

Italian youth unemployment reaches thirty percent

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Recently published statistics reveal the extent of social polarization in Italy. While the so-called “Paperoni” (Scrooges) revel in luxury at the top of society and squander millions, a large section of the population is condemned to a life of poverty and hopelessness. Social conditions are reminiscent of those that triggered social rebellions in North Africa.

At the beginning of March, the government statistics office Istat published figures for unemployment that revealed far higher levels than had previously been made public. Youth unemployment has officially reached 29.4 percent, almost three percent more than a year ago. This means that almost one in three young people between 15 and 24 has no job.

In the south, the situation is even more dramatic; in some areas, from three quarters to eighty percent of all young people are without work. Not infrequently, the Mafia is the largest, if not the only employer.

The official unemployment rate for the whole of Italy is currently 8.6 percent. Compared to December 2010 it has increased by 0.2 percent, with 83,000 jobs wiped out during the past two months.

These figures relate only to the so-called “active” part of the population. This contrasts with the so-called “inactive” population, which accounts for 37.8 percent of those of working age between 15 and 64. These are people who have not been actively looking for work in the last four weeks. This means that more than a third of the potential workforce has dropped out entirely of the statistics.

Unemployment statistics have been produced in this way according to European Union requirements since 2004 and are published monthly. Thus a person who has done at least one hour’s paid work during the week surveyed is counted as “employed”. Workers at Fiat and other companies that are repeatedly put on short-time working are still categorised as “employed”; this despite the fact they struggle to make ends meet and are dependent on the *cassa integrazione*, short-term government funds.

Cuts in education are contributing to the high level of unemployment and social decline. Under the so-called “Gelmini

reforms” (named after the Education Minister Maria Stella Gelmini), government funding for research and teaching are being reduced and their privatization made easier; student grants are also being pruned. This means that many young people are doomed to a life without work, education and study; one without perspectives.

By contrast, the number of millionaires and billionaires is rising, headed by the prime minister, Silvio Berlusconi, Italy’s third richest man. He represents a corrupt layer of the super-rich. According to bank statements revealed during his current trial on charges that he paid an underage girl for sex, the prime minister last year expended 24 million euros for his personal use, including two million euros for the maintenance of luxury villas, over half a million for gifts to young girls and 120,000 euros for neckties.

Personal assets of \$7.8 billion place Berlusconi 14th on Forbes list of the “most powerful people” in the world. His wealth ranks him 108th, and he is no longer the richest Italian. He has been overtaken by the Ferrero business family (makers of Nutella) with \$18 billion, and the entrepreneur Leonardo Del Vecchio (Luxottica opticians) with \$11 billion. In addition, Giorgio Armani, the brothers Diego and Andrea Della Valle, and the Benetton family are now also listed.

A total of fourteen Italian billionaires can now be found on the Forbes list. As for the number of millionaires, with nearly 300,000, Italy is in fifth place in Europe behind Germany, Britain, France and Switzerland, and ninth worldwide. Never before have there been so many millionaires in the “Belpaese”.

And never before have there been so many poor people. Old age and child poverty are rampant. According to figures from the 2010 poverty report, almost eight million Italians, representing thirteen percent of the population, live in relative poverty, meaning that their income reached no more than half the average.

Five percent of the population of sixty-one million, or three million people, are regarded as living in absolute poverty. Those in this category must go into debt to pay for rent, clothing and food, and cannot afford either holidays or leisure activities. The so-called “fourth week” is infamous, the time at the end of the month in which the last penny has long since been spent.

At the same time, the price of basic foodstuffs and other essentials is rising. According to Istat, the price of petrol has increased over the past year by almost twelve percent, and heating costs have risen in the same period by 17.2 percent. Bread and fresh fruit have become much more expensive.

Along with the social crisis, the number of suicides is increasing. In recent weeks, there were a number of cases in which workers took their own lives because they had lost their jobs and so the means to keep their family secure.

In mid-February, a 35-year-old worker from Bergamo doused himself with gasoline and set fire to himself after he had lost his job. In Naples, a worker who was sacked from a supermarket killed himself with a bullet to the head. Carmine Spina, a young worker from Pratola Serra, hanged himself on the stairs. His company had kept its staff on short time working for three years, being paid just €700 a month from the *cassa integrazione*.

The coming months will exacerbate the situation even more, both through the effects of the government's Stability Law, and also as a result of inflation hitting basic needs, and the impact of the latest labour contract at Fiat. The latter firm, Italy's biggest employer, has recently implemented an unprecedented contract, destroying workers' historic achievements and raising the general level of exploitation.

Under the "Stability Law", the government will cut approximately fifteen billion euros in social and cultural benefits by 2013. This applies to the health service, schools, universities and pensions; hundreds of thousands of jobs are to be cut and cultural achievements destroyed.

The scale of these savings represents just a fraction of the wealth of Italy's super-rich. The assets of the fourteen Italian billionaires who made it onto the Forbes list increased by more than four billion euros last year to 45 billion euros.

Italy is a deeply divided country. The graphics produced by Eurostat show that the Italian "boot" is clearly divided in two, both when depicting gross domestic product, as well as unemployment. The division runs just below Rome. Regions such as Naples, Calabria and Sicily are deeply impoverished.

The growing poverty of the South demonstrates the bankruptcy of the reformist left in Italy. Thirty years ago, the Italian Communist Party (PCI) under Enrico Berlinguer had proclaimed the development of the "Mezzogiorno" on their banners. Calls for the establishment of industries in the southern regions were taken up, and government funds were used to establish plants by Fiat and Alfa Romeo, steel company Italsider and other major corporations around Naples or Sicily.

Today, one after another of these factories is being closed. The successor parties to the PCI have completely abandoned their "Mezzogiorno" plans, and today, in some cases, even support the

separatism of the Northern League.

On 15 February, Pier Luigi Bersani, head of the largest PCI successor organisation, the Democratic Party (PD) gave an interview to the newspaper *Padania*, the official organ of the separatist Northern League, in which he described federalism (i.e. the breakup of Italy) as a "historic, epochal reform of Italian democracy."

Bersani offered the League a pact, and said, "I commit myself and my party to stand up for the federal process. We want a dialogue with the League. ... I've always been of the opinion that, despite varied and often conflicting positions in the country there are two real forces for autonomy: the PD and the League. We identify with it and want to maintain and renew this great tradition."

The Northern League has long vehemently advocated autonomy for northern Italy, in order, it claims, to shake off the costs and national responsibility for the poorer south. It does not shy away from calling for the breakup of the country. On March 2, parliament adopted a law brought in by the League to strengthen the fiscal autonomy of Italian municipalities, which will further discriminate against the south.

The Northern League is also Italy's most xenophobic party. It opposes refugees on an openly racist basis. The League has mobilised the military domestically against refugees, the poorest of the poor, and enforced laws prohibiting "illegal immigrants" from renting an apartment, and requiring doctors to report any such immigrants they treat.

By allying themselves with the League, the so-called "left" politicians participate actively in the division of the population in Italy. A principled working class alternative is completely absent. Meanwhile, the deep social polarization is giving rise to conditions comparable to those in Egypt and Tunisia prior to their revolutionary uprisings.



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