

Student protests in Italy against education cuts

Marc Wells

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Tens of thousands of students marched in Italian cities Wednesday to protest education cuts implemented by Silvio Berlusconi's government. The protests came the same day as further mass demonstrations of students in Britain against budget cutting.

In Italy, students mobilized in more than 50 cities and occupied 44 out of the 66 public universities, picketing, suspending classes and climbing on top of faculty buildings. Some of the occupations continued through the night.

The largest demonstrations took place in Rome. A group of students protested in front of the Deputies' Chamber, while another attempted to break into the Senate, although they were prevented from doing so by riot police (See Youtube video).

Students shouted slogans like "Ridateci il nostro futuro!" (Give our future back!), "No ai tagli!" (No cuts!), "Dimissioni!" (Resignations!) and "I veri terroristi siete voi!" (You are the real terrorists!).

Stones and eggs were thrown against the state buildings. Light injuries were reported by a dozen students, a police official and eight Carabinieri (military police). Two students were arrested, and complaints were filed against 27 demonstrators.

Demonstrations took place in Padova, where police charged students; Pisa, where students blocked several bridges; and Siena, where 100 students occupied the railway. There were also protests in Florence, Turin, Naples, Pavia, Perugia, Palermo and Salerno. Teachers and researchers joined the demonstrators.

The Unione degli Universitari (a federation of syndicalist students groups) has stated that it has "no intention to stop. We have every intention to intensify the struggle if this government continues to ignore the demands coming from the entire academic world."

The Gelmini Reforms (named after Mariastella Gelmini, Minister of Education) are the main target of the protests. They are a series of laws and executive decrees that, along with the 2010 budget law approved last December, are part of a massive attack on public education. In 2008, the initial law triggered a string of mass protests and strikes in the fall of that year (See, "Italy: Protests and strikes against Berlusconi education cuts")

These "reforms" amount to a drastic decrease in funds allocated to public education, resulting in mass layoffs and reduced programs.

The attack on education is an international phenomenon. In the UK on Wednesday, tens of thousands of students walked out of classes over tripled tuition fees. Thousands participated in a demonstration in London, where more than 1,000 were penned in and contained by police for hours. Police used batons to beat back students attempting to reach parliament.

The demonstrations in Britain came two weeks after more than 55,000 took to the streets throughout the UK. A crackdown by the government has included the arrest of dozens of students.

In the US, there have been mass protests and, in some cases, occupations in the state of California against tuition fee increases of more than 30 per cent.

The education cuts in Italy and the UK are part of a wave of austerity measures throughout Europe aimed at forcing workers and young people to pay for an ongoing economic crisis.

This past week, market speculation in Irish debt built up pressure for a new multibillion-euro bailout of the banks, which will be paid for by further austerity measures directed at the Irish working class. Amidst talk of "contagion," Portugal and Spain are being watched carefully. A default of Spain would put into

serious question the viability of the euro currency as well as the European Union as a whole.

After Spain, Italy is next in line, with a teetering economy, a large sovereign debt, a massive political crisis and high unemployment.

As in Britain, the response of the Italian ruling class is to pledge repression. Neo-fascist Gianfranco Fini, president of the Deputies' Chamber, referring to the student protests, declared that he "firmly condemns this unacceptable incident of violence and intolerance." Two weeks ago, Fini left Berlusconi's government, opening up a political crisis that will lead to a confidence vote on December 14. This is the day after another austerity measure—the 2011 budget law (now called the "Stability Law")—is scheduled for a vote.

The Senate president, Renato Schifani, a member of Berlusconi's Popolo della Libertà (Pdl—People of Freedom) was even more explicit in threatening violence against students. He remarked that the government has made many "appeals to the sense of responsibility in order to lower the tones and avoid a situation where the increase in violence and intolerance turns into acts of incivility that could trigger deaths."

This is a clear warning that the ruling class is ready and willing to utilize all the force necessary to repress any protest or dissent. The threat follows years of increased attacks against the living standards and democratic rights of Italians by both center-left and center-right governments.

The so-called opposition also supports the education cuts. Democratic Party Secretary Pierluigi Bersani pulled a stunt when he joined students and teachers on the roof of the architecture faculty building in Rome. While posing as a supporter of the protest, his presence is intended as a sign to the bourgeoisie that the Democrats are ready to take control of the situation and reroute opposition into safe channels.

Bersani's statement gives an idea of how a Democratic government would resolve the education crisis. According to him, "Even in Greece they are implementing social and educational reforms. Sooner or later we will also get there."

Just as in Greece, where the working class has seen wage cuts of 30 percent and unprecedented attacks on pensions, Bersani is offering his services for the implementation of harsh austerity measures in Italy.



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