

Italy: Student protests escalate

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Students, teachers and lecturers in Italy are continuing to protest the attacks on the right to education and the 130,000 sackings being proposed by the government of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. By the November 7 weekend, students had been demonstrating nationally against the measures for more than three weeks. A further mass demonstration is scheduled to go ahead on November 14.

The mass movement is protesting the passage of Law 133, the so-called Gelmini reform (after Education Minister Mariastella Gelmini). The decree will lead to at least 87,000 teaching jobs and 44,500 administrative posts being lost at state schools over the next three academic years to 2012. Many smaller schools are to be closed as part of €8 billion in cuts. Universities also face the threat of privatisation.

In primary schools the number of school teachers per class will be reduced from two to one. The school working week is also being reduced from 40 to 24 hours.

The government's reform of the public university system has yet to be finalised but guidelines outlining further attacks were presented by Gelmini on November 6. These include a reduction in teaching hours, a rationalisation of the number of degree courses offered and plans to distribute 30 percent of public funding on a performance-related basis.

Article 66 calls for the rationalisation of staff at universities. Only one in five vacancies amongst lecturers will be filled in the next few years. Authorisation is established to allow Italy's universities to set up foundations, which will be able to benefit from private funding as a precursor to privatisation.

The movement has quickly developed into an all-out confrontation with the government and the state. Statistics from the Interior Ministry reveal that from the beginning of October up to 300 demonstrations had taken place with some 150 schools and 20 university departments being occupied by students. According to the protest movement, 60 high schools have been

occupied in Naples and 120 in the region of Campania, in southern Italy alone.

On October 27, some 10,000 students occupied La Sapienza University in Rome before moving away and blockading several main roads and the central railway station Roma Termini. Protests continued with students finally surrounding the Senate building in the city.

On October 29, the government passed Law 133 by 162 votes to 134. The Senate was forced to suspend the sitting due to the building being besieged by thousands of students. The students and their supporters had arrived in the square after taking part in seven marches departing from various points of the city. As the law was passed, students staged a sit-in outside the Senate's Palazzo Madama building in Rome shouting, "Clowns, Clowns!" referring to the politicians inside.

On October 30, an estimated one million teachers, university and high school students demonstrated in Rome following the ratification of the Gelmini reform. The demonstration was called by several unions led by the General Confederation of Labour (CGIL). A number of students expressed their disgust at the government by throwing eggs and other objects at the ministry of education building in Trastevere.

The demonstration was part of a one-day general strike by teachers. During the day, 90 percent of schools were closed nationally. In Milan, at least 5,000 students staged a short sit-in in front of the Milan stock exchange in the Piazza Affari. In Turin, an estimated 50,000 people protested and were accompanied by the city's theatre orchestra. In Venice, the causeway linking the lagoon city to the mainland was occupied by several thousand young people.

On November 7, demonstrations and protests were held nationally in all the main cities and towns including Rome, Torino, Bari Bologna, Cagliari, Florence, Milan, Naples, Pisa, Lecce, Padua and Turin as well as in Palermo, Sicily. Some 1,000 students attempted to occupy the Ostiense railway station in Rome when they were attacked by riot police. One student suffered a head

wound during the clashes while others were also hurt by police batons.

In Naples, students marched in the thousands and in Pisa, students staged sit-ins on several platforms at the railway station. On November 10, students in Florence announced that they would hold a further protest and teach-in.

In response to the united demonstrations of students, teachers, high school pupils and parents, the government and the ruling elite has spoken in increasingly belligerent and menacing tones. Berlusconi branded the protesters as “violent” and Gelmini spoke of a “terrorist” threat and compared the protests to the Red Brigades that emerged in Italy in the 1970s.

As the demonstrations began, Berlusconi warned, “I want to give a weather warning: We won’t allow schools and universities to be occupied... I will call the interior minister and give him detailed instructions on how to intervene with the police forces to stop these things happening.”

Following the October 30 demonstrations he stated, “I regret that young people have been manipulated by the left... I see a scandalous left wing which has the ability to reverse the truth and speak the contrary.”

A clear warning of the type of measures being prepared was provided by Francesco Cossiga on October 28, in an interview with the *Quotidiano Nazionale*, a far-right newspaper. Cossiga is a former Christian Democrat Prime Minister and President of Italy from 1985 to 1992. He is a now a lifetime member of the Senate.

When asked whether Berlusconi had, “gone too far in threatening the use of State force against the students,” he replied, “I’m afraid that his words will not be followed by action.”

He then advised that Roberto Maroni of the Lega Nord, the current Home Secretary, should “do what I did when I was Home Secretary.”

“Withdraw the police from the streets and the universities, infiltrate the movement with agent provocateurs ready for anything and allow the demonstrators to run loose for a week or so, devastating shops, setting cars on fire and causing havoc in the streets...”

“Then, with public opinion on your side, the sound of ambulance sirens should drown out the sirens of police and carabinieri cars... the forces of law and order should massacre the demonstrators without pity and send them all to hospital. Not arrest them—the magistrates would set

them free straight away in any event—beat them bloody and beat the teachers stirring them up, bloody too.”

To the question, “The teachers, too?” he replied, “The teachers above all. Not the older ones, of course... the young girls. Have you any idea of the seriousness of what’s happening? There are teachers indoctrinating children and encouraging them to demonstrate—that’s criminal behaviour!”

The interviewer replied, “But you realise what they would say in Europe after something like you suggest? ‘Fascism returns to Italy’, they’d say.”

Cossiga replied, “Rubbish, it’s the democratic way— put out the flame before the fire spreads.”

The government is utilising every means to whip up a right wing atmosphere and to intimidate the growing movement to the left by broad masses of the population. Right wing groups have been mobilised to attack the demonstrations and rallies held by the students. Immediately after the vote that passed Law 133 in the Senate, a band of right wing thugs attacked protesting students in the Piazza Navona. Thousands of the students had just arrived in the square from their occupation of the faculty of Communication Sciences and Sociology at La Sapienza University. The thugs are linked to the neo-fascist Casa Pound movement and were armed with large sticks and batons wrapped up in the tricolours of the Italian flag.

The mass mobilisations of students and youth are taking place under conditions of an increasingly militant movement of the working class in defence of jobs, wages and existing contract rights. Workers in public transport, the health service and other sections of public service have taken strike action over the past few weeks. Other workers including firemen, air personnel and staff employed in call centres and at private companies, such as furniture manufacturer IKEA, have also taken part in industrial action. On November 9, workers in rail and public transport began a 24-hour national strike. Most buses, trams, local train services and metro networks did not run as a result of the stoppage.



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