

Italy: 10-million-strong general strike protests pension cuts

Marianne Arens**28 October 2003**

On Friday, October 24, an estimated 10 million workers and office employees took part in a general strike with the central aim of protesting the pension policy of the government of Silvio Berlusconi. One-and-a-half million people—including pensioners, students and the unemployed—participated in rallies in the centres of Italy's main cities. They carried banners with slogans such as “Defend our future” and “Better to die young than live to a ripe old age—if Berlusconi gets his way!”

The new draft law for pensions was agreed to on October 3 by the Council of Ministers. It proposes that from 2008 employees must have paid at least 40 years of contributions, or have reached a minimum age of 65 (60 for women), before qualifying for a pension. Until now it was possible to retire in Italy at 57 after 35 years of contributions. An earlier pension was possible if an individual could demonstrate that he or she had paid 37 years of contributions.

From 2008, all those who have paid less than 40 years of contributions must reckon with considerable reductions to their pensions. Against a background of growing unemployment and an increase in short-term low-paid jobs, it will become increasingly difficult—and in many cases impossible—to attain the necessary 40 years of contributions. Average unemployment for young people under 24 in Italy affects one in three of the workforce, and in the south of the country this figure rises to 50 percent.

For four hours, the strike on Friday paralysed air, train, ship and bus travel and brought transport to a stop in all the major Italian cities. The Italian airline Alitalia had to cancel 155 flights, and 50 percent of national trains were affected. Many schools, banks, museums, libraries, post offices, courts and public institutions remained closed the entire day. City cleaning and sanitation workers struck, and only emergency services were maintained in the hospitals.

Participation in the strike by workers in the private sector was more sporadic. In Sicily, there was a nearly complete strike by the workers at the Fiat car factory, Termini Imerese, at the petrochemical company in Gela and at the shipyards of Palermo. In the major industrial areas of the north, between 50 and 70 percent of the workforce joined the strike action.

The three biggest trade union federations—the CGIL, CISL and UIL—had called the strike. The rank-and-file trade union

COBAS also took part and organised its own demonstration in Rome.

In Naples, where around 80,000 took part in demonstrations and rallies, the main speaker was trade union secretary Luigi Angeletti (UIL). He was confronted by angry workers from the asbestos industry, who object to the new laws that would prevent workers in dangerous industries from taking early retirement. They carried banners with slogans declaring “Injustice is the priority for this government” and chanted “You idiots, you fools—what good is your prattle. We want action.”

In Turin, Florence and Bologna, the demonstrations were estimated at around 70,000, with 60,000 turning out in Genoa. Two-hundred-thousand took part in the Milan protest, including workers from the Alfa-Romeo (a subsidiary of Fiat) factory of Arese. This factory is threatened with closure, together with the Fiat factory in Sicily. Milan was the city where Berlusconi grew up, and for many the size of the demonstration came as a surprise. None of the trade union heads addressed the Milan rally. Around half of those taking part were workers in so-called “precarious” jobs, unemployed, pensioners and the poor, who loudly expressed their disgust with the Berlusconi government but withheld their applause after the speech by a representative of the UIL.

The demonstration in Rome proceeded from the Piazza della Bocca della Verità to the Piazza Navona, and demonstrators carried a huge papier-mâché “mouth of truth” (Bocca della verità), which was to play the role of oracle and test the truthfulness of those who placed their arm in the mouth. A trade unionist wearing a Berlusconi mask put his hand in the mouth in a spoof aimed at emphasising the lies and broken promises made by the Italian prime minister.

In any event, the spectacle expressed the impotence of the trade union protests—no one has really been bitten by the “Bocca” since ancient times. The trade unions pose no real danger to the government, and two unions—the UIL and the Catholic CISL—actually signed a deal with Berlusconi in July 2002, the so-called “Pact for Italy.” Since then, they have taken part in talks with the government on plans to “reform” laws governing working conditions.

