

Italy: Fiat workers protest against management and their union leadership

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On Saturday, May 16, Fiat workers from all over Italy held a demonstration in Turin. Over 10,000 Fiat workers responded to a call from Italian engineering unions and marched through the city centre to the Fiat company headquarters in Lingotto. At the head of the march were the workforces of two Fiat factories facing closure—Termini Imerese on the island of Sicily and Pomigliano D'Arco near Naples.

According to Fiat CEO Sergio Marchionne, both works will be closed if Fiat is able to successfully go ahead with its plans to take over Chrysler and Opel. The two factories in Sicily and Naples have already been reduced to short-time working months ago. Hundreds of short-term and subcontracted workers have been dismissed while large parts of the factories production work have been outsourced to subcontracting firms.

Following the most recent strike in Pomigliano D'Arco, 316 workers were subject to discipline and transferred to another plant in Nola where they have worked under worse conditions for lower wages. It has been reported that the agreement to transfer these workers was supported by FIOM trade union leader Gianni Rinaldini, who is also a member of the organization Communist Refoundation (*Rifondazione Comunista, RC*). The FIOM is the engineering union affiliated to the trade union federation CGIL, which has close links to Communist Refoundation.

The Fiat workers in Turin were in an angry mood and evidently determined to fight for their jobs, wages and rights. The union officials, on the other hand, wanted to use the demonstration to increase pressure for their single demand: joint talks between the unions, management and the government of Silvio Berlusconi about the future of Fiat factories in Italy.

As the Christian trade union leader Giuseppe Farina addressed the crowd at the closing rally in Lingotto a

group of workers called out: “Venduti” [you have been bought] and “Vergogna” [shame]. The catcalls spread rapidly and the workers began to sing to the melody of “Guantanamo” the words: “We want to work.” They then began chanting: “Il potere dev'essere operaio” (power to the workers).

The jeering of the trade union leader came predominantly from workers from southern Italy, who had travelled to the march in buses organized by the unaffiliated union organisation Slai Cobas (Sindacato dei Lavoratori Autorganizzati Intercategoriale—Comitati di Base/Union of self-organised and inter-category workers).

Several Cobas representatives from Naples demanded that they be allowed to speak from the stage of the rally. In order to prevent this from taking place, Gianni Rinaldini immediately commenced his closing speech. Some workers and Cobas members then mounted the mobile stage and tried to pull Rinaldini away from the microphone. FIOM security officials intervened and a struggle developed, in the course of which Rinaldini tripped from the stage.

The incident was subsequently utilized by the media to mount a campaign against the angry workers. On the same evening the press universally reported that Cobas members had tossed Rinaldini from the stage. For their part, the Cobas leadership officially rejected the claim and stressed that on the contrary they had helped Rinaldini return to the stage so he could finish his speech.

The right-wing press demanded the trade unions dissociate themselves from “violent elements.” The very same media outlets that support the extreme right-wing and openly racist policies of Prime Minister Berlusconi now accuse workers of “intolerance.” There were also disapproving comments from Communist Refoundation. The organization's chairman, Paolo Ferrero, condemned the events in Lingotto, declaring: “Such protest actions only weaken the workers and represent a serious obstacle

because it is necessary that we force Fiat to change its production plans.”

The frictions that erupted at Saturday’s demonstration are an expression of the growing mistrust on the part of many workers towards the union leadership in general and Gianni Rinaldini in particular. These tensions represent a continuation of the development evident one year ago in the parliamentary elections, when a large proportion of the working class refused to support Communist Refoundation, which had emerged from Italy’s once powerful Communist Party (PCI). The resounding defeat for RC in the 2008 election meant that the organization was stripped of any representation in the Italian parliament.

Since then the party has continued its turn to the right. Last summer Communist Refoundation split. A wing led by Nichi Vendola, the regional president of Apulia, resigned and founded Sinistra della libertà, a broadly-based movement that regards itself as a counterpart to Berlusconi’s own party, Popolo della libertà, (The People of Freedom, PdL) and is open to all oppositional currents, including conservative and Catholic forces. To this end they are keen to sever any links with a communist past or, as Nichi Vendola put it: “We want the free left to be a promise for the future rather than a memory of the past.”

In contrast the remnants of Communist Refoundation continue to refer to themselves as “communists” and portray themselves—at least verbally—as a more radical grouping. For the European elections, RC is standing on a so-called “Lista dei Comunisti” together with the Italian Communist Party (Pdc) led by Oliviero Diliberto and the group “Socialismo 2000.”

Nothing could be more misleading than designating Communist Refoundation as “communist.” In fact, the organization is not only prepared to seal a pact with the (Italian) Democratic Party and refrain from standing its own candidates, it is also ready to work with Berlusconi himself. This is shown by RC’s politics at Fiat, where both Ferrero and Rinaldini are urging round the table talks with management and the Berlusconi government.

This is the same government that only last week pushed through parliament a law criminalising immigrants, and authorising fines of thousands of euros. It has also sanctioned the introduction of fascist-type civilian guards and deployed troops on the streets of Italian cities. Similar draconian measures will be employed against all those workers who seek to defend their rights and jobs.

To leave the fate of Fiat workers in the hands of Berlusconi and Fiat boss Marchionne only serves to

disarm workers and is an expression of the growing cooperation between the trade unions, government and the state.

For their part, the Slai Cobas representatives lack any viable answer or progressive perspective for the working class. Their politics are limited to carrying out protest actions to put pressure on the official union leadership in the interests of a “common struggle.” Their hopes of pushing the bureaucratic apparatuses of the trade unions to the left are based on the fact that, in the final analysis, they share the opportunist and nationalist perspective of the trade unions.

The working class must establish its political independence from the old leaderships by undertaking the struggle for an international, socialist perspective. It must unite with its colleagues in other countries to defend all jobs. The auto industry is one of the world’s most integrated, with workforces in Italy, America, Germany, France, Poland, Russia and throughout the world.

This perspective is currently being advanced by the International Committee of the Fourth International and its sections in Europe that are participating in the European election. In its election manifesto the Fourth International devotes an entire section to the political independence of the working class and declares:

“The working class is not responsible for the capitalist crisis. It did not participate in risky speculative transactions and has not salted away millions. We support all initiatives—strikes, factory occupations and mass demonstrations—that strengthen the self-confidence of workers and challenge the autocratic power of the parasites in the political establishment and big business. Such struggles can be successful, however, only if they are conducted independently of the Social Democratic Party and the trade unions. The leadership of these struggles cannot be left to the bureaucratic apparatuses. Instead, independent, democratically elected strike committees and workers councils must be developed, which are directly answerable to the working class.”



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