

The Fiat vote in Turin: Unions push through historic attack on Italian workers

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The vote held on January 13 and 14, 2011 approving the new Fiat Mirafiori contract in Turin reshapes industrial labor relations in Italy and obliterates important historical gains won over decades of struggle by the working class. The deal is also a quintessential case of betrayal by the trade unions and so-called “left” parties.

The deal will set a new benchmark, which manufacturers and trade unions throughout Europe will demand be met by workers in the name of “staying competitive” and “saving jobs.”

More than 5,000 workers participated in the referendum, or nearly 96 percent of the workforce. A total of 54 percent voted in favor of the new labor contract previously signed by all trade unions (FIM-CISL, UILM-UIL, FISMIC, UGL and Assoquadrifiat), with the exception of the Stalinist FIOM-CGIL.

The new agreement effectively creates working conditions not seen in the factories since World War II. In one stroke, labor relations have been thrown back more than 60 years. The struggles of the postwar period that were fought courageously by millions of workers and led to substantial gains have been nullified and replaced by a “new normal” of brutal exploitation and permanent economic insecurity.

The contract is an extraordinary attack on some of the most fundamental rights of workers:

- Each individual worker must now sign every section of the agreement. This effectively nullifies collective bargaining and exposes the individual to disciplinary action, including firing, even in case of strike.
- Workers no longer have the right to freely choose their affiliation to a trade union. Only unions signatory to the original agreement can elect their representatives, not on the basis of a democratic vote by workers, but through appointment by the union bureaucracy.
- Workers no longer have the right to free assembly. Only union signatories may organize assemblies.

- Three possible schedules of shifts introduce utterly unhealthy conditions, such as 10-hour shifts (the eight-hour day was a major victory at the turn of the 20th century).

- Compulsory overtime is tripled, from 40 to 120 hours (equal to 15 full work days a year) and is to be performed on off-days or Sundays.

- Breaks have been reduced to 30 minutes from 40, divided in three 10-minute breaks.

- A number of salary items are now grouped in one, the *superminimo non assorbibile* (literally, non-absorbable super-minimum), which will not be payable to new hires.

- Under the guise of “fighting absenteeism”, on the third event of an absence, sick days are not compensated in case of short leaves (five days or less).

- Certain leave of absence rights previously guaranteed by law are now left to the company’s discretion.

- Penalties against workers can be sanctioned in certain cases when workers do not participate in obligatory training.

- Workers’ suitability to certain tasks is now established by criteria exclusively at the company’s discretion.

Fiat CEO Sergio Marchionne had threatened to move Fiat’s operations to lower wage countries, including Poland, if workers did not accept the deal. The deal comes on the heels of Marchionne’s collaboration with the US Obama administration in blackmailing Chrysler workers who, he said, had to accept a “culture of poverty” instead of a “culture of entitlement.”

After the Turin vote, Marchionne called it “an historic turn.”

Corporate executives anxious to impose similar rollbacks on their workers also hailed the deal. Emma Marcegaglia, president of Confindustria (Industrialists Association), said, “Mirafiori is an important turn. We must go forward by adopting ad hoc regulations for

industries and corporations.”

Carlo De Benedetti, a prominent industrialist and publisher with strong ties to the center-left, said, “We must be grateful to Marchionne,” adding, “Turin falls into a logic of globalization and will be more and more American.”

All of the unions—with the exception of the FIOM, signed the contract. The betrayal of the FIOM, while somewhat more concealed, was no less damning. At no point did it do anything to mobilize workers against Fiat’s ultimatum and to fight to defend jobs and living standards.

FIOM President Maurizio Landini said the vote had produced “an extraordinary and unexpected result”, adding, the “trade union and workers want the investment.” With this he demonstrated his subservience to capital and joined those who insist workers must accept the “investment” terms dictated by the global auto giants and big banks if they hope to save their jobs.

FIOM belongs to the CGIL labor confederation, which was traditionally tied to the Stalinist Italian Communist Party (PCI). Its secretary, Susanna Camusso, suggested the blackmail vote was really an expression of workers’ democracy, saying the result “demonstrates that there’s no way of governing the factory without the approval of workers.”

Camusso followed this up by announcing that the CGIL would soon send a “representation” proposal to the industrialists’ association, essentially giving its blessing to the framework of the new labor agreement. The major concern of the union bureaucracy is that it is not left out. Confindustria’s Marcegaglia promptly responded, saying, “We are certainly available. We’ve been waiting for a proposal since 2004.”

From the beginning the public pronouncements against the contract by the CGIL were a thoroughly cynical effort to maintain credibility in the eyes of rank-and-file auto workers. Now that the agreement has been approved FIOM-CGIL officials are applauding the vote.

The Stalinist unions have historically been the principal prop for the PCI and so-called “center-left” governments. This includes the Prodi government, which ruled between 2006 and 2008 based on a coalition of social democrats, Stalinists and ex-Stalinists from the former PCI and its split-off the Rifondazione Comunista (Communist Refoundation) and other middle class “left” organizations.

Prodi imposed “labor reforms,” including cuts in pensions, and lifted virtually all restrictions on

international capital—an orientation that found consistent support from the CGIL.

After the Fiat vote, Paolo Ferrero, leader of Rifondazione Comunista, said, “The Mirafiori workers gave a great lesson of dignity voting down Marchionne’s diktat. Only white-collar allowed the ‘yes’ vote to have a majority.” This combines the lying method of calling a defeat a victory, while blaming salaried workers for this devastating setback, rather than the criminal policies of the unions and pseudo-left parties, including his own, which are responsible.

There is a common thread that unites all the “left” politicians and trade union leaders: their total subservience to the bourgeois order and hostility to any struggle by the working class against capitalism, which would undermine their privileged positions within that order.

In light of the defeat, FIOM-CGIL is calling for a strike on January 28, two weeks after the agreement has been sealed. This is nothing but a stunt aimed at providing the union officials with a “left” cover as they prepare to sign their own agreement with Marchionne.

The Fiat chief recently praised the United Auto Workers union in the US, saying it was the greatest ally of the companies and the government. The same is true of the unions in Italy.

Fiat workers can only begin to defend themselves by breaking with the entire union apparatus and their ex-left supporters. New organizations of struggle, independent of the unions and controlled by the rank-and-file, must be built based on an entirely new political strategy.

The most important allies of Fiat workers are their class brothers and sisters internationally who are facing similar attacks. Fiat workers must reach out to auto workers throughout Europe, along with the United States and other countries, to develop a coordinated counteroffensive to defend the jobs and living standards of every worker.

The diktats of the European Central Bank and the IMF can only be defeated through the development of a political struggle to overthrow the Berlusconi government and establish a genuine workers’ government, which would nationalize the banks and major industries, including Fiat.



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