

Italian union calls eight-hour strike at Fiat

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Last Friday, January 28, Fiat workers from factories throughout Italy participated in an eight-hour protest strike and demonstrations in Turin, Milan, Rome, Cassino, Melfi and other cities. The protest was aimed against Fiat's new contract, which is being introduced at the company's main plant in Turin-Mirafiori, after already being in force at the plant in Pomigliano D'Arco.

The new Fiat contract represents an attack on the fundamental rights of the working class and massively steps up the exploitation of assembly line workers. It includes longer working hours, fewer breaks, compulsory overtime, a ban on strikes and an end to freely choosing union representation in the company. It also has the effect of nullifying the existing national contract.

Two weeks ago, 5,500 workers at Turin-Mirafiori voted on this scandalous contract. Fiat CEO Sergio Marchionne said production of a new Chrysler Jeep in Turin was dependent on the adoption of the contract and threatened to shift production away from Italy if it were rejected. With this sword of Damocles hanging over their heads—and the unions collaborating with management—workers voted by 54 percent to accept the contract.

Last Wednesday the Fiat board reported its profits for 2010. After a loss of over €800 million in 2009, net profits rose last year to €600 million, with sales increasing by 12 percent. Fiat expects further significant revenue and profit increases for 2011.

The assault on Fiat workers is the spearhead of a massive attack on the gains of the Italian working class. For this reason, the strikes and demonstrations by Fiat and metal workers were joined by much wider sections of the working class, including those being forced to work part-time and temporary jobs, the unemployed and students.

Slogans included, "We will not pay for your crisis"

and "Mirafiori—a scandalous contract". Workers in Turin told the press, "We are protesting against a shameful agreement that restricts workers' rights." Another said, "The national contract must not be touched—under any circumstances." There were many banners and slogans calling for a general strike.

The strikes included workers from many engineering companies like Fiat's Turin partner Powertrain, Iveco and Bertone. The workforce at Fiat-Mirafiori's body and stamping plants have been put on shorter hours. At the Fiat plants in Cassino (Frosinone) and Melfi, about half of the workforce went on strike.

Other companies also saw strike action, such as the port of Ancona, the ThyssenKrupp plant in Terni, and the steel mills of Marcegaglia in Alessandria and Asti. Emma Marcegaglia, a scion of the Marcegaglia business family, also heads the Confindustria employers' association. She described the new Mirafiori contract as "an important turning point for Italy".

Striking Fiat workers were joined by students protesting so-called "education reform" and the privatization of research and teaching facilities. One train was halted on the tracks between Rome and Cassino Colleferro when about 400 students who wanted to demonstrate in Cassino with the Fiat workers were found to have no tickets. When workers learned about this they blocked the tracks at Cassino railway station and demanded the students be allowed to join them. To defuse the situation, CGIL union leaders intervened and paid for the students' rail tickets out of union funds.

At the closing rally in Turin, Enrico Panini, secretary of the largest trade union federation CGIL—which has long been affiliated with the Italian Stalinist parties—was booed for comments he made in response to the calls for a general strike. Panini said, "The leadership bodies will decide about a general strike.

Theatrics get us no where.”

In Termini Imerese in Sicily, the speech by the trade union secretary Serena Sorrentino (CGIL) was also interrupted by shouts for a “general strike”.

The yellow and Catholic union associations CISL and UIL approved the new Fiat contract in December. While seeking to distance itself from the betrayal, the CGIL did nothing to mobilize workers against it and, after workers were blackmailed into voting for it, cynically claimed the vote was an expression of the democratic voice of the workers.

Meanwhile CGIL’s new secretary, Susanna Camusso, has been trying to re-engage Fiat in talks for weeks in order to reach its own treacherous agreement with the automaker.

Because the metalworkers union FIOM, which is part of CGIL, has not yet signed the contract, various petty-bourgeois ex-radicals have praised it. Marco Ferrando, formerly a long-time leading member of Rifondazione Comunista, hailed the union in glowing terms, saying, “FIOM has so far played a valuable role and continues to play one. It has rejected Fiat’s attempts at extortion and resists the same pressure also when it comes from the majority of the CGIL.”

In reality, FIOM is complicit in the betrayal. Far from being a principled opposition to the dictates of capital, it wants to convince Fiat management to adopt a “better” industrial policy for Italy. FIOM never sought to mobilize workers against the ultimatum, and to unite with other sections of the working class to defend living standards and jobs.

The eight-hour strike was called jointly by FIOM, the CGIL and Cobas to disperse pent-up anger and divert attention while the FIOM leaders seek a new basis for collaboration with Marchionne.

On Friday, speaking in Milan’s cathedral square, FIOM Secretary Maurizio Landini blamed the brutal exploitation contained in the agreement on “modernity”: “We say no to a modernity, which in the name of competition, pits one worker against another.” He called for “innovation, research and public intervention” and added, “Of course, we want to conclude contracts, and we want the company to function and that fundamental rights are extended, that’s why we offer a platform of talks and debate.”

For a long time Landini’s model has been the role of IG Metall in the German Volkswagen plants. On the

TV show “Che tempo che fa” of 15 January, he said, “Why can’t we do things like they do in Germany?... One must still ask why an engineering worker in Germany earns twice as much as in Italy, and why they work for less time. Why is a lot more invested in the factories in Germany? Why do they have products of much higher quality?” According to Landini, German car factories even take serious measures to protect their workers’ health.

This is nonsense. The capitalist crisis has led to an unrelenting assault on German workers, including those at Volkswagen. At VW, this has been done with the support of IG Metall. A few years ago, the union representatives on the works councils agreed to a secret deal to impose longer working hours without extra pay and other concessions in return for a promise that production of VW’s Golf model would remain in Germany. As a consequence, plants such as Brussels-Forest were closed and hundreds of Belgian workers thrown out of their jobs.

Landini knows all of this, but it is the privileges of the IG Metall officials at Volkswagen that make him lick his lips. As co-managers, they act to ensure the profits of their “own” companies, receiving in return extensive privileges and earning the enmity of the workers.

The principled defence of all jobs is only possible through a break with the nationalist and pro-capitalist trade unions, the building of new organizations of struggle and the elaboration of an internationalist and socialist program for the working class.



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