

Sardinian miners occupy coal mine

Marianne Arens
31 August 2012

On Sunday evening over a hundred miners began an occupation of the Carbosulcis coal mine, which is situated on the southwest coast of Sardinia.

At the end of their shift thirty miners occupied the pit's second lowest tunnel, which is about 400 feet deep. One day later, on Monday night, the nearly 470 strong work force decided at a work place meeting to continue the occupation. Since then the mine has been occupied and entrances blocked around the clock.

Workers in the mine have 350 kg of explosives which they use underground to demolish rock faces. They are threatening to use the explosives to blow up the entire pit.

Carbosulcis is the last remaining coal mine in Italy. The workers are demanding a guarantee from the Italian government led by Mario Monti that the mine be maintained. It has been managed by the Sardinian regional government since 1995.

Plans have been aired for the conversion of the mine to a system of "clean" coal power based on CCS, i.e. a modern coal-fired power plant, whereby carbon dioxide is dispelled inwards into the earth rather than discharged into the environment. The project has been under discussion for some time but requires large-scale investment by the government and EU. In the meantime the pit is threatened with closure by the end of December 2012 if no buyer is found. The Italian government is due to meet and decide on the future of Sardinian mining today.

This is not the first time a mine has been occupied in this region. Many workers took part in pit occupations in 1984, 1993 and 1995. In 1995 the occupation lasted one hundred days before the mine recommenced working based on promises of the future introduction of CCS technology.

In addition to the threatened mine closure, the reason for the spontaneous occupation is the working conditions for miners. For decades they have worked in thoroughly inhumane and dangerous conditions. The miners work in extreme heat and darkness. The tunnel sections total a length of up to seventy kilometres and reach out

underneath the sea. The deepest tunnels are up to 500 meters and the heat in the pit can reach forty degrees centigrade. Now the pit faces closure and all of their jobs and incomes will be wiped out.

Many workers participating in the occupation have been working for decades at Carbosulcis, such as the craftsman Massimo, 54. He told the newspaper *Il Fatto quotidiano* that the amount of dust set free in the mining process was so extensive that the miners were often unable to see for entire eight-hour shifts.

Massimo has two children and has worked in the pit for 25 years. He earns 1,500 euros a month, but must pay back 700 euros for a loan. "Imagine what is left. My oldest wants to study in Cagliari but how can I permit that?"

Giancarlo, 52, who also earns 1,500 euros, wants to prevent his son, who is 26, from becoming a miner. His aim is, "To go into retirement as fast as possible then go with his son to Liguria: Maybe he can find work. Up until now he has been unemployed here." But Giancarlo does not know if he will ever reach the pension age. The government has just raised the retirement age.

Alessandro is younger, married recently and has worked for five years in the pit. "I have to pay back 600 euro per month for a loan." Although he has trained as a skilled worker he is employed as an unskilled labourer and earns 1,400 euros. "At 32 I cannot afford to have a child, I work in dust and dirt all day, that's really unfair. They decide our fate, we have no future, but not just that, they grind us into the dirt as fast as they can. But we will not allow this to happen."

The Sardinian mining region in the west of Cagliari is considered to be the poorhouse of Italy with an average monthly income of less than 1,000 euros. Out of 150,000 inhabitants, one third are unemployed and another third are retired. Throughout the region one finds antiquated mines, industrial ruins and abandoned settlements.

Not far away, on the opposite coast of Sardinia, the wealthy elite of Italy have built luxurious residences. Porto Rotondo, on the Gulf of Marinella, extends for

miles and is one of the homes of former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi.

Other workers in the region are also fighting for their survival, such as the workforce of the US owned Alcoa aluminium company. The company plans to close its Sardinian plant in early November with the loss of over a thousand jobs. Hundreds of Alcoa workers occupied the airport of Cagliari a week ago in protest. Some jumped into the harbour to prevent the local ferry from leaving port.

Workers at the Carbosulcis pit have made clear they have nothing to lose. On Wednesday 49-year old Stefano Meletti slashed his wrist in front of television cameras shouting: “We cannot take it anymore. We cannot. We cannot. If someone here has decided to kill miners’ families, ladies and gentlemen, we’ll cut ourselves.”

Trade unions and politicians have no perspective for the miners and are seeking to sabotage their struggle. They play the Sardinian miners off against their fellow workers in other regions such as Veneto, where the power plant of Porto Tolle is located between Ravenna and Venice. The government in Rome is required by law to maintain a power plant based on CCS (Carbon Capture and Storage) technology. Sardinian politicians have responded by demanding the retention of Carbosulcis at the expense of Porto Tolle, which belongs to the partly state owned energy giant ENEL.

This chauvinist provincial perspective is supported by parties in Sardinia from the far right to the so-called far left. Mauro Pili, who began his political career in the post-Stalinist PDS (*Partito Democratico della Sinistra*—Democratic Party of the Left) and now belongs to Berlusconi’s PDL is quoted as saying: “Our sworn enemy is Enel, we immediately need a law to restrain ENEL. If we lose the pit (...), then the situation could get dangerous, very dangerous.”



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact