Italian students protest university austerity legislation

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Last Wednesday, thousands of students in Italy took to the streets once again. In Rome and Milan, as well as in many other cities, young people demonstrated together with university employees, teachers, parents and families.

In the Sicilian capital of Palermo, police used batons against students, many of whom carried self-made shields painted with the titles of classical works like Goethe's *Faust*. These were used by the students to demonstrate that the Berlusconi government is making a direct assault on classical culture.

The protests are aimed at Education Minister Maria Stella Gelmini's austerity legislation, passed by the Senate the previous Thursday. The law provides for a drastic reduction in the number of university lecturers and professors, and a partial transfer of university management into the hands of private investors. In the coming year, as much as €700 million will be cut from the budget for universities.

Having aggressively opposed this "reform" for months, students used banners, painted signs and chanting to express their persistent frustration and anger. A student was quoted on the television news as saying: "They say none of us really want to work. Exactly the opposite is the truth: we are defending ourselves because they are destroying every chance for us to work and study."

One of the demonstrators' chants ran: "If they want to block our future, we'll block the city for them." A large banner carried the inscription: "The Mafia thanks the government for the murder of education."

When Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi narrowly survived a no-confidence vote on December 14, hundreds of protesters were injured in clashes with police, which raged for hours on Rome's Piazza del Popolo and in the old quarter of the city. A day later, the Senate approved an austerity package amounting to cuts of €25 billion.

At the same time, the government last week began allowing courts to speed up their sentencing of young people. The government is using students to test its new domestic security laws. Maurizio Gasparri, faction leader of the ruling People of Freedom party, proposed to the council of ministers on Monday last week that "potentially violent perpetrators" among the students should be placed under preventive arrest. Interior Minister Roberto Maroni of the Northern League has already raised the issue of banning "potentially dangerous" demonstrations.

When the students converged in Rome again on Wednesday, a wide area of the city centre was cordoned off by a massive contingency of police during the discussion of Gelmini's law in the Senate building on the Palazzo Madama. The vote was eventually postponed to the next day.

According to law, all senators have to be over 40 years old, making them at least twice as old as most students. In the Senate, where the government has a secure majority, the final decision on the Gelmini reform was inevitable from the start. Following the approval of the Senate, the bill's progress can only be impeded if President Giorgio Napolitano refuses to sign it into law.

However, the parties originating from the tradition of the Communist Party and formerly considered "left-wing—such as the Democratic Party and the successor parties of Rifondazione Comunista—as well as the unions have failed to defend the students as a matter of principle, even though their representatives voted against the Gelmini reform.

They all accept the need for austerity measures and the establishment of an authoritarian state. Their aim is

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limited to the overcoming of “Berlusconism”. To this end, they have allied themselves with Gianfranco Fini, the defector from the Berlusconi government, even though he has his origins in the camp of fascism.

Replacing Silvio Berlusconi with Gianfranco Fini would mean bolstering the authority of the state in the interest of the Italian bourgeoisie at a time when the cost of the debt crisis is being shifted entirely onto the shoulders of the workers.

The student protests are a precursor of far sharper class struggles to come. The austerity policy of the government coincides with a fierce assault by employers aimed at wiping out all of the achievements won by Italian workers since the Second World War.

The auto producer Fiat is currently introducing a new employment contract, stipulating longer and more-flexible working hours, shorter breaks and a ban on strikes for all the company’s employees. In order to avoid being bound to a national contract agreement, Fiat’s CEO Sergio Marchionne has announced the withdrawal of the car manufacturer from the Confindustria employers’ association.

Under these circumstances, it is necessary to link the students’ struggle with that of the workers, and to mobilise the whole of the working class against the attacks. However, none of the so-called left organisations are prepared to take this course.

Susanna Camusso, newly elected president of the General Confederation of Labour (the country’s largest union) and former head of the Italian Federation of Metalworkers in Lombardy, declared in a discussion with students at Rome’s University Sapienza that she was against a general strike. Camusso said: “No one is ruling out a general strike, but it’s our opinion that right now conditions are not ripe for one”.

The *Repubblica* newspaper published an open letter by Roberto Saviano (investigative journalist and author of the best-selling book *Ghomorra*) siding against the students. Forced to remain in hiding from the Mafia, the writer has until recently been held in great respect by many young people. Now he is insistently demanding that the students refrain from overstepping the limits of the law during their protests. In doing so, he is assuming that the violence emanates from the young people, and not from the heavily armed police and rabid paramilitary units.

A major mobilisation of Italian students can only succeed if it embraces a truly proletarian, socialist perspective that unites workers and students in all countries. For this it is necessary to make a conscious break with all representatives of the bourgeoisie, whether from the right or the so-called left.

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