

Mass strike in Italy against Berlusconi government

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October 17 saw a general strike against the attacks being waged on working people by the government of Silvio Berlusconi.

The central points of concern are low wages and temporary contracts across various sectors as well as education reforms that threaten 87,000 teaching jobs and cuts in the health system.

Protest marches composed of workers in transport, education, the health and emergency services among others, paralysed traffic in Rome, Milan and Turin last week, with one union official describing the strike as "a success beyond our wildest dreams." In Rome, unions claimed up to 300,000 demonstrated in the main rally at Piazza San Giovanni. Also in the capital, police in riot gear guarded the entrance to the education ministry to prevent access by protesting university and high-school students.

One worker in Rome, Adriana Renza, who was trying to make it to work despite the bus strike, said: "There are too many cuts. They are making reforms that we don't like, especially in the schools and we all have children at school and it affects everyone."

In Milan, around 50,000 protestors were reported for a similar rally at Piazza Duomo. Local police described the traffic situation in the city as "chaotic." In Venice, the Vaporetti water buses were also down to a reduced service, with around 48 percent of operators adhering to the strike. Some international and domestic flights were also cancelled.

The cuts proposed by Education Minister Maria Stella Gelmini, and dubbed the "Gelmini reforms", resulted in thousands of university students, teachers and schoolchildren protesting in Rome, Milan and other cities.

Bill 133 passed in August 2008 is the beginning of a process of privatization of university-level education.

Funds are being heavily cut and teacher turn-over is limited to 20 percent, meaning that a new teacher can be hired only after five have retired. Gelmini's decree reintroduces mandatory uniforms, an antiquated system of grades, including the reintroduction of a grade on "behaviour", the reversion to a single teacher per class instead of three every two classes and the segregation of immigrants in what are defined "classi ponte" (bridge-classes).

In Milan, clashes between police and students left three wounded and others injured. The clashes occurred because students were going to occupy the Politecnico. The Bologna station was invaded. Florence saw 40,000 demonstrating. By November 3, the inauguration of the academic year at Milan's Politecnico where Gelmini herself is due to appear, students have announced "uncontrollable action".

Prime Minister Berlusconi tried to divert attention away from the fact that he is facing his first serious mass opposition since coming to power five months ago by announcing a battle with the Mafia.

He warned last week that oil-exporting nations and sovereign funds could make hostile bids for Italian and European firms now that share prices are so low, and that he intended to resist such moves. But Libya, Italy's oil-producing former colony, took a big stake in Italy's second largest bank, Unicredit, and could not have done so without Berlusconi's blessing.

The Italian government has sought to play down the impact of the financial crisis on its banks by claiming that their so-called conservative lending and growth policies (excepting Unicredit) have shielded them from the worst of the storm. But Economy Minister Giulio Tremonti has already said that concern on world markets has shifted from banks to the "real economy."

The Italian economy was already heading for

recession before the banking crisis. Now it has virtually ground to a halt. In preparation to face the inevitable growth of mass opposition, Welfare Minister Maurizio Sacconi recently announced plans to reform labour laws to "regulate" strikes, by forcing unions to poll members before staging any industrial action.



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