

More than 60 dead as cold snap grips Italy

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The majority of the more than 600 deaths due to the cold snap in Europe during the last two weeks were in eastern European countries, including Poland, Ukraine, Romania and Bulgaria. Only one western European country, Italy, registered dozens of deaths due to the cold. Up to last weekend, more than 60 people had died in Italy from hypothermia and other cold-related causes.

Italy has suffered unusually cold weather, with snowstorms raging in the east and northeast of the country. Trains were stuck for hours in the snow. Lake Garda registered temperatures of minus 25 degrees Celsius (-13 Fahrenheit), and in Abruzzi, entire communities were cut off from food supplies.

The snow piled up high in Rome and fell even in the south of the country. Two thousand passengers remained stranded last weekend at Fiumicino Airport in Rome after more than 100 flights were cancelled due to the weather.

The weather, however, was not the main reason for the deaths of more than 60 in the snow and cold. The major contributing factor is the lack of state support and the general social crisis exacerbated by the drastic austerity measures imposed by the government of Mario Monti.

How did these people die? Some died of a heart attack while shoveling snow, some were buried by collapsing roofs or died as a result of accidents on icy roads. Nearly half of the victims, however, froze to death because they could not afford heated shelter. Thirteen people died in an unheated apartment, 11 outdoors and 3 in a car. Two people died of carbon monoxide poisoning due to defective heaters.

On one day, Monday, February 6, 10 people died from the effects of the cold spell, most of them homeless people and illegal immigrants. A glimpse at the situation in the northern industrial city of Milan demonstrates their plight.

On February 8, a 62-year-old Ukrainian woman was found dead in Milan in front of her accommodation, an unheated barracks. The day before, an Egyptian citizen had been found frozen to death under a road bridge. On February 9, the newspaper *Corriere della Sera* reported on the situation of homeless people in Milan who camped on the street despite the cold. Most of them were illegal immigrants, unemployed workers or destitute retirees.

In Milan, one church charity is now supplying more than 3,000 meals daily. The Metro Central Station is being held open around the clock, sleeping bags are distributed at the Curia in Milan every evening, and the Red Cross and civil defense have opened up dormitories.

The journalist from the *Corriere* found several young immigrants (from Romania, Pakistan and Latin America) who avoided the sleeping quarters because they were afraid of being arrested and deported. The situation, however, is equally grim for destitute Italians. Giovanni, 62, from Trapani, Sicily, who had last worked in Milan as a cabinet maker, told a reporter in relation to the charity workers: "To hell with them. I can die here, too. If someone wants to help me, they should give me work."

Forty-four-year-old Faustin from the Ivory Coast had worked for a number of years as a metal worker in an Italian factory until it was closed. He told a reporter about his work: "During the shift I could not stop for a moment. I could not even put sugar in my coffee because, my friend, I had no time. I had to move literally tons. Now they have moved the factory, I think, to Poland."

A 72-year-old bricklayer from Calabrian Rosarno was quoted saying, "I greet you, keep healthy. If I croak, you know that I've worked all my life to die here."

These are just a few examples of an entire layer of the population whose numbers are constantly growing. The

Monti government is doing everything in its power to drive large segments of the working population into acute poverty.

Since November, the Italian government has been under intense pressure from the European Union and the banks to introduce one austerity package after another. On January 1, the government increased the Value-Added Tax and raised taxes on energy and real estate. The result is increased prices for gasoline, gas and electricity, as well as many rents.

The price of fuel has risen faster than ever before, including the price increases following the oil shock of 1973. A liter of petrol costs about €1.80 (US\$2.35), and the price of diesel has gone up by a quarter. As a result, many commuters are under severe pressure. The newspaper *La Repubblica* calculated that a working professional couple requiring two cars to commute to work now has to pay almost €100 (\$132) more per month and more than €1,000 (\$1,315) per year for gasoline.

The price of fruit and vegetables has also increased. Farms and agriculture have been affected by the snow and cold, and speculation has driven up prices. Since mid-January, the price of a kilo of oranges has risen from €1.00 to €2.30, pears cost €3.00 (formerly €1.20), and a kilo of zucchini €8.00 (formerly €3.00).

Inflation is a problem especially for pensioners. The austerity dive has deprived them of the previously existing adjustments for inflation, leading to a de facto reduction in pensions. In December, 100,000 elderly people were deprived of entering the pension system. Pensioners constitute a large proportion of Italy's poor, and the pension reform will ensure that the number of poor continues to grow.

On the poverty scale, Italy occupies third place of the 27 euro zone countries, behind Greece and Portugal. In 2010, one in four Italians, about 15 million people, earned less than 60 percent of the average national income. Every seventh Italian is poor. These 8 million people cannot feed themselves properly, are not in a position to finance a week's holiday per year, are behind on bills, and do not have an adequately heated home.

In order to satisfy the claims of the banks, businesses and the wealthy, the government is attacking all of the social gains fought for by working people in the postwar period. In particular, the government and

employers are intent on abolishing Clause 18 of the country's labour laws, which currently offers workers in companies with more than 15 employees relatively extensive protection against dismissal.

Prime Minister Monti is determined to overturn the regulation by early March. For weeks, the prime minister and Labour Minister Elsa Fornero have carried out feverish negotiations with the "social partners", particularly with employers' association head Emma Marcegaglia and Susanna Camusso, head of the largest trade union confederation, the CGIL.

Recently, Monti declared provocatively on TV that a permanent job was "boring", stating, "How dull it is to have a job for life. It's nice to go and take on new challenges." His comments triggered a flood of letters to the editor. The youth unemployment rate is at a record high of over 30 percent and much higher in the south of the country.

The unions are working directly with the government to protect Monti's back. The unions' current toothless protests against the abolition of Clause 18 are aimed at misleading workers.



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