

Tens of thousands march in Rome against austerity

Stefan Steinberg
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Tens of thousands took part in a demonstration in Rome on Saturday in protest against the austerity policies of the Italian government. The demonstration was called by the metalworkers federation FIOM, affiliated to the country's largest trade union central, the CGIL (Italian General Confederation of Labour), long affiliated to the Communist Party.

Pensioners opposing the undermining of their benefits were particularly prominent on the march through Italy's capital. The protest was also supported by the SEL (Left, Ecology, Freedom party), led by Nichi Vendola, and backers of the Five Star Movement (Movimento 5 Stelle, M5S) headed by Beppe Grillo.

Slogans on the banners included: "The main problem is jobs, not the IMU [property tax]". Another issue raised at the demonstration was the disastrous situation facing Italian youth, whose jobless rate officially stands at 38.6 percent. Other banners attacked the role of the European Union and the role of Germany in the implementation of austerity measures throughout southern Europe.

Union leaders used the demonstration in Rome to cover their tracks for supporting the austerity coalition government led by Prime Minister Enrico Letta, formed in late April.

The main union slogan on the demonstration—"We can wait no longer"—inadvertently referred to the role played by the unions in recent years, i.e. the demobilizing of the working class to allow successive governments to slash jobs and social spending in Italy.

The main speaker at the final rally was FIOM's general secretary, Maurizio Landini. His speech to the crowd in Piazza San Giovanni was an exercise in political duplicity. After pleading with the government in power "to stop the lay-offs and put jobs back at the centre" of the political debate, Landini criticized the

fact that the Democratic Party (PD) did not participate in the demonstration. PD officials had left it up to individual members to decide whether to participate or not.

"I do not understand how you can govern together with [right-winger Silvio] Berlusconi", Landini continued, addressing himself to the leadership of the Democratic Party, who are in a coalition with the former prime minister. Calling upon Letta to increase investment in industry, Landini pleaded with the government to "break with the policy of [the previous prime minister Mario] Monti and undertake a new policy."

Landini's lamentations at the failure of the PD to attend the Saturday demo are ludicrous. The PD did not attend the demonstration because it is the main party in the current coalition government, along with Berlusconi's People of Freedom (Pdl).

After declaring during the negotiations that followed the February 2013 elections that it would never enter into a coalition with Berlusconi's outfit, the PD did precisely that, in order to create the best conditions to continue with austerity measures.

Not only was the PD absent from the demonstration, the former head of the parent body of FIOM, the CGIL, Guglielmo Epifani, was also absent. The reason for his absence is easily explained—he recently shed his trade union cap to participate directly in government. Just a week ago, Epifani, the long-time general secretary of the Italian General Confederation of Labour, was appointed general secretary of the Democratic Party. The appointment of Epifani was a deliberate move by Letta to integrate the unions fully into his coalition.

Replying to criticisms of his absence from Saturday's demonstration, Epifani told *La Repubblica* on Sunday

that he had spent a lifetime demonstrating in the streets, but things were different now that he had government responsibility. He also praised the course taken so far by the Letta government.

Epifani and Landini have undertaken a definite division of labour. Epifani's role is to offer his services as a long-standing trade union leader and advise the government how best to implement the austerity program demanded by the banks and the EU.

Landini has the job of covering Epifani's posterior with toothless protests aimed at letting off steam and preventing growing social discontent developing into a threat to the government.

At the same time, the cynical game played by the union leaders is taking place under conditions where social tensions are reaching the boiling point. After less than a month in power, approval ratings for the Letta government are already falling sharply. According to one poll published Friday, the government's approval rating has dropped to 34 percent from 43 percent at the start of this month.

And at the heart of the government, the PD itself is disintegrating. Leading members of the party resigned after the defeat of two of the party's candidates for the post of president, and the party is currently polling at less than 20 percent.

Faction fighting is rife in the party. One group of PD deputies is already collecting signatures opposing Letta's decision to set up a technocrat commission to prepare certain constitutional amendments. And Epifani, with just a week on the job, is under intense pressure from two sides: from Christian Democrats in the coalition who want to replace him and from leading PD member and mayor of Florence, Matteo Renzi, who is also keen to take over his post.



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