also took place in Milan, Florence and Pisa.

In Fornovo, a small village near Parma, a large part of the population expressed their solidarity with the protest and the mayor of a neighbouring village lay down across the tracks, bearing his official insignia. Local residents brought white flags, set fire to the tracks and drank wine and grappa before being driven away by police.

In Pisa, over 400 police were assembled to accompany a convoy from the railway station to the military airbase. In addition to blocking the railway station, protesters also picketed the airbase where supplies were being taken in cargo lifters. Demonstrators, bearing rainbow coloured flags, managed to force their way onto the grounds of the airbase, attempting to halt the movements of tanks and military vehicles.

In Migliarino, the driver of a passenger train refused to continue his journey in order to use his train to block the tracks for military transports. Only after some hours, and upon being threatened with the loss of his job, did he agree to drive further.

In Sardinia, violent clashes took place between the police and some 1,000 demonstrators who blockaded the NATO base on the island of La Maddalena. The police used teargas.

The main organiser of the actions was the so-called “Disobbedienti”, a group based on a policy of “civil disobedience”. Others taking part included members of the rank-and-file trade union organisation Cobas, members of Rifondazione Comunista (Refounded Communists), the Italian Greens, as well as many unaffiliated individuals.

Luca Casarini, head of the “Disobbedienti”, stated that it was the government alone which was responsible for the hold-ups in public transport because it had given permission for the transports without consulting parliament. “By what right are trains and rail facilities being militarised and abused for a war which people do not want?” he asked.

Railway workers who had been instructed to accompany the convoys turned to their trade union, the CGIL, for support in refusing to carry out such duties. The regional trade union secretary of the CGIL in Toscana, Roberto Martelli, stated that in principle railway workers could not be forced to assist in such convoys which transport “death and destructive materials”. The “transport of goods to be utilised for war” was also a security risk for the public at large, he said.

However, Guido Abbadessa, the general secretary of the CGIL transport section, expressed his regret that the union would not be able to back rail workers who refused to carry out their duties for reasons of conscience, because the Italian railways have a commitment to the Italian Defence Ministry. As general secretary, he argued, he had to abide in the first place by legal regulations, in addition to looking after the interests of his members.

The national general secretary of the CGIL, Guglielmo Epifani, has called for talks with the government. For his part, a speaker for the governing party (Forza Italia) of Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, described the boycotts and protests as “red

terrorism”.

Over the last few days additional convoys were heavily guarded by *carabinieri* and military forces, but even they could not guarantee free passage for the trains. Up until Tuesday evening, just six trains had reached their destination. On Monday and Tuesday passengers pulled the emergency cords on a number of passenger trains in order to block the line between Padua and Pisa.

In the meantime, the CGIL has agreed to call an official strike to back boycott measures by dock workers who refuse to load military materials. The strike threat was confirmed by Guido Abbadessa on February 26 in the newspaper *La Stampa*.

A total blockade of the “death trains” was planned for February 26. Thousands demonstrated along the Vicenza—Padova—Ferrara—Bologna—Florence—Pisa line to Camp Darby. A speaker for the European Social Forum in Florence explained: “We intend to continue as we have done over the last days, taking no risks regarding ourselves or others, nor will we create any problems for people as whole, nor react to any provocations.”

In Genoa, an antiwar demonstration was planned for the main entrance of the Fiat car factory for all those auto workers who wish to take part. A central demonstration was also planned in Pisa. Nationwide demonstrations are planned in Italy on Saturday.

In view of the protest the Italian government is considering rerouting the convoys to the port of Brindisi in southern Italy. According to the paper *Il Manifesto*, further train convoys are to be routed over the Balkans. In line with such plans the US military made an application on Tuesday to the Slovenian government for permission to transport 20 trains loaded with soldiers, tanks and weapons through the country to Turkey.



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