

Italy: One-day general strike against Renzi's Jobs Act

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In the latest protest action against the Italian government's Jobs Act, hundreds of thousands participated in demonstrations across Italy last Friday. An eight-hour general strike paralysed much of the country's public transport and services, and protesters took to the streets in 54 cities.

The strike affected public transport, schools, hospitals and government administrative offices. In addition private industry was also hit—in particular the country's engineering and auto industries. Air and rail traffic came to a virtual standstill for eight hours, although workers in the public transport sector were originally conscripted to work on that day. At the last minute, however, Transport Minister Maurizio Lupi lifted the ban on strike action.

The strike and protests were directed against the austerity program of the government headed by Matteo Renzi (Democratic Party, PD) and especially against his so-called Jobs Act. The Jobs Act gives employers free rein to "hire and fire", thereby wiping out the last remnants of employment protection in Italy. The Italian parliament has already approved Renzi's labor market reform and now many industrial workers fear mass layoffs in the near future.

In recent years whole sections of industrial workers, for example, Fiat auto workers, have been repeatedly forced to work short-time. Now they rightly fear that the new law will eliminate the country's modest protection against unemployment and miserly levels of short-time working compensation ("Cassa Integrazione").

Large numbers of pensioners were also present on the demonstrations. Even prior to the full implementation of Renzi's austerity program retirees are struggling to survive on pensions of around €500 per month. The economic crisis and social attacks carried out during the

last four years under former prime ministers Silvio Berlusconi, Mario Monti, Enrico Letta and now Matteo Renzi have created a massive pool of pensioners condemned to poverty. The same austerity programs have also doubled the country's unemployment and driven up youth unemployment to around 50 percent.

The protests in Milan and Turin were marked by fierce clashes between demonstrators and police. In Milan, police and carabinieri used tear gas and batons against demonstrators, including some garbed as Santa Claus. The protesters had tried to climb over the fence in front of the headquarters of the regional government of Lombardy. In Turin the police brutally attacked a section of the demonstration, injuring many participants. Dozens were arrested.

The reaction of Prime Minister Renzi to the protests was to stress that he would implement his program as speedily as possible. He commented: "That makes no impression on me. ...We are not a government that changes its mind just because protesters say we should do so." Renzi's stance against the working class has been backed by leading representatives of the Italian and European bourgeoisie.

On Tuesday, just three days before the strike, IMF Director General Christine Lagarde made a guest appearance at the Bocconi business university in Milan and stressed that Renzi's Jobs Act was "an important tool to weaken the gap between precarious workers and workers with highly protected rights. This will stimulate the labour market."

German President Joachim Gauck also supported Renzi. Gauck flew to Turin on Thursday to open an Italian-German economic forum together with Italian President Giorgio Napolitano. Gauck declared that he felt there was "great appreciation in Germany for the ambitious reform plans of Matteo Renzi's

government". For his part Napolitano stated that "the decision on labor market reform ... had already fallen".

On the day of the general strike, Renzi's Finance Minister, Pier Carlo Padoan, gave an interview to several European newspapers calling on the European Investment Bank (EIB) to undertake more investment in Italy. Padoan, a former IMF official and OECD chief economist, spoke to journalists from *La Stampa*, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *El País*, the *Guardian* and *Le Monde*. With regard to the strike, he said that there would be "no 180-degree turn" by the Renzi government; the Jobs Act was necessary to increase the flexibility of the economy and would, like all other reforms "not be diluted."

In carrying out his program Renzi has the backing of an all-party political alliance. He can also rely on the support of the union leadership in enforcing his anti-labour reform plans.

Friday's protests had been called by two of the country's three major unions, the CGIL and the UIL, under the motto "Così non va" ("No way"). The union appeal reads: "We have concrete proposals on how to change Italy," but this slogan: "Cambiare l'Italia—Change Italy" is precisely the battle cry of Renzi himself.

The unions pursue the same fundamental objectives as the Renzi government, namely, to make production in Italy competitive and attract investment at the expense of workers. The unions hope to use the demonstrations to show the government that they should be taken seriously as partner and interlocutor. In fact, such collaboration has already been promised by Renzi's Labour Minister Giuliano Poletti, who declared Friday evening that the involvement of the trade unions had already been scheduled as soon as the specific legislative paragraphs of the Jobs Act come into force.

As the WSWS has repeatedly explained, the Jobs Act is the product of joint consultations between employers, the government and union leaders. In October, government leaders met with representatives of all three major unions (CGIL, CISL and UIL) and at the end of their talks spoke of "surprising points of mutual understanding."

By organizing strikes and protests such as that on December 12, the unions are seeking to create an outlet for workers' anger and to direct their resistance into

channels that will ultimately lead to the acceptance of the government's policy.

Under conditions where workers are increasingly coming into conflict with the trade unions, pseudo-left organizations are seeking to reinforce illusions in so-called grassroots unions and "leftist unionists and politicians."

For example, Marco Ferrando of the pseudo-left Communist Workers Party (PCDL) has called for an indefinite general strike "that does not stop halfway." And who should carry out such a strike? According to Ferrando, such a task is to be left to the "political and trade union left", i.e., precisely those political layers that share the same bankrupt nationalist perspective as the union bureaucrats determined to lead workers into a dead end.

Ferrando cut his political teeth as leader and candidate in January 2006 of a faction that functioned in the Stalinist Communist Refoundation, which in turn was preparing to play a crucial role in supporting the implementation of the program of austerity and imperialist complicity of former prime minister Romano Prodi.

For years, the Italian fake left has presented Nichi Vendola's SEL and the leader of the "left" metalworkers' union FIOM, Maurizio Landini, as genuine "political alternatives". Both Vendola and Landini, however, have actively supported Matteo Renzi from the beginning and have offered the government their services.

Landini shares the same national capitalist perspective as Renzi, i.e., increasing the competitiveness of the Italian economy. The destruction of labour rights is not the problem, according to Landini, but rather "corruption and tax evasion have led to our country becoming uncompetitive," he wrote on Friday on Facebook. Renzi must first of all "accept that he is confronted with everybody and must discuss with everybody", by which he means the union bureaucracy.



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