

One-day national strike in Italy against austerity measures

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On the same day the Italian Senate met to begin ratifying harsh austerity measures, dubbed the *manovra*, to make an estimated €195 billion in cuts and regressive taxes, hundreds of thousands of workers went on a one-day strike Tuesday and took to the streets to protest against an assault on social rights.

Large crowds assembled and rallied in Rome, Milan, Florence, Naples, Turin, Bologna, Palermo and at least a hundred other cities across the country.

A few incidents were registered in Naples, where 8 policemen were hurt by firecrackers; in Turin, where some NO TAV (a controversial high-speed train) protesters tried to force their way onto the stage; and Palermo, where eggs were thrown against the Mondadori headquarters and flags were burned. In Genoa, workers booed the proposal to sing the national anthem and demanded “The Internationale.”

The main focus of the strike and protest was the attack on jobs and pensions pursued by the government with the *manovra*. Slogans read: “If they block our future, we block the city,” “Our rights are untouchable,” “They protect the rich, sell out Italy. Let’s stop them,” “Nationalize the banks” (spray-painted on the window of a Deutsche Bank branch in Rome), “Enough with social butchering,” “Workers won’t pay for the crisis caused by speculators.”

The strike was called by CGIL, a trade union traditionally associated with the Stalinist Communist Party. Their call was against the *manovra* and for “a counter-maneuver that has exactly the same balance as the economic measure elaborated by the government.”

Such statements highlight the class gulf separating striking workers from the trade union bureaucracy.

This cynical position confirms the role of CGIL in helping the government destroy the social position of workers. As it is opposed to a political struggle to bring

down the government and fight for a workers’ government, it echoes bourgeois demands for “balanced” budgets, which, on a capitalist basis, will come only at the expense of the workers. Their intervention is reduced to promoting illusions that the bourgeois “left” can concoct a less painful austerity budget.

An amendment to article 8 of the latest *manovra* was singled out by the protesters, as it would undermine the existing labor code by emasculating national collective bargaining agreements. Company-level contracts would override nationally-negotiated agreements, and workers could be fired with the unions’ approval.

Article 8—like the *manovra* as a whole—is the logical consequence of a series of concessions by the unions. It underscores the treacherous role of the unions and their political accomplices in the petty-bourgeois “left” parties.

As the WSWs noted last April, “The new Fiat contracts mark a qualitative and historic change in social relations in Italy towards a naked dictatorship of the employers, exercised with the help of the union bureaucracy. By requiring workers to individually sign contracts, they lay the basis for eliminating collective negotiation of contracts and banning strikes.” (See: The Fiat vote in Turin: Unions push through historic attack on Italian workers)

This change was first outlined in Italy’s leading automotive firm, Fiat, which signed deep concessions contracts with the unions at the Mirafiori and Bertone plants. (See: Italian unions deal another blow to Fiat autoworkers)

Then, on June 28, CGIL, CISL and UIL (the main labor confederations) signed a pact with the Confindustria employers’ group, paving the way to the changes made by article 8 of the *manovra*. In that

agreement, company-specific contracts were already elevated to override national contracts.

In particular, article 7 of that agreement specifies: “Company-based collective contracts ratified with the company’s trade unions in agreement with those signatory to the present inter-confederate agreement, to handle critical situations or in the presence of significant investments to favor the economic and occupational development of the company, may define amending agreements with reference to the institutions of the national collective agreement...”

Only a month ago, after a speech by Berlusconi addressing the Parliament, the “left” and the unions rushed to negotiate with the “social partners” and elaborate a “Pact for Growth.” The pact echoed the June 28 agreement: “in light of great economic difficulties, the parties will continue the process of modernizing industrial relations.” (See: “Italy prepares new cuts after stock market panic”)

None of the unions and their accomplices on the “left” are concerned about the conditions of workers. If anything, they are concerned that the depth of the attacks they are planning will radicalize and mobilize workers against them. This is precisely the reason why CGIL’s Secretary Susanna Camusso sought to use the September 6 strike call to contain opposition in the working class in the dead end of trade union protests.

The measures proposed by the government in the last two weeks have caused popular outrage. The discontent was temporarily concealed by saturation coverage of proposals and counterproposals being considered in the Senate now, amounting to 1300 amendments.

These reactionary proposals aim only to hide the bourgeoisie’s determination to make cuts and stimulate illusions in the political establishment. What is being discussed is a rise in regressive VAT taxes, which weigh disproportionately on workers, and a new increase of the retirement age.

The role of the “left” is, once again, to channel massive opposition into a political blind alley. The role of the Democratic Party (PD) is quite revealing: sections of the party were even opposed to the September 6 strike. However, Secretary Pier Luigi

Bersani, a seasoned ex-Stalinist who knows that his best hope to defuse a threat from the working class is to appear to spearhead it, appeared at the protests.

But the internal conflicts of the PD reflect increasing worries among the bourgeoisie that the current situation is bringing the class struggle too much in the open, and a section of the party seeks to use the opportunity to hijack workers’ struggles. Some of the internal criticisms to the strike start from the idea that parliamentary negotiations should suffice.

The PD’s “left” political partners—from Nichi Vendola’s Left-Ecology-Freedom (SEL), to Paolo Ferrero of *Rifondazione* and the Pabloites of *Sinistra Critica*—all agreed on the need for another union-led strike.

A glaring measure of the political character of these organizations is given by their role in organizing last month’s joint municipal protests with the neo-fascist politicians. This protest aimed at preserving bureaucratic privileges of the political establishment, not jobs of municipal workers. As a result, it attracted the support of neo-fascist Gianni Alemanno, mayor of Rome, as well as the ex-*Rifondazione* mayor of Milan, Giuliano Pisapia.

What unites ex-Stalinists and neo-fascists is their unconditional defense of the bourgeois order against the independent organization of the working class based on a genuine socialist program.



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