

Warning of food riots, Rome sends 20,000 troops to patrol southern Italy

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In recent weeks, there has been a massive deployment of 20,000 army soldiers to the southern Italian regions of Campania, Puglia and Sicily to guard commercial centres and streets, as the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown enters its second full month and citizens run out of money to buy food and other basic necessities.

After an incident in Palermo, Sicily, where a group of residents ran out of a grocer shouting that they could not pay, the media and the state sought to paint a picture of disorderly citizens looting stores and threatening the public good. Media headlines blared that without military intervention, the Mafia would take control. But there is no evidence the Mafia is taking over. The Mafia, just like the state, has left southern Italians in distress. Workers blame state corruption and political apathy for their plight.

“There are no riots,” a grocer near Bari told the WSW. She continued, “Clients at my store are orderly and everyone wears masks and gloves when they come to the store. There have been robberies of closed restaurants, people stealing anything they can sell to get money. Many people work in the black [economy], and they can’t find normal, regular work.”

Rather than providing financial support and provisions for food, however, Italy’s regional councils are calling for increased military and police presence.

The Council of Sicily recently invoked Article 31 of the Sicilian Statute that provides the region with the power to “take over the direction of the public security services (including military and police) to deal effectively and promptly with any state emergency situations that affect public order, health, and safety in the territory of the Sicilian Region or any part of it.”

Article 31, which has never been applied until now, puts the police and army at the regional president’s disposal for use in suppressing any form of protest or

class struggle that emerges as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy.

In describing the developments in Sicily, *Giornale di Sicilia* writer Giacinto Pipitone said, “[Sicilian President Nello] Musumeci has, for weeks, been moving as if we were at war.”

The constant drumbeat of criminal accusations of the Italian population is overbearing and reactionary. Both the media and the ruling class are seeking to divert public attention away from the government’s inability to deal with the pandemic, in order to shift the blame for the state’s unpreparedness from top officials to the people who are living in quarantine and no longer have the financial means to buy food and other necessities.

The same grocery worker told the WSW that 10 to 20 percent of her customers are receiving government support to buy their groceries, and that many small business owners now find themselves without any income because of the pandemic. One of her friends owns a travel agency, and all of her bookings are cancelled this year, leaving her with no income virtually overnight. She passes through police and army checkpoints, however, carrying with her a self-declaration that she is going to work.

The diversion aims at concealing the criminal responsibilities of the ruling class, from a delayed response to a completely inadequate plan for fighting the virus. At the same time, after mass wildcat strikes broke out across Italy and internationally to protest the official COVID-19 policy and demand the right to shelter at home, the government is clearly attempting to strengthen its position against the working class.

Governments, in Italy as elsewhere, have sought for decades to divert social resources to the financial oligarchy instead of utilizing them for a rational, scientific plan to strengthen health care, halt infectious

diseases and ensure the survival of society. This has led to a situation where governments instead bring the army out onto the streets.

In early March, when the government could no longer ignore mounting deaths and spreading contagion, Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte called in the army—the only force in Italian society with enough funding and instruments—to construct coronavirus field hospitals, distribute medical materials to local hospitals on the frontlines of the battle against the deadly pathogen, and to cart off the dead for mass burials.

By mid-March, the government imposed a nationwide lockdown, asking residents to shelter in place for an unspecified time. However, the government leaked news of the lockdown the night before the official announcement, causing panic and sending thousands of Italians scrambling to get home for fear of being trapped away from their families, especially southern Italians who work in the industrial north.

This reckless breach of public trust sent the media into overdrive to blame southern Italians for the spread of the contagion and give authorities cover to deploy thousands of soldiers to control the population, under the army's "Secure Streets" (Strade Sicure) program. This policy is now receiving support from capitalist politicians of all political colorations.

Lombardy's governor, Attilio Fontana, sought to dismiss worries that the use of army patrols is a breach of citizens' democratic rights, saying that his call for the army was supported by Italy's President Sergio Mattarella. "I reiterated in a phone conversation with the president the need to use the army to support police forces and reinforce the network of controls aimed at applying the rules," Fontana said, then added: "I can say that Mattarella has shared my request, which is aimed at guaranteeing the collective good."

Interior Minister Luciana Lamorgese boasted, "At the moment the contingent of 7,300 soldiers already in the streets will be used, but if they are not enough there are at least another 13,000 soldiers available. They have already arrived in Campania and Sicily ... they will respond to [the request by] Governor Fontana and in the next days to the Mayor of Rome."

For his part, Minister of Defence Lorenzo Guerini threatened, "The army is ready to do more checks. We will guarantee security on the ground," adding, "The

armed forces are ready to do their part, as they are already doing both on the health front and in the control of the territory. Let's help the Civil Protection and watch over the 'misery' in the South."

Luigi Di Maio, leader of the Five Star Movement, suggested the government include a provision in the next national government emergency decree that explicitly provides for domestic military intervention, thus giving the government the immediate and unequivocal power to deploy the army against the civilian population as and when they want during, and especially after, the pandemic.



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