Growing protests in Italy against austerity policies

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Protests are intensifying against the Jobs Act, the labor market reforms drawn up by Prime Minister Matteo Renzi (Democratic Party, PD).

Following the protest demonstration in Rome on October 25 involving up to a million people, workers and youth once again took to the streets in at least 25 cities on November 14. So-called "rank and file" trade unions such as COBAS, Cub and SB, together with social centers and several student, refugee and humanitarian organizations, had called for the "social general strike". The CGIL (Italian General Confederation of Labour) union has called for an eight-hour general strike on December 5 in both the public and private sectors, to be accompanied by demonstrations.

The protests of November 14 were directed against the economic policies of the Italian government and the European Union, against the spread of precarious forms of work, the housing crisis and the mounting attacks on education. In several cities, violent clashes took place between demonstrators and police. In Milan, police moved violently against supporters of the CGIL and FIOM (Metal Workers Union), which have their own links to Renzi's Democrats.

In Rome and Pisa, demonstrators occupied airports for several hours. In Naples, they blocked motorway access routes and a tunnel for an entire day and in Palermo they occupied the city's student campus.

In Rome, Telecom Italia workers and bus drivers took strike action and took part in demonstrations. Several bus drivers climbed scaffolding at the Coliseum in Rome and unfurled banners protesting against the privatization of public transport and demanding the reinstatement of two coworkers. The pair were recently sacked after reporting on television about maladministration at their workplace.

In northern Italy, police brutally attacked protesters, using teargas and batons, injuring dozens. In Padua, the police used their batons to shield the headquarters of the Democratic Party from angry demonstrators. On day earlier, on November 13, the Democrats had expressed their support for Renzi's Jobs Act.

The CGIL and FIOM had called for a rally in Milan. Initially CGIL secretary Susanna Camusso had supported Renzi and his "reforms" and worked closely with the employers' association Confindustria. Now she fears losing all control of angry workers. The protests organised by the CGIL are primarily aimed at allowing protesters to let off steam. In Milan's Cathedral Square, Camusso and her colleague Maurizio Landini (FIOM) made every effort to present the unions as organizations with a degree of independence from the government.

As supporters of the rank-and-file unions approached the rally and several leaders sought to join Camusso and Landini on the podium, they were forcibly restrained and repelled by stewards of the main trade unions. A little later, violent clashes with the police took place in Milan.

Prime Minister Renzi responded to the protests with arrogant contempt. Before departing for the G20 summit in Australia, he told the press: "I will not let myself be held back by the swamp."

The head of the Italian government is under intense pressure from the banks and the EU to abolish the remaining social gains of the Italian working class. Italian gross domestic product shrank again in the third quarter by 0.1 percent and, last Friday, the Istat statistics office in Rome confirmed that Italy remained in recession.

In order to bring his own party into line, Renzi recently intensified his collaboration with opposition leader Silvio Berlusoni and his right-wing organization. Last Wednesday, Renzi and Berlusconi announced their agreement on a new electoral law at a joint meeting.

Behind the agreement is a tradeoff. Renzi promised Berlusconi, whose Forza Italia party has currently slumped in the polls, that there would not be new elections until the end of 2018. In return, Berlusconi

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pledged to support Renzi's pro-business labour market reforms plus the new election law, which promises to be just as undemocratic as the old one. In future elections, the party receiving more than 40 percent of the vote will still automatically obtain a majority of parliamentary seats.

The growing social tensions are forcing Renzi and Berlusconi to close ranks. The economic crisis and the massive social attacks of the past four years have resulted in rampant unemployment and poverty. Since 2008, the unemployment rate has more than doubled, the pension reform has plunged millions of seniors into poverty and youth unemployment has reached a new record of 45 percent.

There is growing anger on the part of workers, students and young people with both the ruling Democratic Party and the traditional trade unions. It is therefore not surprising that the appeal by COBAS in Italy has met with a wide response. Thousands of workers and students joined together with numerous refugees and immigrants to take part in the demonstrations on November 14.

The rank-and-file unions, however, are no alternative to the official bureaucracies and share their nationalist program. The protests last Friday were directed especially against Germany and the EU. In Rome, demonstrators pelted the German embassy with eggs and firecrackers.

Workers throughout Europe face political tasks that can only be solved in a joint struggle for a socialist transformation of society. For their part, the rank-and-file unions rely on a purely syndicalist orientation. Despite their occasional militant actions their program is restricted to demanding concessions from the ruling class. On their banners directed against the CGIL all COBAS had to say was "Unionism can be different."

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