

Italy's general strike exposes workers' opposition to austerity and war—and the treachery of the union bureaucracy

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More than half a million workers across Italy took part in a one-day general strike on December 12, called by the CGIL union against the government's 2026 Budget Law. The strike, which shut down large sections of the public and private sectors, expressed the deep anger among workers over collapsing living standards, the dismantling of social services and the all-sided drive toward war and authoritarian rule.

Officially, the CGIL announced a nationwide general strike of all workers for the entire day in protest against what it described as an “unfair, wrong and ineffective Budget Law.” The measure, approved by the Meloni government, imposes sweeping cuts to health care, education and public services while diverting tens of billions toward military rearmament and preparations for war. The initiative was endorsed by the CGIL assembly of delegates and promoted by General Secretary Maurizio Landini, who declared the goal was to “highlight the economic choices harmful to workers and pensioners” and pressure the government to revise its plan.

The strike saw an overall participation rate of approximately 68 percent according to CGIL figures. More than 50 demonstrations were held across the country, including a 100,000-strong march in Florence where Landini delivered his concluding speech in Piazza del Carmine. Transport, schools, public health and key private industries were hit by significant slowdowns or closures. The nationwide character of the mobilization doubtlessly revealed the scale of popular opposition to the ruling class agenda of austerity and war.

But the political role of the CGIL is to blunt and contain this opposition, not mobilize it toward an open clash with the ruling class. This function is not accidental. The CGIL is the direct product of the Stalinist heritage in Italy and Europe, whose historical role has been class-collaborationism, subordinating the working class to the national state and the capitalist order.

Its decision to call a separate general strike on December 12, isolating it from the November 28–29 protests organized by USB and other base unions, was entirely deliberate. By fragmenting workers' initiatives, the CGIL ensured that the growing anger over austerity and war would remain confined within safe, state-sanctioned channels. The union's demands were crafted to be perfunctory, offering a controlled outlet for discontent while guaranteeing that nothing would challenge the foundations of “business as usual.”

In Florence, Landini denounced the Budget Law as “cutting health care, education and salaries while investing in military rearmament” and acknowledged that the government is “limiting the right to strike.” Yet his proposal was a pathetic plea for “a progressive tax system and a solidarity contribution from the richest.”

Landini's rhetoric is thoroughly deceptive. It does nothing to challenge the austerity agenda or the military priorities of a capitalist system that is destroying millions of lives. Workers know full well that the global crisis will not be resolved through appeals to the supposed generosity of the wealthy.

The union's socioeconomic proposals fall entirely within parameters politically acceptable to the ruling class. Their demands for increases in wages and pensions through measures neutralizing so-called fiscal drag (the automatic erosion of real income caused when inflation pushes wages into higher tax brackets) and expanded tax cuts on lower earnings do not alter the trajectory of the government's policy. They are ignored because they challenge none of the underlying priorities of the ruling class.

Similarly, the CGIL calls for halting the automatic increase in the retirement age, creating a guaranteed contributory pension for precarious workers, improving workplace safety and launching national industrial plans for “quality employment.” Additional appeals for investment in health care, schools, social assistance, public transportation,

affordable housing and development in the South amount to little more than wish lists.

None address the fundamental reality that the ruling class is redirecting all available resources toward the buildup of military capacity in preparation for global conflicts. The government's escalating military spending is not an unfortunate imbalance in priorities but the conscious reorganization of the entire state to meet the needs of European imperialism.

This broader context is carefully hidden by the CGIL leadership. Landini's timid references to militarism are treated as afterthoughts, raised only to mollify the widespread anti-war sentiment among workers rather than mobilize it.

The union bureaucracy seeks to prevent the growing opposition to NATO's war drive from developing into a unified political movement of the working class. In this it plays an indispensable role for the Meloni government, which relies on the unions to police and fragment the working class.

The clearest demonstration of the CGIL's deliberate containment tactics came during the strikes and protests on November 28 and 29, organized by base unions such as USB. Those actions explicitly opposed not only austerity but Italy's support for the war on Russia and the genocidal destruction of Gaza.

Notwithstanding the dangers posed by the union bureaucracy's national-based perspective, workers expressed the deep political nature of their opposition. Rather than join or amplify this sentiment, the CGIL isolated it. The December 12 strike was carefully structured to foreground only mild economic grievances and mute the explosive questions of war, nationalism and state repression.

Even the scope of the CGIL's action is framed within narrow national boundaries. The union's Stalinist origins and historic role as an appendage of the Italian state remain unchanged. Once able to push through limited reforms in the postwar period, over the last four decades the CGIL has collaborated in dismantling all past gains, echoing an international pattern driven by the world crisis of capitalism. Its "national solutions" and appeals for a humane Italian capitalism are toxic illusions. They dovetail seamlessly with the austerity agenda of the Meloni government, with which the CGIL stands ready to make deals behind closed doors.

That the government recognizes the political danger posed by the working class, even in its union-controlled form, was shown in the condescending mockery by Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini. Meloni posted a sarcastic remark asking "which day of the week December 12 will fall on," implying the union scheduled the strike on a Friday to create a long weekend.

Salvini echoed the joke, suggesting Landini should "forgo the long weekend" and strike on another day. These cynical comments aim to belittle the seriousness of the working class and shift attention away from the real issues of war spending and social cuts. Yet the CGIL's own opportunism enables such attacks, since even the far right relies on the union bureaucracy to control workers.

The ruling class does not fear the CGIL but is terrorized by the independent movement emerging from below. Across Italy, workers have been at the forefront of opposition to war and genocide. A major source of anger toward the Budget Law is precisely its combination of wage cuts, social cuts and vast military increases demanded by NATO and the EU.

Internationally, general strikes have unfolded in Italy, Portugal and Belgium. Dockworkers have coordinated actions in recent months to refuse handling weapons cargo in ports across the Mediterranean. This glimpse of international solidarity shows what is possible and what terrifies capitalist governments. It is also what union bureaucracies of every country seek to suppress, since their privileges depend on loyalty to the national state, including when fascists hold power.

The crisis today is global. Syndicalist organizations trapped within national frameworks have become an objective obstacle to the development of an international working class movement against capitalism, the root cause of war, austerity and dictatorship. Decades of experience have shown there are no reforms capable of reversing this trajectory. The task before workers is not to pressure the CGIL but to break free of its grip.

New organs of struggle must be built: rank-and-file committees in every workplace, democratically controlled by workers themselves, and connected internationally through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. Only such an independent, global movement can confront not a single government but an entire capitalist system pushing humanity toward disaster.



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