

Striking truckers, fishermen clash with Italian government

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Yesterday, the newly-installed government of Italian Prime Minister Mario Monti moved to crush continuing protests by truckers, fishermen and other professions affected by Monti's unpopular deregulation measures and social attacks.

Airline and public transport sector workers are also set to go on strike today, after nearly a week of protests by truckers.

Increases up to 50 percent have been reported on food and fuel prices, as truckers refuse to carry freight and set up highway roadblocks that prevent the re-supply of retail stores. The truck blockades have particularly affected the food industry, as supermarkets are not receiving supplies.

Grocery stores and street markets in Naples are empty. Vegetables, milk and other daily products are in increasingly short supply, with grocers in Rome reporting that vegetable and fish supplies are down 80 and 90 percent, respectively. Operations at major industrial plants including Coca-Cola and Italian automaker Fiat were also halted for lack of supplies.

The media is waging a cynical campaign aimed at pitting the population against the truckers, denouncing the truck drivers who are blocking scabs from delivering supplies.

Protests have continued in Sicily, where the initial truckers' strike began last week, as the protest group "Movimento dei Forconi" (Movement of Pitchforks—MDF) organized a rally in Palermo on Wednesday that attracted 10,000 people. "They are not going to stop us, politicians do their part or go home," MDF leader Mariano Ferro said during the Palermo protest.

Wednesday also saw clashes between fishermen, who came from all over Italy to protest, and police in riot gear outside Montecitorio Palace, the Italian Chamber

of deputies, where Monti was asking for broader support for a series of deregulatory and austerity measures. He eventually obtained the support of three major political parties: the bourgeois "left" Democratic Party (PD), the right-wing PDL (People of Freedom) of ex-Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, and the Third Pole (TP), which includes neo-fascist forces.

Police attacked the protesters after some firecrackers were thrown at Montecitorio Palace. Five fishermen were injured by the brutal response of the police, including two in serious condition. Fishermen yelled, "Shame! Shame!" and "Assassins!" One of the fishermen said, "We are workers and fathers of families. You can beat us but we won't move."

Then the protesters left Piazza Montecitorio to rally on Piazza Venezia until 7PM.

Fishermen denounced fuel price increases (due to increased taxes and oil prices), a proposed "point-based license" system, and demands that the origin of seafood sold in markets be "traceable"—thus imposing a heavy burden on hard-hit small fishermen. Without any subsidies or government support, many fishermen will be forced out of business.

With the point-based license, the holder is subject to fines for a series of easy-to-commit infringements, such as fishing too close to the coast, catching undersized fish, and using non-approved nets or tools. For each of these infringements, there is a financial sanction and a loss of points; if a total of 18 points is lost, the fisherman's license is suspended for two months. Fishermen fear they will be forced to choose between being fined or fishing much less.

Fearing that developing strike action by the working class could turn into a solidarity action with the professions and a political challenge to the Monti government, the regime is determined to crush the

protests. European Union officials are also pressing for a quick resolution of the truckers' strike.

Yesterday European Commissioner Antonio Tajani called on Interior Minister Anna Maria Cancellieri to suppress truck drivers' resistance, demanding that the Italian government intervene "to quickly solve the problem and resume trading."

Already the day before, Cancellieri—known as the "Iron Lady" due to her stint as police chief in Bologna—had promised that she would "use all possible measures to end the blockades."

Ex-banker and Minister of Economic Development Corrado Passera tried to halt the protests, claiming that truck drivers would receive benefits—reductions on highway tolls, presumably on top of a supposed "series of measures already passed by the government" that are in their favor and "will be signed very soon."

On Thursday, the Monti government deployed a massive police presence throughout the country, trying to smash highway blockades and disperse gatherings of truckers. Already on Wednesday, police had arrested five truckers at a roadblock in southern Italy.

The prefects of Ravenna and Bari ordered police to halt blockades, with the prefect of Bari also giving an order to stop all blockades in the Puglia region until January 27. There were reports that thirteen truck drivers had been arrested at roadblocks around the country, notably in roads near Ragusa and Salerno, and charged with "private violence and aggravated damages."

Maurizio Longo, secretary of the Trasporto Unito truck drivers' union, accused the police of violence. "Assaults and violence are taking place all over the country by the police, who are intervening not only against blockades, but also against any kind of gathering of truck drivers, even in private parking areas."

Nonetheless, the response of the Italian trade union bureaucracy and the bourgeois "left" has been to endorse state repression and issue hostile criticisms of the protesters, while limiting solidarity action by the working class despite deep popular opposition to Monti's cuts.

On Wednesday, Susanna Camusso, the leader of the Stalinist trade union CGIL (General Italian Labor Confederation), openly attacked the truck drivers. With a protest that blocked the entire country, she said, "a

limit was passed. The protests must be organized in a way that don't violate rights and don't prevent other citizens to act."

Yesterday, she found another reason to oppose the protests, this time echoing the bourgeois media and petty-bourgeois consumers' groups: "The government has to stop the strike of the truck drivers because it's causing inflation."

PD's secretary, Pierluigi Bersani, called for the intervention of the police to break the strike of the truckers, while cynically proclaiming his sympathy with opposition to strikebreaking: "I understand the unease in Sicily, but if an old man goes to a store and is not going to find anything ... we must call the prefects."

Under these conditions, the political right has been able to pose as the only political opposition to the anti-social attacks of the Monti government. Umberto Bossi of the far-right xenophobic Northern League has called on Silvio Berlusconi, who lost power to Monti last year, to try to bring down the Monti government by withdrawing the PDL's support.

Berlusconi responded by reiterating his full support for Monti, in line with the TP and the ex-Stalinists of the PD: "At this time, all those who have a sense of responsibility and have given support to the Monti government cannot hold back." Berlusconi claimed he felt "serene" about his choice.



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