

Italy: Strikes and protests against the Renzi government's "Jobs Act"

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On Friday, a 24-hour national railway strike paralyzed large parts of Italy's urban and national rail systems. A week earlier, striking flight attendants at national carrier Alitalia halted more than 200 flights, affecting 25,000 passengers. Teachers at state schools are calling for a national school strike for October 21.

In mid-September, hundreds of parcel delivery workers took strike action in Bergamo, Brescia, Piacenza, Bologna and Parma against European logistics company GLS and its subcontractors. In Perugia, on the night of September 15, an Egyptian striker was run over and killed by a scab truck driver.

Abd Elsalam Ahmed Eldanf, 53, an Egyptian and former teacher, was on the picket line at delivery firm Seam. Although he had a permanent contract, he supported the struggle of colleagues opposing their precarious employment conditions and miserable pay. He was run over by a lorry driven by a strike-breaker and was killed on the spot, leaving behind a wife and five children.

When the state attorney and the media described the death as an "accident," and released the guilty driver, 7,000 workers took to the streets in Piacenza and the strike spread to all GLS offices in Italy and to other firms.

Another labour dispute began on August 27 in Lombardy, directed against the Swedish multinational fashion company H&M, whose warehouses in Stradella and Casalpusterlengo were hit by strikes for several days. Although the level of exploitation in Italy is not as horrendous as in the company's textile factories in Bangladesh, where seamstresses earn less than a \$100 a month, H&M uses Italian subcontractors notorious for their low wages and inhumane working conditions.

The spread of industrial action is characterized by two common features:

First, it is aimed directly or indirectly against the effects of the labour market reforms under the "Jobs Act" introduced by the Renzi government at the end of 2014.

Second, it is consistently boycotted by the official union confederations (CGIL, CISL, UIL).

The union leaders, above all the CGIL's Susanna Camusso, signed up to the Renzi government's new labour laws and market reforms the previous year, despite over a million workers engaging in strikes and protests for weeks at the end of 2014. At the Fiat Group, whose CEO Sergio Marchionne is a particularly aggressive advocate of the Renzi reforms, the secretary of the largest metalworkers' union FIOM, Maurizio Landini, has since agreed to a restrictive contract.

Renzi's "Jobs Act" has weakened protections against dismissal and facilitates the introduction of precarious, fixed-term contracts, which can be extended for up to 36 months without giving reasons. Companies can also more easily access temporary labour and subcontractors. With the introduction of so-called "labour certificates" ("Buoni lavoro"), a kind of modern day labour was created: Under this system, a worker can be hired on an hourly and daily basis for just €7.50 an hour.

The "Jobs Act" significantly weakens previous labour protections and liberalises the labour market, similar to the Hartz labour market "reforms" in Germany and the El Khomri laws in France. In addition, the referendum instigated by Renzi seeks to impose stronger central government, better able to suppress popular resistance.

The CGIL, CISL and UIL trade union bureaucracy have countersigned all the "reforms," fully sharing the view of the Renzi government that the Italian economy must be made more flexible and competitive at the expense of the workers.

It is no wonder therefore that virtually all recent industrial action has been organized without, and against, the unions. Tens of thousands of workers have already abandoned the traditional unions. In their place have come so-called rank-and-file unions, which have called for the current strike by railway workers, pilots, teachers, parcel

delivery and others.

On the railways, the CAT, CUB, SGB and USB unions are opposing the “Jobs Act,” pension “reforms” and call for a reduction in working hours. At Alitalia, Anpac, Anpav and USB they are demanding fewer night flights and improved job security for flight attendants; among educators, USB and Unicobas are organising teachers to defend the right to education and against privatization in the school system.

However, the perspective of these rank-and-file unions does not fundamentally differ from that of the traditional unions. Although they act more militantly and appear to be less corrupt than the big unions, their politics do not go beyond the usual union framework of exerting more pressure on the capitalists and the national government.

The rank-and-file unions SiCobas and USB, which are leading the struggle by the parcel delivery workers, point to “their tough negotiations” with the employers. “As soon as we drop our guard, they immediately try to take back what has taken us years of struggle to win,” the provincial coordinator of SiCobas in Rome said.

This is a perspective that completely misjudges the situation today. The profound international crisis of capitalism is deepening every day. Not only the Italian banks, but also the German and international financial institutions are heading towards a new crash; the EU is falling apart and national governments are increasingly relying on military solutions.

The working class can only defend what it has won in the course of a hundred years of struggle with an international socialist perspective. This means the building of a new political party, independent of all bourgeois parties and the trade unions.

The notion of “militant unions” is promoted by many pseudo-left groups that have emerged from the former Italian Communist Party, and serves precisely to discourage workers from engaging in such a political struggle.



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