

Italian truckers, taxi drivers mount national strike against social cuts

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Truckers and taxi drivers blocked roads and highways throughout Italy, as protests spread against the social cuts, free market measures, and fuel price increases of Prime Minister Mario Monti.

Taxi drivers oppose Monti's deregulation of their licensed professions, as the economic slump means that there are already too many taxi drivers struggling to find enough passengers. There were parades or assemblies of striking taxis in Bologna, Milan, and Rome, causing transport bottlenecks at Rome's Fiumicino airport and its Termini train station.

The taxi strike follows a bitter confrontation between taxi drivers and union bureaucrats on January 19, when a nationwide assembly of taxi drivers at the Circus Maximus in Rome threw out union officials who had negotiated the cuts with the government.

Loreno Bittarelli, the head of the Uritaxi union, returned from negotiations at the Palazzo Chigi, the seat of the government, and stood on a car at the Circus Maximus. He announced: "We had to do it. Now you must return to work. Don't worry, tomorrow the decree will be published." He was then interrupted by shouts of "What?" and "Sellout!" from the taxi drivers, who forced the union leaders to flee. The drivers then faced squads of riot police outside the Circus.

Truckers also parked their rigs across highways yesterday, creating at least 60 major blockades surrounding cities across Italy—including Turin and Milan in the north, Bologna and Rome in the center of the country, and Naples, Foggia, Taranto, and Gioia Tauro in the south.

Truckers also blockaded and halted production at the Fiat auto plant at Melfi, where management and the unions forced through a draconian concessions contract last year.

Truckers oppose a fuel tax increase that would push

gasoline prices up 8.2 cents per liter and diesel prices up 11.2 cents, to €1.76 and €1.71 per liter, respectively. By comparison, in 2009 diesel prices were only roughly €1 per liter. Truckers also are demanding caps on insurance premiums and stricter regulations to bar unlicensed trucking operations in Italy.

Trasportounito, the truckers' union, was stunned by the scale of the unauthorized strike that rapidly spread throughout Italy. Its general secretary, Maurizio Longo, said: "The massive participation in the national work stoppage, exceeding all our expectations, shows the gravity of the current crisis. Discontent is real and palpable for companies and families of truckers who are fighting for survival." The union said that they expected strike action would last until Friday.

The protest comes after a week of similar protests by truckers in Sicily. They blockaded Sicilian ports, bringing internal trade and international shipping through Sicily to a halt and cutting off resupply of Malta.

The Sicilian protests were organized primarily by the so-called "Pitchforks Movement," a populist movement of local businessmen, farmers, fishermen, shopkeepers, self-employed truckers and unemployed workers in Sicily. The "Pitchforks Movement" has ties to the neo-fascistic *Forza Nuova* party and to Maurizio Zamparini, the president of the Palermo Calcio football club. It has also been promoted by various Italian Stalinist groups.

The Monti government, installed last November at the behest of the financial markets and the European Union, threatened a confrontation with strikers. Interior Minister Anna Maria Cancellieri said, "Roadblocks will not be tolerated, we can make use of tolerance and dialogue, but we must also consider citizens' rights."

The bourgeoisie views the strike as a decisive challenge that the Monti government must crush to

proceed to impose the program of cuts demanded by finance capital. The *Guardian* wrote, “The Monti government appears to be heading for a decisive battle, similar to that between Margaret Thatcher and the miners in 1980s Britain.” The isolation and defeat of the 1985 British miners’ strike was a key victory for Thatcher, after which she pressed forward with deep attacks on the working class in Britain.

Such comments are a warning of the methods that the Italian government will consider using against the protests. In similar conditions in Greece in 2010, the social-democratic government of Prime Minister Giorgios Papandreou mobilized the army to crush an independent truckers’ strike. (See, “Greek military mobilised to break truck drivers’ strike”)

Italian state and union officials fear that opposition to Monti’s political agenda might draw broad sections of the working class into struggle, in solidarity with protests by self-employed taxi and truck drivers and other professions targeted by Monti’s deregulation schemes—pharmacists, lawyers, and gas station owners. Protests are set to escalate, with protest actions announced by all these professions, as well as a strike warning by railway workers.

Cancellieri told RAI state radio that the government was monitoring the protests “with close attention,” adding: “We cannot rule out that this discontent could lead to protests of a different kind.”

The likelihood of the entrance of the working class into struggle is all the higher, as the Monti government is currently negotiating a politically explosive labor law reform to eliminate what remains of job security for Italian workers. As taxi drivers and truckers struck yesterday, union officials met with Labor Minister Elsa Fornero at the Palazzo Chigi to negotiate the reform.

Those present included Emma Marcegaglia, the president of the Confindustria employers’ federation; Susanna Camusso, the head of the Stalinist CGIL (Italian General Confederation of Labor) union; Raffaele Bonanni, the head of the Christian-democratic CISL (Italian Confederation of Workers’ Unions); Luigi Angeletti of the social-democratic UIL (Italian Labor Union); and Giovanni Centrella of the neo-fascist-affiliated UGL (General Labor Union).

The defense of living conditions for workers and professionals requires a broad industrial mobilization of the working class in political struggle against the Monti

government, based on its own independent socialist program. Workers’ struggles cannot be straitjacketed by the political influence of right-wing parties or the petty bourgeois “left.” Instead, they should deepen the rebellion begun by the taxi drivers against the class collaborationist and anti-worker policy of the unions, and their accomplices in and around the Italian Stalinist “left” parties.

The Italian bourgeois and petty bourgeois “left” parties again demonstrated their utter hostility to the working class, as several of its leading representatives came forward to praise Monti’s cuts.

Italian President Giorgio Napolitano, a longtime Stalinist politician, praised the cuts as “substantial and incisive,” while Democratic Party General Secretary Pier Luigi Bersani attacked Monti’s cuts for not going far enough. He said the cuts could be “more, better, still more frequent and with more immediate effect.”



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