

Italian police incarcerate 1,300 migrant workers after Calabria protest

Marianne Arens, Stefan Steinberg
12 January 2010

Italian police and carabinieri arrested about 1,300 African workers in the Calabrian town of Rosarno over the weekend and shipped them off in buses and trains to detention centers. The immigrants had launched protests in Rosarno on Thursday and Friday of last week against the shooting of several migrants by unknown gunmen the day before.

The violent clashes and wholesale arrests are indicative of mounting social tensions in Italy and in Europe brought on by the economic crisis, unemployment and attacks by the European governments on the living standards of the working class. The European elite hope to divert the resulting social anger toward immigrant workers while manipulating events like those in Rosarno to put in place police state measures aimed at the entire working class, immigrant and native.

Italy's Interior Minister Roberto Maroni lost no time in describing the events in Rosarno as the result of "too much tolerance." In fact, far from being a result of the "tolerance" of the Italian state—among the most brutal in Europe in its dealings with immigrants—the immigrant workers' protest in Rosarno had been brewing for months, the result of subhuman working and living conditions and the wanton abuse of Calabria's version of the Mafia, the 'Ndragheta.

It was most likely 'Ndragheta violence against the workers that triggered the protests. The day before, a few migrants were reportedly shot and injured by unknown gunmen. Among those wounded was a man from Togo.

In response, hundreds of workers shouting "we are not animals!" left their rudimentary dwellings and marched into the city center of Rosarno, where they reportedly tore down fences, turned over trash cans and broke car windows.

Around 1,500 workers are employed during the orange harvest in Rosarno, a small town in Calabria with approximately 16,000 inhabitants. The hardest work is carried out by low-paid *clandestini*—i.e., illegal immigrants, mainly from Africa. The Africans work a circuit in southern Italy, harvesting tomatoes in Campania in the spring, grapes in Sicily in the summer, olives in Puglia in early autumn, and finally Calabria's orange harvest in the late autumn. They reportedly earn no more than €2 or €3 an

hour.

When they have work, the African migrants labor under intense pressure and sleep in tents and cardboard constructions. About 200 African workers of Rosarno lived in an abandoned factory without heat, a toilet, or running water.

According to Flavio Di Giacomo, spokesman for the International Organization for Migration in Italy, the riots reveal that "many Italian economic realities are based on the exploitation of low-cost foreign labor, living in subhuman conditions, without human rights," and conditions of "semi-slavery."

The Calabrian fruit harvest has increasingly come under the control of the 'Ndragheta. The immigrants' wage is a maximum of €23 per day, from which they must pay up to €5 "protection money" to the 'Ndragheta. The shots fired last week are thought to be the work of the crime syndicate seeking to punish workers who refused to pay protection money.

A Sudanese worker, Abdul Rashid Muhammad Mahmoud Iddris, told CNN that on Thursday a BMW pulled up outside the abandoned factory that served as housing for many immigrants. A man then emerged from the car and shot and wounded 26-year-old Ayiva Saibou. Local police told the immigrants they could not help the injured man.

Within hours, as many as 2,000 immigrants marched on Rosarno's town hall before being driven back by police. They attempted to repeat the march the next day.

The Italian state responded ruthlessly to the immigrant protests. Hundreds of policemen and carabinieri were immediately mobilized against the migrant workers. Paramilitary police units fired tear gas at the crowd and struck down protesting workers with their clubs.

The police and carabinieri stood by as extreme right groups attacked migrant workers. Armed with clubs, stones and even hunting rifles, these extremists conducted a battle with the migrant workers which lasted throughout Friday. They used trucks and tractors to hunt down foreign workers wherever they could find them.

The migrant workers defended themselves with a barricade consisting of two ignited cars and a heap of car tires before withdrawing back into the factory building which served as their main dwelling. Eventually heavily armed police units encircled the workers in front of the old factory. A number of migrant workers fled and the remainder were deported from the city overnight.

The police organised buses and trains to transport more than 1,000 migrants to detention centers in Crotona, Bari and Brindisi, before bulldozing their makeshift encampments on the outskirts of Rosarno.

On Saturday a racist mob continued to vent its anger against the last remaining foreign workers in Rosarno. A 29-year old man from Burkina Faso was injured in both legs and in his arm by rifle shots. A car with three migrant workers was stopped by thugs armed with iron bars. One of the three in the car was severely beaten, the other two were able to flee.

The official number of injured totaled 67, including 31 immigrants, 17 Italians and 19 policemen. Eight Africans still remain in hospital with serious injuries.

Prominent figures in the Italian state issued xenophobic denunciations of the African workers. Interior Minister Maroni has said that any African worker of Rosarno who was without proper papers will be deported. Minister Roberto Calderoli of the Northern League spelled out the racist agenda of the Italian government and declared that with unemployment at 18 percent in the south of Italy, “work should go to the Italians ... not to illegal immigrants.”

“First establish order, then everything else” demanded Maurizio Gasparri, the former neo-fascist and the current parliamentary fraction head of the ruling Popolo della Libertá in the Senate. Illegal foreign workers had to be deported with much greater efficiency, the senator insisted.

Gasparri remained silent on the Mafia-type structures revealed in this latest incident, or the way in which the Ndragheta organizes the fruit harvest and makes huge profits from the illegal status of immigrants. On the first day of the riots Maroni, also of the Northern League, happened to be addressing a meeting in Reggio Calabria on the issue of organized crime. Just a few days previously the Ndragheta had carried out a bomb attack on the regional court in the city. In May 2009 the anti-mafia commission had arranged an investigation into the Mafia’s role in agrarian enterprises in the region. The investigation resulted in the arrest of three local agrarian businessmen and two Bulgarian associates.

It is entirely likely that local criminal elements incited the violence against migrants in order to deflect attention away from their own activities. This was the case in 2008 when Camorra criminal gangs diverted scrutiny away from their role in the city’s rubbish scandal by instigating racist pogroms in Naples.

These gangs are able to incite violence and unleash such pogroms in the knowledge that their activities are welcomed by the Berlusconi government as a smokescreen for the intense social crisis in the country as a whole. The government, in turn, remains in power because of the complete abandonment of any struggle to defend the rights of working people by Italy’s opposition parties and trade unions.

On Saturday, the General Secretary of Italy’s largest trade union federation, Guglielmo Epifani of the CGIL, refused to come to the defence of the migrant workers and condemned “violence, irrespective of where it comes from.”

Out of a population of 60 million, Italy has some four or five million legal immigrants, and perhaps as many or more immigrants without papers. It has an aging population and one of the lowest birth rates in the world.

Berlusconi has introduced some of the most draconian immigration laws in Europe, including extensive measures by the police and coast guard to prevent migrants from reaching Italy’s shores. There is every indication that the government will use the events in Rosarno to tighten up its laws even more.

Italy is not alone. All across Europe, the ruling elite is embracing the most far right political forces, putting in place new restrictions on democratic rights and building up the police powers of the state—all in the guise of controlling immigration and fighting “terrorism.” These measures, in fact, serve as a prelude for a far broader attack on the social position and democratic rights of the working class as a whole.

The authors also recommend:

Berlusconi government incites racist pogroms
[23 May 2008]



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact