

Italy: Expo 2015, May Day reveal deep class antagonisms

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On May 1, 2015 the Universal Exhibition, also known as Expo 2015, opened in Milan, Italy. Under the misleading and falsely humanitarian slogan “Feeding the planet, energy for life,” the world’s fair is a corporate orgy with participation from 145 countries around the world.

“Expo Milano 2015 offers a unique business opportunity,” its web site describes. “Leading businesses in innovation, technology, energy, mobility, security and banking have decided to become partners of the event.” Italy’s President Sergio Mattarella, proclaimed: “Expo is a turning point. Today a new cycle begins. I never had doubts.”

A false picture is being painted of the Expo as a unique opportunity for Italy as a whole.

In reality, companies like Coca-Cola, automaker Fiat Chrysler, defense giant Finmeccanica, oil multinational ENI and bank Intesa San Paolo are some of the Expo’s powerful sponsors. Major world corporations, in addition to pro-imperialist international institutions like the European Union and the United Nations, are set to participate.

The opening day created a glaring dichotomy of two Italies—Expo’s big business on one side, and the working population on the other—as it coincided with May Day, the heritage of which is based on the bloody struggles of workers who, inspired by socialist ideas, won fundamental social gains, such as the 8-hour day.

This year, in addition to the traditional May Day march, led and controlled by the trade union federation CGIL-CISL-UIL, which have reduced the event to a series of bureaucratic perfunctory events such as music concerts and empty rallies, an organization called No-Expo added its presence to the streets in the afternoon with the declared intent of “celebrating Expo 2015’s epic flop.”

The social crisis in Italy is intense: between 2007 and 2014, unemployment in Italy has doubled, and the percentage of youth between 15 and 24 not in education or in employment training (NEET) has jumped from 16.2 to 22.2 percent. The labor force participation rate has decreased from 62.8 to 55.7 percent, nearly 15 points below the European Union’s 70 percent safety target.

Workers are increasingly frustrated by the unions’ collusion with Prime Minister Matteo Renzi’s government. His Jobs Act facilitates dismissals and the introduction of a new contract form according to which new hires receive virtually no benefits, while the state-run wages guarantee fund *Cassa Integrazione* is progressively eroded.

The unions signed an agreement in July 2013 with Expo 2015 that, according to the ex-Stalinist CGIL, “responds to the contingency needs derived from this opportunity of development through [collective] bargaining, not through the derogatory legislative establishment.”

In addition to the creation of a measly 640 positions and 195 internships, the agreement pledges to “generate 475 volunteering opportunities. This number, multiplied by... a minimum of 5 hours and for an average engagement of 2 weeks... allows the deployment of about 18,500 volunteers.”

Moreover, there are no provisions for employment beyond the six-month duration of the Expo, while training is set in most cases at 12 months, twice as long as the actual fair.

These mechanisms are typical of how the unions facilitate the restructuring and fragmentation of labor: by rotating volunteering jobs, the agreement ensures the deployment of gratis labor and creates more precarious jobs with no benefits or security.

CGIL called this “a balanced response to the needs of flexibility related to the event.” In other words, the unions fully complied with the demands of capital to demolish workers’ rights and establish a new normal based on free labor and hyper-exploitation.

This is being upheld as the model to fight world food shortage and malnourishment by the major trade unions as well as Prime Minister Renzi, who cynically called Expo “a great opportunity for life quality and to declare war against poverty in a world where a billion people die from obesity and another billion from lack of food.”

The purpose of the No-Expo organizers is to fill the immense gap created by the trade unions’ treacherous policy of collaboration with the employers. No-Expo is a conglomerate of bourgeois, pseudo-left tendencies whose

program supports capitalism, while they demand only the opportunity to play a more prominent role in future exploitation.

As CGIL-CISL-UIL stand exposed and discredited, social centers, base unions (“sindacati di base”), CGIL dissidents and the so-called “radical left” (more accurately pseudo-left) join forces to contain and smother the workers’ malcontent.

A prominent role in that effort is played by Sinistra Anticapitalista (SA), the successor of the dissolved and thoroughly discredited Sinistra Critica. It proclaims that its purpose is to develop “a revolutionary and libertarian project for socialism.”

SA’s political trajectory follows the logic of its history. After the dissolution of the Stalinist Italian Communist Party (PCI), the continuity of bourgeois rule was ensured by the creation of two new parties: a bourgeois organization which is today the Democratic Party (PD) and an alternate one, Rifondazione Comunista, aimed at maintaining control of the vacuum created on the left.

Throughout the two decades following the split, Rifondazione consistently provided the “left” cover for all the policies of social reaction implemented by the center-left, from sweeping privatizations, to massive cuts in social programs and pensions, to imperialist interventions.

Until 2006, Rifondazione incorporated many opportunist tendencies that served a vital role in providing support for anti-worker policies. Once workers’ opposition to such policies and a decline in its membership indicated that an imminent collapse of Rifondazione was on the horizon, the various factions sought to ensure the maintenance of a “left” cover.

Hence, leaders of these factions created new vehicles to contain the working class politically: Marco Ferrando, a veteran member of Rifondazione and with a long history in the Pabloite United Secretariat, formed the Workers’ Communist Party (PCdL), while former Rifondazione senator Franco Turigliatto, after providing decisive support to the center-left imperialist Prodi government, created Sinistra Critica, now dissolved into SA.

These parties share one common strategy: opposition to the working class as the only social force capable of overthrowing capitalism and replace it with petty-bourgeois demands in line with capitalist rule.

They view an independent mobilization of workers on a socialist basis with hostility, not as a viable strategy. Instead, they are concerned with “being able to converse with a section of the city [of Milan] that’s uncertain on the judgment [of the Expo],” as PCdL states while it praises the myriad of groups that joined the No-Expo demonstration with which this party is politically aligned.

Or they congratulate themselves for having “participated,

without ifs or buts, in the great and beautiful [May Day] demonstration... along with ‘L’Altra Europa con Tsipras’ [The Other Europe with Tsipras, another sympathetic group that supports Syriza’s pro-bank orientation] and the trade unions.” Nothing reeks more of petty-bourgeois opportunism than their position.

The No-Expo demonstration mobilized 30,000 people, according to its organizers. Some 300 “black bloc” demonstrators vandalized windows (some were marked by No-Expo protesters with a blue X), set cars on fire and engaged in physical confrontations with the police.

While there is no reason to rule out the possibility of state agents provocateurs behind these actions, it is also true that the anarchist elements are at home in a demonstration led by Pabloites, given their common political target: to sabotage any possibility of an independent mass working class movement and to divert attention from the social contradictions underlying capitalism, while the state is given a free pass to implement reactionary police state measures.

The Expo will proceed undisturbed for the sake of corporate interests. The next six months will see an escalation of precariousness and hyper-exploitation of labor. For the working class, broader questions of political strategy need to be raised.

Workers must become conscious of and fight against their enemies in the pseudo-left, who shout radical slogans while they despise and fear the working class and make deals with sections of the bourgeoisie. This struggle requires the unity of workers internationally on the basis of a genuinely socialist program.



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