

Protests mount in Italy against Renzi government

Our correspondent
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Protests have mounted in recent weeks reflecting deep-seated anger among Italian workers against the Democratic Party government of Prime Minister Matteo Renzi and its anti-working class policies. The response of the government has been to unleash police violence against demonstrators.

On October 29, some 600 ThyssenKrupp steelworkers protested in Rome against the company's decision to eliminate 550 jobs at its factory in Terni. The police violently charged workers who were on their way to the Ministry of Economic Development after having rallied outside the German embassy. At least four workers and two union officials were injured in the police assault.

Deputy Prime Minister Angelino Alfano's Interior Ministry responded to the incident by falsifying the events and accusing the workers of seeking to occupy Rome's main train station.

The day of the protest, the secretary of the metal workers union FIOM, Maurizio Landini, who was injured in the attack, invited Renzi to "say a word" about the crackdown, but the prime minister has said nothing about the incident.

Nevertheless, union leaders, including Landini and Italian General Confederation of Labour (CGIL) Secretary Susanna Camusso, met with Renzi the day after the police assault, demonstrating the continuing support of the unions for the supposedly "left of center" government.

"They must apologize to the workers," Landini said, and quickly added, "We are not demanding anyone's resignation."

Camusso said the CGIL's intent was "not to change the government, but rather to obtain pro-labour policies."

The October 29 police attack was followed last

Saturday by a mass demonstration in Rome against Renzi's austerity policies. This protest was led by public-sector workers in opposition to the government's pro-market labour "reforms." It followed a protest two weeks before that had brought a million workers from across Italy to the capital.

Union officials said 100,000 people marched on Saturday from Piazza della Repubblica to Piazza del Popolo to demand a significant pay increase and additional staff in the public sector, where wages have been frozen for six years. Out of 3 million public-sector workers, 300,000, i.e., 10 percent, have been laid off. Understaffing and speedup are the norm in every state hospital, school and public office.

At the rally, the CGIL's Camusso repeated her previous threats of a general strike. She said the union federation would support a referendum on overturning the pension "reform" introduced by Mario Monti's technocratic government in 2011. The so-called "Legge Fornero" significantly increased the retirement age, leading to a rise in poverty among the elderly.

The CGIL leadership intends to cooperate with the Northern League (Lega Nord) on the issue of a referendum against the pension measure. As an opposition party, the Lega Nord initiated the proposal. The party is notorious for its racism and anti-immigrant chauvinism.

Left-wing activists threw stones and trampled on the car of Lega Nord leader Matteo Salvini in Bologna on Saturday as the party carried out a racist campaign against a Roma settlement.

Prime Minister Renzi responded to the latest protests by blaming the people for the country's problems. At the unveiling of a new tunnel, he declared that Italy had to "emerge from the tunnel of inertia and resignation." He announced once again that his government's

“reforms” would be implemented quickly. He added that he intended to reform the election law with the support of former right-wing prime minister Silvio Berlusconi.

Renzi has already implemented a so-called “Jobs Act” that eliminates long-standing protections for workers against layoffs. It is part of a broader program demanded by the banks, the European Union (EU) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to deregulate the labour market.

The government intends to continue the wage freeze in the public sector next year and drastically cut spending on public services once again. The Jobs Act makes the further elimination of public-sector jobs easier and allows for the use of temporary work contracts for up to 36 months. These measures will be used to cut wages further and increase speedup.

Officials of the three major trade unions--Camusso of the CGIL, Annamaria Furlan of the Italian Confederation of Workers' Trade Unions (CISL), and Carmelo Barbagallo of the Italian Labour Union (UIL)--spoke in the Piazza del Popolo last Saturday. They have no intention of mounting any serious opposition to the government's policies. Rather, they are seeking to contain and defuse mass opposition by calling the protests, while pressuring Renzi to involve the trade unions more directly in formulating government policy.

These same functionaries welcomed Renzi's rise to power six months ago. Many of his “reforms” have been jointly prepared by the trade unions and the employers' organisation Confindustria. The main fear of the union officials is that the government's attacks could trigger social opposition that they would not be able to control and quash.

This fear is justified. Due to the deep economic crisis, an official rate of youth unemployment of 45 percent, and growing poverty, social relations are stretched to breaking point. In the first nine months of this year, a million workers started temporary jobs, most of them on the basis of zero-hour contracts. They obtain their income from the Cassa Integrazione, which is to be done away with as part of the Jobs Act.

As a result of extremely inclement weather in northern Italy, which has caused flooding, destruction, and the deaths of four people, spontaneous demonstrations have erupted against politicians accused

of criminally neglecting the welfare of the population. In Carrara, the town hall was occupied. Hundreds of residents, who had lost everything due to hail and floods, demanded the resignation of the mayor.

At the unveiling of a new production facility for the aircraft producer Piaggio Aerospace near Genoa, Prime Minister Renzi was unexpectedly confronted with protests by the workforce. Workers opposed him with signs and slogans. They were resisting the outsourcing of more departments and the cutting of 400 jobs.

Employees of an Alcatel branch in Vimercate were so angry over layoffs that the prime minister had to leave by a side door to avoid the insults and accusations of the workers.

There are many signs that workers are looking for an alternative means to fight outside the established political parties and the official trade unions. The CGIL, the biggest union federation, published a study October 14 meant to show that workers still trusted the unions. But the survey indicated the opposite.

It emerged that 45 percent of non-union workers and 23 percent of union members thought the unions were useless. In the event of a labour conflict, only 36 percent of non-union workers said they would turn to the trade unions. Forty three percent said they would appeal to the courts. Only 1 percent said they would turn to the political parties.



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