The latest four-hour general strike appeared to be the lowest

common denominator expressing the unity of the trade union movement. The main aim of the biggest trade union, the CIGL, is limited to taking part in talks with the government over restructuring measures. The political perspective of the union is restricted to supporting the opposition parties of the Olive Tree alliance—a coalition of left and bourgeois organisations that constituted the government before Berlusconi came to power. In fact, the Olive Tree has nothing to offer in the way of alternatives to the existing government. During its own period in office, the alliance had begun attacks on the fabric of the Italian welfare state, implemented privatisation and cut social security payments in order to trim Italy's public finances in line with the dictates of the Maastricht Treaty.

The leaders of the opposition used the October 24 general strike as a platform to improve their public image. Marching through the streets of Rome alongside Savino Pezzotta from the CISL was a succession of leaders of the organisations that emerged from Italy's postwar Communist Party—Fausto Bertinotti (Refounded Communists), Piero Fassino (Democratic Left, DL) and Armando Cossutta (Italian Communists). In a show of nationalism the CISL draped the demonstration in a sea of flags sporting the Italian national colours—red, green and white.

In Bologna, the general secretary of the CGIL, Guglielmo Epifani, took part in the demonstration together with his predecessor, Sergio Cofferati (DL), who is currently campaigning as the candidate of the centre-left parties for the post of mayor in Bologna. Opposition parties regard Cofferati as potential prime minister should the Berlusconi government collapse.

The government and employers have attempted to play down the significance of the strike. The chairman of the Italian Employers Federation Confindustria, Antonio D'Amato, was already declaring on Friday at mid-day that only 30 percent of workers had struck, while Labour and Social Affairs Minister Roberto Maroni (Northern League) spoke disparagingly of "this part-time strike."

In fact, the government is visibly nervous in the face of this latest development. In 1994, plans to reform the Italian pension scheme were the trigger for the eventual resignation of the first government led by Silvio Berlusconi. Today, in contrast to the trade union bureaucracy, broad layers of workers regard the Berlusconi government with anger and contempt, opposing its attacks on the welfare state and support for the US-led war in Iraq. Last year, more than 13 million demonstrated against plans to abolish paragraph 18, which protects against arbitrary dismissal; and in the spring of this year, 3 million took to the streets in Rome to protest the Iraq war.

The government has been weakened over the past weeks by a series of profound conflicts. At the beginning of October, Gianfranco Fini, deputy prime minister and head of the neo-fascist National Alliance (NA), who is acting as Italy's representative to the European Union, made a surprising call

for the introduction of voting rights for assimilated immigrants. This was a tactical manoeuvre aimed at strengthening the hand of the NA against the notoriously racist Northern League, whose head, Umberto Bossi, vigorously rejects such a move. On the issue of pensions, Bossi made the demagogic claim that he would vehemently defend "northern pensions" ("pensions in the north will not be touched"). For his part, Roberto Maroni, who is also a member of the Northern League, described the government's plans as "inviolable."

The UGL trade union, which has close links to the National Alliance, held its own demonstration in Rome against the pension plans. The divisions inside the government have forced Berlusconi to delay the official implementation of his "reforms" to 2008. He has also announced forms of relief for workers who voluntarily agree to work longer.

Another indication of the weakness and nervousness of the government was the massive police presence on the day of the general strike. On the same day, the papers were full of reports of the arrest of six persons alleged to be members of the Italian Red Brigades. Hundreds of police raids and searches in the earlier hours of the morning carried out throughout Italy were obviously aimed at intimidating those planning to take part in the mass mobilisation and tar them with the brush of terrorism.

Italian minister of the interior Giuseppe Pisani declared that those who had been arrested were responsible for the murder of Massimo D'Antona and Marco Biagi (two advisors to the Labour Ministry). Biagi was responsible for drafting the law for massive changes to working conditions due to come into effect October 24—the day of the general strike.

The trade unions have threatened additional and longer strikes for October 30. A strike is planned for November 7 by FIOM engineering workers supported by a number of alternative trade unions. The government is planning to tighten up the laws governing the right to strike and has already offered police protection to employers who would be affected by the November 7 strike.



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