

Italy's Meloni wages war on the poor

Peter Schwarz
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The message came via a text message and consisted of a few words. On July 28, the Italian government told 169,000 households that they would lose their incomes in four days. From August 1, they would no longer receive a cent from the state's basic income support.

The 169,000 are only the beginning. In the coming months, hundreds of thousands more households will have their support cut off. In total, about 2.5 million people will be affected by the cuts. In this way, the government wants to save several billion euros, which it will pass onto the rich in the form of tax breaks.

In its current form, the Citizen's Income (Reddito di cittadinanza) had only been introduced in 2019. It was a central election promise of the Five Star Movement, which won many votes with it, especially in the poor south of the country. It provided those in need with an additional income of up to €500 per month. Spouses received an additional €200, children €100 each and a maximum of €280 for rent. Given the high level of poverty in the country, however, this was only a drop in the ocean.

In the future, only households in which minors, disabled people or senior citizens live will receive a maximum of €480. On the other hand, 18- to 59-year-olds are considered "employable" and go empty-handed. Only if they participate in further education and training courses do they receive €350 per month, limited to a maximum of one year. So far, however, there are no such courses and the Ministry of Labour has not even set up an internet platform for them.

As a result, hundreds of thousands of people in Italy are to be left without income overnight and will not know how to pay the rent and utility bill or buy food. Large cities in the south of the country, such as Naples, Bari, Palermo, and Caserta, are particularly affected. In Naples, one in six households receives Citizen's Income, and in the northern city of Bolzano it is one in 30.

As a result, there were protests in front of the offices of the social INPS welfare agency in many places. In the Sicilian municipality of Terrasini, a man stormed the

mayor's office, poured petrol all about and threatened to set everything on fire.

The cancellation of the Citizen's Income and the brutal way in which it is being carried out are a deliberate provocation. The government of Giorgia Meloni is now showing its true fascist face. It wants to achieve two things.

Firstly, it is giving workers the choice of accepting the lowest-paid job or face starving to death. In this way, the Meloni government is trying to lower the overall level of wages and introduce compulsory work. And secondly, it is trying to divide the middle and working classes by turning better-off layers against the unemployed and those on benefits, just as it has so far turned them against refugees.

Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia railed against the Citizen's Income during the election campaign, denouncing it as an invitation to do nothing "on the sofa." Those who can work should not be reliant on the state's pockets, Meloni had repeatedly stressed. She was supported in this by business associations that complained about the lack of staff in the catering and tourism industries because those receiving aid refused to take the low-paid jobs.

With her declaration of war on the poor, Meloni stands in the tradition of Mussolini, who continues to serve as a shining example for the Fratelli d'Italia, even though Meloni has declared him a "matter of history" for tactical reasons.

Mussolini's fascist dictatorship embodied the direct and immediate rule of finance capital. Its populist phrases served only to mobilise its supporters. Its main task was to smash the workers' organisations. It dissolved the trade unions into corporations dominated by the state and the employers' associations and introduced forced labour on a large scale under the guise of "job creation measures."

Germany's Nazi dictatorship then went even further. During the war, more than 20 million forced labourers worked for the German economy in the Reich and conquered territories. While the leading industrialists such as the Flicks, Krupps and Quandts remained owners of

their companies and raked in millions in profits, an army of slaves were worked to death. This practice reached its macabre climax in the inscription “Arbeit macht frei” (Work makes you free), which was emblazoned above the entrance to many concentration camps, such as Auschwitz.

Meloni’s attack on the poorest in society has met with support in bourgeois circles throughout Europe. Typical is a commentary in German daily *Die Welt*.

“Without much ado, the right-wing government under Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni has implemented its controversial plan to completely cancel basic assistance for a large proportion of those on benefits,” cheers the paper’s “chief economist”, Dorothea Siems. “Those who are considered fit for work now mostly have to look to their own resources to see how to make ends meet.”

In Germany, too, many citizens lacked “any understanding for the fact that in many places it is not possible to place more long-term unemployed into service jobs, for example in restaurants, hotels or in construction.” It was “urgently necessary to abolish the incentives for non-work.” Those who were too hard-working, writes Siems, citing Ifo head Clemens Fuest, “not only lose their entitlement to the Citizen’s Income, but also to housing benefit and other social payments. De facto, this is tantamount to a work ban—and no welfare state can afford that in the long run.”

In France, President Macron is using brute police force to force through a pension reform that will drastically reduce retirement benefits. Governments in other European countries and the US are also recouping the trillions they spend on war and trade war, bailing out the banks and increasing the profits of the rich, by cutting wages and benefits. Resistance to this is growing; in the long run, the attacks cannot be realised by democratic methods.

This and her unconditional support for NATO in the Ukraine war explain why the red carpet is being rolled out for the fascist Meloni in Brussels, Berlin and Paris. US President Joe Biden has also received her for a two-way meeting at the White House. Meloni serves as a lever to help right-wing and fascist forces break through in other countries as well.

The close cooperation with Meloni underlines that there is no question of an alleged “firewall” against the extreme right. In Germany, too, the AfD is courted by all parties and the media. At the European level, the integration of the fascists is particularly advanced.

Meloni’s governing coalition unites the three largest

right-wing and far-right groups of European parties and serves as a blueprint for a similar alliance at the European level.

Meloni herself is the leader of the European Conservatives and Reformers (ECR), which, in addition to the Spanish Vox, also includes the Polish ruling party PiS and the Czech ruling party ODS. Meloni appeared in the Spanish election campaign at major events organised by Franco supporters from Vox. Matteo Salvini’s Lega is a member of Identity and Democracy (ID), alongside Marine Le Pen’s Rassemblement National in France and Germany’s AfD. And Forza Italia, founded by Silvio Berlusconi, belongs to the European People’s Party (EPP), as do the German Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) and the Spanish People’s Party (PP).

The German European People’s Party (EPP) group leader Manfred Weber, in particular, is busily preparing an alliance with the far right to secure another term for EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen after the 2024 European elections. Spanish PP leader Alberto Feijóo has even called on Meloni to join the EPP. “It would be good for the EPP if Ms. Meloni ended up with the EPP,” he said in an interview.

The Social Democrats, Greens and Left parties and the trade unions associated with them have done nothing to oppose this. Their policies—from support for the Ukraine war, to social cuts, to fending off refugees, to arming the police—are not much different from those of the right and ultra-right.

In Italy, the leader of the Democrats (PD), Elly Schlein, rails against Meloni’s war on the poor. But the PD itself has led or supported several governments that have vigorously pushed through social cuts, paving the way for Meloni to come to power. Italy’s largest trade union, CGIL, invited Meloni to its last congress in March, giving the fascist a platform to promote her anti-working class programme.

Only an independent working-class movement that combines the struggle against war and social devastation with the struggle against their cause, capitalism, can stop the danger of fascism.



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