

Italian students continue protests against education cuts

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8 December 2010

Since November 24, students have organized several mass protests in most Italian cities. The political establishment, meanwhile, is seeking new forms for a renewed attack on public education.

Students have so far displayed determination in their opposition to reforms. Researchers and teachers, also victims of the education measures sponsored by Minister of Education Mariastella Gelmini, have joined them. They have sought to occupy the Italian Senate, approached the Deputies' Chamber, blocked many of the main train stations (Rome, Bologna, Turin, Palermo), occupied the famous Tower of Pisa, and the Internal Revenue building in Milan to name a few. Police have not hesitated to use violence. (See YouTube links below)

Students, researchers and teachers are adamantly opposed to the Gelmini reform, a series of bills and executive decrees begun in 2008 that have effectively resulted in an unprecedented attack on public education.

Italy's education system already fares quite poorly in comparison with other EU countries. According to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), before the cuts introduced by the reform, Italy spent \$5,400 per student compared to \$10,200 in Germany, \$9,400 in the UK and \$9,300 in France. Moreover, the student/teacher ratio in Italy was 20.4:1, compared to 12.4:1 in Germany, 16.4:1 in the UK and 17:1 in France.

With the introduction of the reform, 30 percent was cut from the *Fondo di Funzionamento Ordinario* (Ordinary Operating Fund). The current bill imposes further cuts on an inadequately funded system, plus an undemocratic restructuring of university personnel.

All democratically elected bodies would lose their executive power, becoming merely consultative entities. Increased powers would be given to the dean and the board of directors, including disciplinary action taken against students, teachers and researchers. Universities would therefore more and more resemble private corporations. Indeed, what is being prepared is the privatization of public education.

The role of university research historically constitutes one of the foundations of scientific and social progress and development. The proposed bill institutes a new, non-tenure type of employment for researchers, who would be hired on a

contract basis with no guarantee for renewal or tenure conversion, adding precariousness to an already volatile job market.

The new bill comprises more than 170 items, which will produce preposterous and complex regulations for educators who will be subordinated to bureaucratic requirements that will further compromise the quality of education.

The bill the students are opposing has been approved by the Deputies' Chamber on November 30, 2010 and is scheduled for a Senate vote after December 14. The parliamentary calendar is not a coincidence. On December 14, a no-confidence vote on the Berlusconi government will take place. Moreover, it was decided that all congressional sessions are to be shut down from December 6 to 13.

The first and foremost reason for this maneuver is a deliberate attempt to break the protests and defuse their momentum. The militancy shown by students and faculty is representative of much deeper social tensions building up in Italy. There is broad popular hatred for the right-wing government of Silvio Berlusconi, which has implemented massive austerity measures and arrogantly attacked democratic rights.

Second, a new majority will emerge which will be more suitable for the implementation of similar, if not more brutal, attacks on the living standards and benefits of workers. Public education constitutes an important part of those postwar concessions won through bitter struggles that the Italian bourgeoisie now intends to take back.

The so-called "Third Pole," a coalition between the neo-fascist Gianfranco Fini, the Christian Democrat Pier Ferdinando Casini and the political chameleon Francesco Rutelli (formerly a Radical, a Green, a Democrat, now essentially a Christian Democrat), has been negotiating a post-Berlusconi government for months, realizing the need to replace the prime minister in light of his unpopularity.

The Italian bourgeoisie is preparing a grand coalition spanning from Fini to the ex-Stalinist Pier Luigi Bersani for the purpose of appeasing the popular opposition to Berlusconi. However, the policies of such a coalition would not differ from those of the current majority.

Specifically on the question of the Gelmini reform, on the eve of the vote in the Deputies' Chamber, Fini, who has been

Berlusconi's political partner since his first government in 1994, declared, "The Gelmini reform is positive and Fli [his new party *Futuro e Libertà per l'Italia*] will vote for it." Fini, in fact, has expressed utter contempt for the protests, which he said were "unacceptable."

The Christian Democrats joined *Partito Democratico* (PD) and the *Italia dei Valori* (Italy of Values—IdV) in a stunt on November 30 aimed at posing as opponents of the reform. In reality, Casini has stated that the reform "is a catalog of good intentions," but lamented the lack of resources, declaring his agreement in principle.

The role of the PD, behind its stated opposition to the Gelmini reform, is even more treacherous. Last May it published a program that details the methods it will implement to privatize public education.

The program adopts many of the same measures used in the US in the last decade that have contributed to the dismantling of the public education system, such as issuing vouchers (which the PD specifically promotes), favoring private investments (another measure the PD has been proposing since the Prodi government) and supporting undemocratic "selective immigration," as it is bluntly referred to in the document.

The PD's aim of "soliciting venture capital and start-up [charter] schools to bring entrepreneurial culture in the school and in the research," as the program states, is a clear sign that the party has every intention of delivering education into the rapacious hands of the profit system.

On November 24, PD leader Bersani climbed atop the roof of the architecture faculty building in Rome—an initiative copied the next day by his political accomplice Nichi Vendola of *Sinistra, Futuro e Libertà* (SEL)—as a sign to the bourgeoisie that a government of the left would contain the students within safe perimeters. It would also subordinate Italian workers to the same austerity measures that have characterized Greece (Bersani stated that "even in Greece they are implementing social and educational reforms. Sooner or later we will also get there.")

These events are occurring in the midst of a deepening economic crisis that is being used by every ruling class throughout Europe to reconfigure social relations by imposing harsh austerity measures on workers and students.

Italy is under growing pressure from financial markets to implement further austerity measures. The country has a high public debt (118.9 percent of GDP), low growth rate (0.2 percent in the third quarter) and an increasing bond spread that has exposed the country to the risk of credit downgrades. International markets have been looking at Italy as next in line after a possible default by Portugal and Spain.

Last Monday, European Central Bank (ECB) Governing Council member and Bank of Italy president Mario Draghi declared that "growth is as fundamental as stability. It's by growing that debt can be paid off. Budget rigor is fundamental."

This statement encapsulates what can be expected. Social spending will be slashed to reduce debt; growth will occur by increasing the exploitation of the working class and decreasing labor costs; and stability will require a strong hand—if necessary, even authoritarian methods.

The attack on public education is a critical component of this policy dictated by the financial aristocracy.

In light of the postponement of the Senate session, the *Unione degli Universitari*, a federation of syndicalist student groups, has declared a "great victory of students and researchers, the result of a year of mobilization that has raised its voice month after month." There is no such victory. The postponement is a smokescreen while the bourgeoisie reshuffles its ranks and proceeds toward a more aggressive attack.

There is no solution offered by any of the parties currently negotiating for power. They all share one interest: the defense and preservation of the bourgeois order. So long as the protests of students remain within this framework, they will be suppressed and defeated.

To carry forward their struggle, students must make a conscious turn to the working class, to the political mobilization of workers in opposition to the entire political establishment and all the defenders of the bourgeois state, including the trade unions.

The defense of education must be linked to the defense of jobs, wages and working conditions, and a European-wide policy to overturn the domination of the financial aristocracy. This means the fight for a socialist program—including the nationalization of the banks and all major industries—and the establishment of a workers' government.

Videos of the student protests can be seen here:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DbQCpG_mjQw

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AW_vJgzNaj4

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kaJt1wa0TI>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KPuc6f05hWE>

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wj4N7V_0oOs

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wPhQggBdwLY>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WNOGrtpcj8Y>



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