

# Mass protest by immigrants against Italian government's racist policies

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“March 1st 2010—24 hours without us.” Under this slogan, tens of thousands of immigrants in 60 Italian cities engaged in strikes and demonstrations to protest against the racist policies of the Berlusconi government, and for equal rights for all.

In Naples alone there were over 20,000 participants, 10,000 in Bologna and some 2,000 in Milan. Other key locations were Rome, Florence, Turin, Trieste, Varese, as well as the Sicilian city of Palermo. Protesters carried handwritten placards and banners with slogans such as “Immigration is not a crime,” “End the Silence—equal rights for all,” “Everyone is a foreigner—almost everywhere.”

Almost 5 million non-Italians live and work in Italy, or about 8 percent of the population. In agriculture, one in ten workers are of foreign origin. About half of the immigrants are Europeans, about 25 percent Africans, and many come from China or India. They work mainly in agriculture, in tourism, the textile industry and construction.

Since the intensification of xenophobic measures by the Berlusconi government, conditions for immigrants have become more difficult: For example, a residency permit and its renewal costs up to €200. Illegal immigration is dealt with as a crime, punishable with fines of up to €10,000. Undocumented immigrants can be held for up to six months in detention centres. The municipalities are permitted to maintain private citizen patrols, and teachers, nurses and landlords are required to report illegal immigrants.

Undocumented immigrants are increasingly subjected to inhuman working conditions, from which the Mafia also benefits. In January, thousands of African migrant workers protested in the southern Italian city of Rosarno against working conditions reminiscent of slavery. They worked in the orange harvest, controlled by the ‘Ndragheta (Calabrian criminal organisation), and were

subjected to life-threatening harassment.

In mid-February, the death of a young Egyptian man in Milan led to street fighting between Egyptian and Latin American youths. The unrest was soon quelled by the police and military, but it showed just how explosive the situation is.

It is not only foreign workers that are affected; Italian workers too are exposed to increasing pressure. Earlier this year, Fiat CEO Sergio Marchionne announced the closure of the Termini Imerese plant in Sicily and the elimination of thousands of jobs. This resulted in desperate actions by the laid-off workers in Sicily, who occupied a factory roof for two weeks. In early February, the metalworkers’ unions responded with a four-hour national strike at Fiat, in order to let off steam.

The unions, dominated by nationalism, have distanced themselves from the immigrants’ entirely legitimate action. Guglielmo Epifani, secretary general of GCIL, Italy’s largest trade union federation, said a “mere immigrants’ strike” was wrong: “I do not think that the best way is to use a tool that isolates and divides.”

The action on March 1 first prepared mainly via the Internet. Protests and strikes by immigrants in France, Spain and Greece were also held on this day. Within a very short time, the Facebook page “First of March—24 hours without us” received more than 50,000 posts.

The organizers, however, had no far-reaching perspective: they merely wanted the protests to make immigrants’ living in Italy more “visible.” Several religious and social initiatives, agricultural interest groups and the environmental organisation Legambiente supported the action. The Confederazione italiana agricoltori (CIA) called for the revision of the so-called Bossi-Fini Law, because this law imposes quotas on the much-needed influx of foreign labour.

## Role of *Rifondazione Comunista*

Fausto Bertinotti, the former secretary of the ex-left *Rifondazione Comunista* (Communist Refoundation), published a totally demoralized commentary under the title “March 1st 2010: Rosarno and the Left, which does not exist.” He raised the prospect of a political alternative only in the conditional. He wrote: “The economic, structural and systemic crisis of global capitalism would ... pose great topics on the agenda, if there were any alternative forces in Europe.” He lamented that the events in Rosarno demanded “a fundamental change in the politics of the social and political left,” however, “Nothing has happened.”

In reality, Communist Refoundation itself bears the central responsibility for the present situation. All the successor parties of the Italian Communist Party, whether the *Rifondazione Comunista* (PRC), the Party of Italian Communists (PDCI), or today’s Democratic Party (PD), have abandoned the working class and turned to nationalism and bourgeois politics.

Between 2006 and 2008, the current chairman of *Rifondazione*, Paolo Ferrero, was minister for social affairs in the Romano Prodi government. In this role, he agreed to the military mission in Afghanistan, signed off on the attacks on pensions and social rights and defended the first deportation lists for foreigners. Two years of the Prodi administration, with the participation of Communist Refoundation, were sufficient to bring the hated Silvio Berlusconi back into government.

Since the fiasco of 2008, when *Rifondazione* lost all its parliamentary seats, the party has moved further to the right. Under the pretext of the fight against Berlusconi, it is abandoning its own programme and the standing of its own candidates. In the upcoming regional elections of 28 March, *Rifondazione* is standing candidates under the name *Federazione della sinistra* (Left Alliance) together with the Democratic Party and the PDCI. In some regions they are even supporting candidates of the Radical Party and the Christian Democrat UDC.

## Environmental Emergency

The same day as thousands of immigrants took to the streets, an environmental emergency was proclaimed in

northern Italy, as a result of the “discharge of toxic materials into the River Lambro.” Unknown perpetrators had intentionally opened three tanks in the old Villasanta refinery near Milan and discharged 3.5 million litres of industrial oil into the water. The oil ended up in the River Po and from there got into the Adriatic. It threatens fish and bird populations, and is poisoning the water that farmers need for agriculture. Moreover, it has blocked a number of sewage treatment plants, so that untreated sewage is entering the river.

The state prosecutor is conducting an investigation, since this was clearly a work of sabotage. Not only was it necessary to open the taps, but also to turn on oil pumps, furthermore, the disaster alarm was intentionally delayed. It is not yet clear whether the disused Villasanta oil refinery was to be decontaminated on the cheap in this way. The site is in an expensive area of speculation in the vicinity of Arcore, the family residence of Prime Minister Berlusconi. Villa Santa is being remodeled into a modern “Ecocity” with cycle paths, recreation areas, houses with passive heating and expensive apartments.

The recent oil spill from northern Italy has now awakened memories of the garbage scandal in Naples. In Italy, corruption, nepotism and Mafia-like practices are widespread.

The fall of the Berlusconi government alone would not change anything for the working class. Under conditions of the current capitalist economic crisis, any bourgeois government, even one of the centre-left camp, would enforce aggressive austerity measures against working people. Across Europe, social democratic governments stand at the forefront when it comes to implementing harsh attacks on the working class. The best examples are Papandreou in Greece, Socrates in Portugal and Zapatero in Spain.

When it joined the euro zone, Italy falsified its real financial position, as later became known. Today, the media are warning that the crisis could spread to Italy. Then, “suddenly the whole euro zone would have a major problem: threatening the breakup of the monetary union and thus ... the ‘mother of all financial crises,’” says Claus Hulverscheidt in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*.



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