

Italy: Protests and strikes against Berlusconi education cuts

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31 October 2008

Hundreds of thousands of teachers, students and parents marched through Italian cities Thursday in protest over reforms initiated by Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. His government's multibillion-euro education cuts were voted into law on Wednesday.

Organisers claim that up to 1 million people marched in the capital, and that nine out of ten schools across the country were closed. Prominent at the rallies on Thursday were large numbers of school and university students who have been conducting a prolonged campaign against the government's educational reform. Thursday's strike had been preceded by weeks of protests by pupils, students, parents, teachers and professors.

Schools and university faculties across the country have conducted a series of demonstrations, public meetings and occupations of educational establishments. Even the sleepy rural areas in the south of the country were hit by the protest movement.

According to the Interior Ministry, since the start of October no less than 300 demonstrations had taken place and an estimated 150 schools and 20 university departments occupied by students. If anything, the official figures are an underestimate. According to the protest movement's own figures, a total of 60 high schools have been occupied in Naples and 120 in the region of Campania.

Demonstrations took place across the country last Friday, with hundreds of thousands taking part. One day later, on Saturday, several hundred thousand protested in Rome against the government.

The target of protesters is the reversal of the so-called Gelmini reform, named after the 35-year-old education minister, Mariastella Gelmini, from Berlusconi's party Forza Italia. The reform plans to cut a total of 87,000 teaching jobs and 44,500 administrative posts at state

schools within the next three years. The scheme is aimed at saving €8 billion. The plan also envisages cuts to university staff, with just one in five vacancies amongst lecturers to be filled during coming years.

The Italian educational system has been considered to be one of the worst in Europe for some time. The schools are poorly equipped, teaching methods are outdated, teachers are underpaid and there is a widespread lack of modern teaching materials such as computers. The universities are chronically overcrowded.

The government now has the audacity to claim that its austerity program is the answer to this misery. According to Education Minister Gelmini, the reform will make education more effective and efficient by cutting back on bureaucracy and concentrating on performance.

In terms of its recommendations for the content of school education, the reform appears to have drawn from educational concepts prevailing in the 19th century. Instead of modern methods, teaching, and textbook material, the plan emphasizes discipline and order. In primary schools the reform advocates the replacement of specialized subject teaching staff with "general" teachers—a so-called "maestro"—whom all pupils are to greet by rising from their seats when he or she enters the classroom. A form of school uniform is to be made compulsory, school reports are to replace the existing form of more differentiated evaluation, and additional reports will decide on the transfer of pupils.

Gelmini's discipline initiatives are planned for the mass of the student population in public schools. The implementation of the reform will inevitably lead to a precipitous increase in private schools, where the wealthy will send their children to be educated.

The reform also discriminates against immigrants. In

this respect, Gelmini responded to a demand by a coalition partner in the government, the racist Northern League (Lega Nord). Anyone failing a language test on their first day at school will be required to attend a special class in future. The Lega Nord cynically refers to this measure as “positive discrimination” and a contribution towards “better integration.”

The broad popular opposition to Gelmini’s plans surprised not only the government, but the opposition parties as well. The spontaneous protest actions across the country took place largely independently of the traditional organizations.

Pupils occupied school buildings together with their teachers. Parents demonstrated alongside their children. Professors held lectures in public places. In Venice, teachers blocked motor traffic to the mainland, while in Bari a symbolic funeral cortege paralyzed traffic. University departments were occupied at the universities in Bologna, Milan, Turin, Genoa, Naples and Rome. In the proximity of Milan, pupils occupied a railway station and blocked the tracks for some time.

In response, the government has stubbornly ignored this opposition. It prevented a parliamentary debate over the reform by declaring the bill to be a decree that required a vote of confidence, enabling it to push through the bill without a debate.

Gelmini and her mentor Berlusconi have reacted to recent protests with arrogance and contempt. Gelmini described the opposition as “terrorist.” Other members of the government even spoke of an “infiltration of the movement by the Red Brigades”—a terror organization that emerged in Italy in the 1970s.

Berlusconi insisted that he would not give way “a millimetre,” that he was prepared to use force against the opposition and that he would not tolerate the occupation of schools and universities. He threatened, “I will invoke the interior minister, and I will give him exact instructions on how he should intervene with the security forces to prevent such things happening.”

His comments merely poured oil on the flames. The protests continued to spread and became more radical. Berlusconi then retreated somewhat and stated he had been misunderstood, but he made no concessions with regard to the reform. On Wednesday, the Italian Senate voted through the reform by a vote of 162 to 134, which means it can now enter into force.

The Gelmini reform draws on the cuts implemented

by the predecessor government led by Romano Prodi. In its two-year term of office, Prodi’s centre-left government cut 47,000 jobs in the education sphere. But as protests grow it is the Democratic Party led by Walter Veltroni that is now trying to place itself at the head of the movement. The Democrats emerged from the Communist Party and were the most important component in Prodi’s coalition.

Veltroni was the only speaker at the demonstration held in Rome last Saturday. Following his defeat at the hands of Berlusconi in national elections held in the spring of this year, Veltroni initially made an offer to work together with Berlusconi’s coalition. Now the Democrats are attempting to take the leadership of the movement against the education reform in order to keep it under control.

The Democrats will face an uphill fight. The protests against the education reform are part of a broad social movement that will only intensify as the effects of the financial crisis make themselves felt. The past few weeks have also witnessed strikes and protests in public transport, the health service and other sections of public service. Firefighters, air personnel and those employed in jobs in call centres and commercial ventures such as IKEA have also taken part in strikes.



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