

# Protests erupt in Rome against attack on job protection

**Marc Wells****5 December 2014**

In the immediate aftermath of a Senate vote of confidence Wednesday that ratified Democratic Prime Minister Matteo Renzi's reactionary labor "reform" known as the Jobs Act, mass protests by workers and students exploded in Rome and were met with violent police repression.

Protests broke out in Naples as well, although no clashes were reported. The crackdown follows similar recent incidents, where state repression is playing an increasingly ominous and anti-democratic role.

According to witnesses in Rome, the demonstration was peaceful and protesters had obtained an authorization from state authorities when police charged the lawful, unarmed protesters with batons.

One protester declared: "The charge was unjustified against a protest rally that was authorized to move and stand in front of the Senate to protest against the Jobs Act." He added: "This is the state's response to those who protest and the unemployed, the precarious workers and the students. Police physically hurt a lot of people today and arrested two." The arrested were released after an hour.

One of those arrested confirmed the police double charge (against the front and rear of the rally): "We all had our hands up in the air, our faces uncovered. Out of many, I was targeted, cornered and baton-beaten on my knees and then I was taken away with someone else." He elaborated on the political issues: "The Jobs Act hits the right to a job and destroys labor regulations with no guarantee on the social safety net. As it was approved, in this country we no longer had the right to even show up at the Senate."

A different tone marked Renzi's statement: "The Jobs Act becomes law. Italy is really changing. This is it. And we go forward," he wrote on Twitter. During an interview, he reiterated, "Today is a historic day for the country."

That Italy is changing there is no doubt. The social gains workers won through bitter struggles in the postwar period ensured two generations of economic development and relative social stability. Italy's working class was able to rely on public social services such as health care, education and pensions, in addition to basic job guarantees. It is precisely those guarantees that have been removed by the Jobs Act.

In 1970, in the aftermath of the "hot autumn" of 1969, when social upheavals put into question the future of capitalist rule in several countries like France, the Italian ruling elite approved the Workers' Statute, a set of labor regulations which guaranteed basic rights such as freedom of assembly, free choice of union representation, and better safety conditions and curtailed arbitrary dismissal by employers. These protections were mainly enshrined in the historic Article 18.

As the crisis of capitalism worsened, the ruling class engineered various mechanisms to circumvent the law however it could. In the last 15 years, attacks against the Workers' Statute have greatly intensified, as the bourgeoisie seeks to repeal its previous concessions. Every party in the Italian political establishment has made an attempt to erode the rights established by it. Many have succeeded in progressively eroding it.

But no one was able to dismantle so much in one fell swoop as Renzi did. The Jobs Act—whose name was borrowed from President Obama's maneuver similarly aimed at reducing regulations on corporations—ends an era, destroying past gains and giving the capitalists free rein in the job market.

First, dismissals are now facilitated. Article 18 established that a worker was to be rehired in the case of "unjust cause" firing. In 2012, the Fornero law had already discarded such protection, but it still retained reintegration to work in certain cases, economic compensation and the option to appeal. Now, dismissals

in companies with more than 15 employees are allowed without “just cause” or at the employer’s discretion. Reintegration is no longer available, even through court action.

Secondly, the law creates a new definition for labor agreements, the so-called “increasing protection contract,” according to which new hires receive virtually no benefits. With seniority, some benefits would be introduced.

The Jobs Act, however, establishes that employers may fire any new hire within the first three years for any reason whatsoever. A severance is paid in such cases, but its amount is a fraction of what it would have been under the old Statute: 15 days’ pay for every 3 months of employment. For the company this is a meager cost with an immense upside.

While the bill defers some of the details to be spelled out by the executive branch, the thrust of the law is clear: the measure creates a mechanism through which employers can now increase labor exploitation and easily reset labor costs through firing and re-hiring.

The state-run wages guarantee fund *Cassa Integrazione*, which has provided a safety net by paying workers’ wages when suspended by a financially troubled company, is also coming to an end. According to *La Repubblica*’s Roberto Mania, “the law establishes that cessation of a company or branch thereof will not allow access to *Cassa Integrazione*.”

The law also introduces surveillance rights for the employer. Privacy protection is dismantled in the workplace: computer activity monitoring, Internet and email tracking and even cell phone searches are now legalized.

Renzi’s latest act is the culmination of an entire era of assaults, but not its end. From the beginning the premier took his cues from the European Union’s demands, despite his populist criticisms of the “Brussels bureaucracy” before he became head of government. Banks, not workers, decide policy. Renzi, lauded by financial circles and the complicit media, is their representative.

But such a massive attack would not have been possible without the backing of the trade unions, which loyally provided crucial support for every center-left government participating in the carving up of the Workers’ Statute.

Renzi’s Democratic Party, a byproduct of the disintegration of the former Stalinists, is no exception: a month before his premiership appointment, the CGIL-CISL-UIL union confederation signed a deal with

Confindustria, the employers’ association, establishing massive restrictions to industrial action and harsh penalties for non-compliance.

This signaled their preparedness to support the upcoming attacks. CGIL leader Susanna Camusso was more explicit the week prior to Renzi’s installment as head of government: “We need discontinuity in government policies … For too long no decisions have been made to incentivize demand and raise investments.”

Winking at the incoming premier, she declared: “I give credit to Renzi for making the labor issue central.” She can now rest assured that Renzi has answered her grievances.

The Jobs Act is the result of negotiations between union leaders and Renzi. In October, a successful meeting between government officials and CGIL-CISL-UIL was so productive that all parties “found surprising points of common understanding.” Moreover, all the unions praised the bogus 80-euro-a-month tax break Renzi used to soften up workers for a larger assault.

Now, any rhetorical criticism raised toward Renzi must be understood for what it is: an effort to disguise that the unions are committed to forcing workers to accept the new terms. They do so by providing workers safe vehicles of protest, such as the general strike announced for December 12.

The action is a calculated stunt: the Strike Guarantee Commission has immediately limited the legal scope of the already toothless strike by forbidding transportation workers to join it. CGIL’s Camusso consented that the commission “can rest assured, as always CGIL will respect the law and regulations on strike of essential services.”

It has become a despicable ritual: the pseudo-left hangers-on and professional opportunists like Nichi Vendola’s SEL or what remains of Rifondazione Comunista will predictably raise their voices in unison with the unions, only to disguise their previous support when, in February, the “lefts” provided crucial support for Renzi’s nomination.



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