

Public sector workers mount national strike across Italy

Will Morrow
9 December 2020

Yesterday, a nationwide strike in Italy brought large portions of the public sector to a standstill. As hundreds continue to die every day from the coronavirus pandemic and the government's policy of permitting the virus to spread, there is mass opposition in the working class to the lack of safe working conditions and the malignant levels of social inequality fueled by decades of austerity and exacerbated by the pandemic.

According to the trade unions, more than three million workers participated in the strike. The public sector union federations that called the strike cover public administration employees, civil servants, education and health care workers, though hospital employees remained on the job.

The strike was animated by mass opposition to the slashing of public funding over decades, particularly in the health sector. There are currently 350,000 public sector workers on casual contracts without job security, including 60,000 health workers. Even as it has cynically hailed nurses as "heroes" in the fight against the pandemic, the government of Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte has refused to provide funding for permanent job positions or wage increases.

The strike took place amid a series of protests and strike actions by workers internationally. In neighboring Spain, thousands of doctors and nurses protested in Madrid on November 29 against plans to slash health funding. In Portugal, a national strike of childcare, primary and secondary educators will take place this Friday. In Greece, hundreds of thousands of workers shut down the country's public sector on November 26, to protest a law abolishing the eight-hour day.

In France, hundreds of thousands took part in protests across the country a week ago against police violence and to oppose the Macron government's plans to

criminalize the filming of police. And in Germany, there is growing opposition among teachers and students to the policy of keeping schools open to allow the virus to spread.

Under these conditions, the strike in Italy has received virtually no coverage in international media. The state-run *France Info* radio broadcaster produced a single article on the strike, the only one to appear in French. None of the major English-language or German news outlets produced an article on the strike.

In contrast, when groups of several hundred right-wing protesters held anti-lockdown demonstrations in Germany this year, they received immediate international coverage. In the political and media establishment in Europe there is intense concern at the eruption of working-class opposition to their policies that have permitted the virus to spread by rejecting a prolonged economic lockdown that would impact on corporate profits.

The death toll from the coronavirus in Italy is catastrophic, among the highest per capita in the world. Yesterday alone, 634 people died from the virus. There have been more than 500 deaths from the virus every day since November 20. On December 3, there were 993 deaths, eclipsing the record of 921 deaths set this spring, on March 27, when Italy was one of the first countries in the world to be overwhelmed. With Italy's population of 60 million, the December 3 death toll would be equivalent to approximately 5,300 deaths in a single day in the United States. In total, more than 60,000 people have died since the beginning of the year.

Italy has the second-highest number of infections in Europe, after France, at 1.77 million cases. The total number of recorded cases stood at half a million on October 24 and has more than tripled in less than two

months. Between 10,000 and 20,000 new cases are recorded each day.

This massive death toll was not inevitable. The Conte government was forced to enact lock-down measures in March, after wildcat strikes at auto and other industrial plants in Italy demanded the idling of non-essential production to allow workers to shelter at home. After lock-downs were ended, the Conte government, like its counterparts across Europe, reopened the economy, including non-essential production, bars, restaurants and schools, to ensure that the extraction of corporate profits could resume.

The Conte government has since rejected the re-imposition of a full lock-down demanded by medical professionals. On November 9, the president of the Italian Federation of Medical Guilds called for a complete lock-down to prevent the spread of the virus.

The same day, the head of the infectious disease department at Milan's Sacco Hospital told RAI news that a lock-down was required, "otherwise the pandemic will end up doing damage that goes beyond the already very sad number of deaths." Conte replied in an interview with *La Stampa* on November 11 that such a lock-down "shouldn't be the first choice" because "the costs are too high."

Instead, the government has maintained a nationwide curfew from 10pm to 5am. High schools, covering the final two years of secondary education, are closed across the country, but middle school and primary schools have been kept open everywhere except in "red zones," where the virus is spreading the fastest. Currently, only the central Abruzzo region is marked as "red." In "orange zones," bars and restaurants are closed, but commercial and retail stores remain open. Lombardy, Piedmont, Calabria, Bolzano and Tuscany are all among the "orange" zones.

The trade unions have not called the latest strike as an act of opposition against the government and its coronavirus policies. On the contrary, the unions have supported the opening of schools, and opposed any action to demand a lock-down with full wages provided to workers.

It has called a series of one-day actions whose purpose is to let off steam among workers, while doing nothing to oppose the government's policies. The unions called the latest strike action after a similar token four-hour national stoppage on November 25,

which shut down transport, education and health services across the country, including bus services in Rome.



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