

One million protest in Rome against Renzi's labor "reforms"

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An estimated one million demonstrators took to the streets of Rome on Saturday to protest against the labor market reforms and austerity policies of Prime Minister Matteo Renzi.

The demonstration was called by Italy's largest union, the CGIL (General Italian Confederation of Labor), in order to preempt any effective action against the government and cover up the role of the unions in developing the new legislation. At the concluding rally held in Rome's Piazza San Giovanni, CGIL leader Susanna Camusso accused Renzi (Democratic Party—PD) of a policy of confrontation. She appealed to him to collaborate more closely with the trade union bureaucracy on the basis of the country's traditional policy of "social dialogue."

Camusso's appeal was echoed by the general secretary of the metalworkers' union Fiom, Maurizio Landini, who told Reuters TV: "If he (Renzi) really wants to change this country, he needs to do it with these people, not against us."

The demonstration was preceded by strikes on Friday protesting cuts to public services and Renzi's so-called "Jobs Act." The strikes took place mainly in the transport sector, affecting train and public bus travel.

Rome and other Italian cities were plastered with posters showing Renzi alongside Fiat Chief Executive Sergio Marchionne and Public Administration Minister Marianna Madia and bearing the slogan: "Let's send them home for just cause!" Marchionne has undertaken his own radical restructuring at Fiat, involving plant closures and layoffs in Italy other European countries. Public Administration Minister Madia is responsible for implementing the government's cuts and labor "reforms" in the public service sector.

The core of Renzi's Jobs Act is the elimination of protection against layoffs in existing labor agreements

and the introduction of a universally applicable contract with a three-year probationary period. An end to job guarantees and other safeguards for workers has long been demanded by the International Monetary Fund, the European Union and the Italian employers' federation. Following the failure of the right-wing government of Silvio Berlusconi to implement such measures, the Italian ruling elite entrusted the task to Renzi.

Despite the attempt by union leaders to distance themselves from Renzi on Saturday, the unions have close ties to the PD and have worked closely with Renzi's government since it came to power in February.

Renzi's labor minister, Giuliano Poletti, is a former trade union official who belonged to the Communist Party. Poletti played a leading role in drafting the Jobs Act, which will effectively abolish the most important gains made by the Italian labor movement since the 1970s.

From the start, Renzi relied on collaboration with the unions to facilitate his "reforms." In order to sweeten the pill of his attacks on workers' rights, Renzi implemented a tax cut earlier this year that hikes the income of workers earning less than €1,500 per month by a paltry €80.

All three of Italy's main unions, the CGIL, the CISL (Italian Confederation of Workers' Trade Unions) and the UIL (Italian Labour Union), praised the measure. The head of the UIL, Luigi Angeletti, described the modest tax break for low-wage workers as a "turning point." Camusso was also enthusiastic, declaring, "I see that the prime minister has listened to us."

At the start of October, Renzi, Poletti and Economy Minister Pier Carlo Padoan once again met with the leaders of a number of unions, including the CGIL's

Camusso, the UIL's Angeletti, Anna Maria Furlan of the CISL, and Jeremiah Mancini of the General Labor Union, to discuss the government's labor bill.

After the meeting, Renzi was gushing in his praise of the union leaders, noting that the government officials and union leaders had "found surprising points of common understanding." Two of the union leaders emerged from the meeting to praise "the government's willingness to discuss with labor organisations."

Camusso admitted that "Renzi's position remains the same," but welcomed the government's agreement to meet with the union leaders for new talks. These were held Monday, two days after the mass demonstration.

Renzi has made clear that he intends to defy the protests and rely on the unions to defuse popular opposition. Speaking Saturday at a DP rally in Florence, where he previously served as mayor, Renzi declared, "The days when a street protest could block the government are gone. We won't budge a centimeter."

Renzi's stance was underlined by one of his main backers, the hedge fund founder Davide Serra, who made clear that the aim of the Jobs Act was to turn Italy into a low-wage paradise for employers and investors. Serra warned that failure to implement the new legislation would drive away potential investors.

The latest attack on workers' rights follows years of austerity that have had devastating consequences for the Italian population. The economy has contracted by around 9 percent since the start of the financial crisis in 2007. The country's overall employment rate is one of the lowest in the euro zone, at 55.7 percent in August, with joblessness among young people running at a record high 44.2 percent. Now the government is seeking to wipe out the employment rights of the minority of workers who earn a reasonable wage.



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