

Wildcat strikes erupt across Italy to demand idling of plants during coronavirus pandemic

Will Morrow, Alex Lantier

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As the death toll in Italy from the global coronavirus pandemic surged on Thursday and Friday, wildcat strikes erupted across the peninsula, fighting to halt the spread of the deadly disease. As Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte's government calls on white collar workers to avoid going out and work from home, factory workers are demanding to limit the contagion by shutting down industrial plants whose operations are not essential to fighting the virus.

They are defying Italy's corrupt union bureaucracy, which has been working hand in glove with the banks and the Conte government to demand that production workers stay on the job and continue working—despite the threat that the disease could claim millions of lives. This is part of a growing, international wave of strike action by workers against the criminal indifference of the financial aristocracy to the coronavirus pandemic. It has seen strikes by London postal workers, private bus drivers in Paris, and Fiat-Chrysler workers in Canada.

It appears that the strike wave in Italy began at Fiat-Chrysler's Pomigliano plant in Naples, which employs 6,000 workers. Autoworkers, kept on the line to produce luxury Alfa-Romeo cars for the super-rich, walked out spontaneously at the beginning of the afternoon shift at 2:00 p.m. on Tuesday, protesting unsafe conditions.

On Wednesday, FCA announced the closure of the Pomigliano plant, along with facilities in Melfi, Atessa and Cassino, until Saturday. However, FCA management claimed it would have the plants "sanitized," so it could then try to force workers back to work—demonstrating their criminal contempt for the danger of contagion between workers and other staff at the plants.

That evening, Prime Minister Conte was compelled to announce heightened emergency measures to address the contagion: the closure of all restaurants, museums, non-essential stores, bans on public gatherings, heightened travel restrictions, and requests of all citizens to remain indoors where possible.

No restrictions whatsoever were placed on the operations of large corporations, which continue ordering workers into cramped assembly lines to keep pumping profits out of the workforce while infecting them and their families with an untreatable, potentially fatal disease.

From Wednesday to Friday, the strike wave mushroomed across Italy, hitting every major industry. "The workers are striking against the coronavirus, or rather against the government that is keeping the factories open despite the coronavirus," wrote the *Corriere della Sera*.

The strike wave is being almost completely blacked out by the international corporate media: the ruling class is terrified that the same explosive anger is mounting everywhere, and that the example of the Italian workers will be followed around the world.

In Brescia, in the region of Lombardy which is among the worst hit by the disease, the *Secolo d'Italia* wrote on Thursday that "workers from some factories have started more than one wildcat strike. An outbreak is also taking place in Grottaglie, in the [southern] province of Taranto."

Shipbuilders at Fincantieri in Liguria walked off the job after a worker tested positive for coronavirus, and their strike quickly spread to other company dockyards in the Ligurian peninsula.

According to the Stalinist trade union publication *Rassegna Sindacale*, workers at Scotsman Ice in Pogliano Milanese, who manufacture refrigeration units, and the Bitron car components maker in Cormano walked out on Thursday.

On Friday, more than 700 mostly female Electrolux workers in Solaro refused to go to work. Workers at Lobo di Cornaredo (producing factory bolts) and Tecnomagnete of Lainate struck. More than 450 Corneliani clothing workers in Mantua walked out "to protest," in the words of the *Voice of Montova* daily, "against the government's

failure ... to order the closure of companies that are not involved in the fight against the virus.” In Pistoia, Tuscany, workers at the Hitachi railway factory launched a week-long strike beginning yesterday until March 21.

Work stoppages are hitting Italy’s entire steel industry. Most metalworks have shut down operations until March 22. Amid the growing rebellion in among rank-and-file workers, the main national metalworking trade unions were forced to publish a statement on Friday warning that if the companies did not shut down operations, strikes would hit the entire industry until March 22.

The union appealed vaguely for wages to be “covered primarily with contractual instruments or with any social safety nets as required by law,” writes *Il Riformista*. This means that workers have received no credible guarantees that they will receive their full pay through the pandemic.

The trade union executives, who helped keep workers on the job until the strikes erupted, and only called strikes where workers were going to walk out regardless, are no less terrified than the government and corporations by the strikes and determined to shut them down. Francesca Re David, the general secretary of the Stalinist Italian Metalworkers Union (FIOM), appealed for the government to hold an emergency “consultation” to prevent the further spread of wildcat strikes.

Yesterday, Prime Minister Conte held an emergency video teleconference with the unions and employers associations. The government’s communiqué on the meeting hailed union and management representatives for their “utmost collaboration to reach a shared solution.” Conte “greatly appreciated the responsibility assumed by all the social partners and kept emphasizing the very constructive atmosphere that characterized the meeting.” A further meeting was held last night, “confident that everyone will be ready to complete the work as soon as possible.”

The government, unions and corporations would work “constructively” to force workers to risk their lives, going back into the factories during the pandemic—to satisfy the super-rich that nothing will be done during the pandemic that could in any way jeopardize their fortunes. As the WSWS noted in its Perspective article yesterday, “The motto of the capitalist oligarchy is: ‘If the accumulation of our billions requires the death of millions, so be it.’”

Workers can give no confidence to these filthy maneuvers. For the health and survival of the population, the struggles of the working class, which erupted against the Conte government, must now be taken out of the hands of its trade union lackeys. In Italy and across the

world, the working class, not the financial markets and their political and trade union representatives, must decide what plants run and under what conditions.

This requires the building of workers committees of action, independent of the trade unions and controlled by the rank and file. They can coordinate the struggles of the working class, oppose attempts to railroad workers back to work, oversee the shutdown of plants, ensure that workers who are self-isolating keep receiving full pay, and ultimately oversee the re-opening and the safe functioning of plants after the pandemic is over.

To maintain this work against opposition from the unions and the ruling class, they will need a revolutionary perspective against the Conte government and its backers in the international financial markets and the European Union (EU).

The coronavirus pandemic is unforgettable proof that the capitalist class is unfit to rule. This morning, a panicked Conte promised to provide “personal protective equipment, including masks, free to all workers,” so they can be forced back to work. He hailed anyone from the affected plants who is going to work—risking their lives, and those of their families, friends and loved ones—for carrying out “an act of great responsibility towards the entire national community.”

What rubbish! This “act of great national responsibility” would ensure the banks keep counting their profits, union bureaucrats their bloated salaries, and workers the deaths of their loved ones.

It is time for a revolution. Policies of austerity in the EU and internationally that have slashed health care spending, wages and living conditions must be overturned, and the necessary infrastructure built and financed by impounding the ill-gotten wealth of the financial aristocracy. In Italy and internationally, the lives of countless millions depends on political power going to the working class, and capitalism being replaced by socialism.



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