

Italian steel workers fight for jobs

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Employees of the Ilva steel group carried out demonstrations throughout Italy last week to protest against the closure of the company's main plant in Taranto, located in Puglia in the south of the country. Workers also took to the streets in Genoa and Novi Ligure in northern Italy. Eighty workers occupied the Ilva plant in the port of Marghera near Venice.

The company stopped production at Taranto on Tuesday and closed the factory gates after a regional court ordered the partial decommissioning of production following accusations that the facility was emitting pollution. The court also issued a warrant against senior managers.

The closure of the factory will have huge consequences for the already hard-hit region. With 11,650 employees Ilva is the largest employer in Taranto. When subcontractors are included, the loss of jobs rises to an estimated 20,000. The closure of Taranto also threatens 1,700 jobs in Cornigliano near Genoa, 800 in Novi Ligure and 80 in Marghera, which are threatened by a lack of raw material for further processing. Many supply and processing companies in major industrial cities throughout Italy will also be affected by the closure of the steel company.

The plant in Taranto was first built in the 1960s when the Italian government and the then-powerful Communist Party pursued a policy of creating new jobs in the poor south of the country. It was originally state-owned but was then privatised in 1995 and sold to the Riva Group.

Founded in 1954, the Riva Group, with its headquarters in Milan, grew on the basis of its operation of scrap-processing mini steel plants. It is now the world's 10th largest steel company, with factories in Germany, France, Belgium, Greece, Spain and Canada. It bought up two steel plants in former East Germany following German reunification in 1990.

It is claimed that for years the Ilva plant in Taranto has emitted large amounts of toxic dioxin, particle dust and carbon monoxide into the atmosphere. This has led to a sharp increase in cancer rates among steel workers and in the local community. One report states that during the past 13 years, up to 400 people, including small children, have died in the region of complaints clearly related to the emissions from the steel plant.

This provided the opportunity for the regional court to proceed against the steel plant and its operators. Already in July, a judge ordered the confiscation and sealing of several parts of the Ilva plant, and senior managers were temporarily taken into custody or placed under house arrest. Now, the prosecutor's office in Taranto has issued arrest warrants against seven senior managers, including two members of the Riva dynasty, vice president Fabio Riva and his son Nicola Riva. The 86-year-old company patriarch Emilio Riva was forced to close the plant in Taranto, leaving thousands of workers outside the factory gates.

The prosecutor justified the arrest warrants on the basis of his office's obligation to take action against managers who "consciously continue to poison the environment and do so according to the logic of profit, while abusing the most basic safety rules". The prosecutor has been able to rely on the support of a number of environmental groups and initiatives, as well as the Apulian president Nichi Vendola.

There is no doubt that the outdated and poorly maintained steel works have caused serious health and environmental damage. It is first and foremost steel workers who are affected by cancer. The closure of the plant, however, will by no means solve the problem. Instead, thousands of workers will be deprived of their jobs and livelihood.

Unemployment is very high in the Italian south. According to the Istat statistics office, only 44 percent of the population between 15 and 64 years and 14 percent of young people between 15 and 24 years have paying jobs. This explains why this summer, steel workers protested that they would "rather be poisoned slowly than die of hunger".

Regional president Nichi Vendola simply ignores such class issues. Vendola is a former member of Communist Refoundation and is regarded as an icon for the left by a host of pseudo-left organisations in Europe. In Italy, he can rely on the support of the FIOM metalworkers' union. Since his election as president of Puglia in 2005, Vendola has consistently enforced the social cuts demanded by local and international finance and business interests.

In 2008, Vendola quit Communist Refoundation and formed a new party called Sinistra, Ecologia e Libertà (SEL—Left, Ecology and Freedom) together with Christian Democrats, Stalinists and environmentalists. He relies on support from layers of the middle class who are motivated by such issues as lifestyle, sexual orientation and their immediate environment, but who despise the working class. Two thousand demonstrators representing such layers protested in Taranto in mid-August to demand the immediate closure of the Ilva plant.

The same attitude is adopted by newspapers in Germany such as the *Taz*, which has links to the country's Green Party. The paper ran a photo of Ilva with smoking chimneys and the headline: "Does not look especially healthy". The *Junge Welt* newspaper welcomed the closure of the factory with the headline "Poison spreader closed".

It is against this background that the Italian government led by Mario Monti, which has carried out the sharpest attacks against the Italian working class since the Second World War, has intervened, seeking to portray itself as the "saviour" of the steel workers. Faced with angry protests by workers, local trade unions made an appeal to the government in Rome, arguing that the steel plant was of strategic importance for Italian industry.

Last Thursday, Monti invited representatives of the company, region and trade unions to the seat of government in Rome. The roundtable was also attended by Susanna Camusso, head of the largest trade union, the CGIL (Italian General Confederation of Labour), and Donato Stefanelli, secretary of FIOM (the metalworkers' affiliate of the CGIL) in Taranto.

On Friday evening, the Monti government then issued a decree revoking the decision of the public prosecutor in Taranto and allowing the resumption of production in important parts of the steel plant, such as blast furnaces, smelting and the coke plant. At the same time, a person was appointed with the task of monitoring environmental safety and supervising the upgrading of the plant.

The unions supported the intervention of a government commissioner, and Monti personally portrayed his action as an environmentally friendly measure on behalf of workers. It was not, he said, a decree to save Ilva, but rather a decree to save the environment, health and labour.

Apulian president Vendola, however, called the government decree a "blow" for Taranto. "The decree is a blow for the health needs of an entire city," Vendola told the press. With its decree, he said, the government meant: "These needs can wait. National production interests are more important."

In fact, the government decree creates more problems than it solves. It neither serves to preserve jobs nor protect the health

of the population of Taranto. According to his mandate, the planned government commissioner will be entirely dependent on information provided by the Ilva management. His responsibility is "to obtain information about necessary measures from the group, management or relevant bodies...and propose adequate measures".

The government's decree is aimed especially at defending the interests of Italian banks and companies. The Italian steel federation Federacciaio, which is headed by Riva, and the Confindustria employers' association estimate the damage to the Italian economy should Ilva close to be between €6 billion and €8 billion (US\$8-US\$10.5 billion)

The decree makes no demands on the Riva Group. It is quite possible that against the background of the world economic crisis the company will choose to shut down whole parts of its operations rather than undertake the costly renovation of the plant in Taranto.

A complete renovation would cost around €3 billion. Funds have already been donated from the public purse without any real rectification of the problems at the plant. Some months ago, Mario Monti made more than €300 million available for the rehabilitation of the Ilva plant. Any future funding will be paid either by the Italian state or the European Union—with workers picking up the tab through higher taxes.

In addition, the government has set an important precedent by overturning the decision made by the court in Taranto, which has since declared its intention to appeal to the country's constitutional court. Neither the Monti government, the judiciary, nor the regional government of Vendola has any solution to the crisis confronting workers and the people of Taranto.



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