

Tens of thousands protest fascist attack at high school in Florence, Italy

Our reporters
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Tens of thousands of young people, teachers and workers took part in a demonstration and rally in Florence, Italy, last Saturday. Estimates of the crowd varied from 20,000 (according to police) to 50,000 (CGIL trade union federation) as participants marched through Florence to make a statement against fascism.

The protest was prompted by a fascist attack at a high school in Florence. On February 18, members of the far-right “Azione studentesca” had attacked students outside the classical Liceo Michelangiolo for refusing to accept their flyers. Two students, who were outraged by the content of the flyers and had clearly expressed this, were brutally beaten.

A video shows one student, still on the ground, being kicked and punched ruthlessly until a teacher shows up. Since then, six attackers are said to be under an investigation, which has been taken over by DIGOS, a branch of the state police specializing in counter-terrorism and counter-extremism.

While the Liceo Michelangiolo school administration issued an unprincipled, cowardly statement condemning both sides, and “violence” in general, Annalisa Salvino, principal of the neighbouring Liceo Leonardo Da Vinci, reacted quite differently. She addressed the students in a letter and, referring to Italian Communist Antonio Gramsci, warned against an indifferent attitude toward fascism. Salvino’s letter states:

Fascism did not arise in Italy at large rallies of thousands of people. It began on the edge of an ordinary sidewalk, where the victim of a politically motivated beating was left to fend for himself by indifferent passers-by. “I hate the indifferent,” said Antonio Gramsci, a great

Italian whom the fascists imprisoned until his death because the power of his ideas frightened them like rabbits.

She continued by pointing out that it was precisely in times like the present that totalitarianism could gain a foothold “to ruin the future of entire generations,” and concluded with the following warning:

Those who praise the value of borders, who venerate the blood of their own ancestors in opposition to the “others,” those who still erect walls, must be isolated, called by their name and fought, with culture and with the power of ideas. We must not be under the illusion that this disgusting resurgence will disappear by itself. Many decent Italians also believed that 100 years ago, but it did not happen that way.

The letter aroused the anger of Education Minister Giuseppe Valditara, a member of the far-right *Lega*, who threatened to reprimand the school principal. In a TV interview February 23, he called the attack a “ridiculous scuffle between students” and said it was “not the job of a principal to spread such messages” in an official capacity. The content of Salvino’s letter “has nothing to do with reality. In Italy there is neither a fascist threat nor a drift toward violence or authoritarianism,” the minister asserted.

Valditara, originally from the fascist *Alleanza Nazionale* party, took a far-right stance himself. He claimed, “Defending the borders and remembering the identity of a peoples has nothing to do with fascism or,

even worse, Nazism.” Finally, he threatened the principal, “If this attitude translates into an approach that goes beyond school boundaries, we will see if it is necessary to take action.”

As for Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, leader of the fascist *Fratelli d'Italia* (FdI), she has so far remained silent on the incident. She had herself chaired the “Azione studentesca” years ago. The fascist youth organization and its predecessors go back to the Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI), the rallying movement of Mussolini supporters after World War II. In Florence, the “Azione studentesca” is headquartered in the same building as Meloni’s ruling FdI.

The education minister’s reaction caused a general outcry. Spontaneously, Florentine students organized a protest demonstration through the city, and enormous anger at Valditara spread on the Internet. Finally, the largest trade union federation, CGIL, felt compelled to call for a national demonstration in Florence on Saturday, March 4, in “defence of the school and the constitution.”

The opening rally at noon on Saturday saw thousands of school pupils, students and teachers gathered, as well as workers from Florence. Hundreds of teachers and school principals from all over the region came to stand in solidarity with principal Salvino. Banners emphasized that Florence was “anti-fascist,” and a placard demanding Valditara’s resignation drew a fitting likeness to Mussolini.

The closing rally in Piazza Santa Croce featured Florence Mayor Dario Nardella, Elly Schlein, the recently elected Partito Democratico (PD) leader, CGIL Secretary Maurizio Landini, as well as Giuseppe Conte, head of Five Star Movement (M5S).

The media focused heavily on Schlein’s meeting with Conte. In an effort to take the explosiveness out of the mobilization, Schlein’s call for “cooperation” in the “fundamental disputes” was played up. Everything pointed to the fact that the quarrelling opposition parties would now once again act together against the government of Fratelli d'Italia, Lega and Berlusconi’s Forza Italia.

As if this represented even the slightest bit of progress. In fact, it was precisely the right-wing, anti-working class policies of the supposed “centre-left” camp that had paved the way to power for Meloni. Before the last elections, the PD and M5S had even

formed a coalition with Lega as part of their “collaboration.”

On Saturday, many participants took the opportunity to raise broader demands, for example, for the minimum wage, for a new immigration policy, for investment in health and education (rather than in the military) and for freedom for teachers to address anti-fascist issues in schools. This cannot be realized with a PD or M5S government, as past years have shown.

In any case, the protest has shed a harsh light on the crisis of Giorgia Meloni’s government. Unrest and resistance are growing throughout Italy. Contributing to this are not only the brutal refugee policy, responsible for murderous shipwrecks in the Mediterranean, and the deep social crisis, but also, increasingly, the government’s militarism and Meloni’s arms deliveries to Ukraine in the NATO war against Russia.



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