

Italy: General Strike opposes Gaza genocide

Marc Wells
18 May 2026

A 24-hour general strike against the Israeli genocide in Gaza, the militarism of the Meloni government and its social implications for the working class brought Italy to a halt on Monday, May 18, 2026. Its convergence with another ferocious Israeli attack on the Global Sumud Flotilla, whose defense was the catalyst for the general strike, transformed it into a political earthquake.

The strike, organized by the Unione Sindacale di Base (USB) together with the Unione Sindacale Italiana (USI) and the Federazione Italiana Sindacati Intercategoriali (FI-SI), brought transport, schools, public services and logistics to a standstill across the country.

Rail service on the national Gruppo FS Italiane network was reduced to minimal legally mandated windows. In Rome, Metro Line C was shut entirely; Lines A and B ran at reduced frequency. In Venice, the Vaporetto waterborne network nearly ground to a halt. In Bologna, the airport express link to Marconi was suspended. In city after city—Turin, Genoa, Bari, Naples—commuters found their morning and evening routines disrupted by a working class refusing, for the fourth time in nine months, to simply absorb the costs of war and austerity in silence.

The USB's demands are substantive: the introduction of a legally mandated minimum wage, the restoration of the *scala mobile* wage-indexing mechanism abolished under earlier capitalist governments, a windfall tax on energy and banking conglomerates, and the defense of public healthcare, pensions, education and housing against a budget that funnels tens of billions toward rearmament.

Under the slogan “Nemmeno un chiodo per guerre e genocidio”—“Not even a nail for wars and genocide”—the union connected Italy's planned increase in military spending to 5 percent of GDP directly to the gutting of social infrastructure. In its call for the General Strike the USB states: “We bring the country to a standstill to make it clear that no worker, no student, and no region can be dragged into this economy of death.”

It calls on the Italian government to “sever all diplomatic, economic, commercial and military ties with the terrorist state of Israel,” denounces the United States for its aggression against Iran and condemns the Meloni government and the European Union as accomplices. It ends with the call: “On 18 May we bring the country to a standstill to protest against war, genocide, rearmament and repression. For wages, welfare, healthcare, education, rights and democracy.”

These calls give at least a glimpse of the anger sweeping the working class. Workers understand viscerally that every euro allocated to military budgets is a euro stripped from wages and services.

The flotilla seizure: Labor and war converge in real time

As workers were gathering at strike assemblies, Israeli naval commandos seized at least 25 vessels of the Global Sumud Flotilla approximately 80 to 250 miles west of Cyprus in international waters. Among the seized boats were Italian-flagged vessels—the *Belella*, the *Cactus*, the *Zio Faster*—and at least seven or eight Italian citizens were detained. They were being held at gunpoint on the high seas by a military force conducting an operation that can only be called piracy.

This was not an isolated incident. It was the second such operation against the flotilla. On April 29, Israeli naval forces had already intercepted part of the convoy off the coast of Crete, detaining over 175 activists, including organizers Thiago Ávila and Saif Abu Keshek. They both were brought to Israel and reported physical and psychological abuse during ten days of imprisonment. The Rome Public Prosecutor had already opened a criminal investigation into the kidnapping of Italian citizens. The May 18 attack was therefore a deliberate escalation—carried out in full daylight, live-streamed and timed with contemptuous disregard for any diplomatic protest it might provoke.

In Rome's Piazza dei Cinquecento, strike assemblies turned into emergency protests. Saif Abu Keshek and flotilla representative Maria Elena Delia addressed the crowd directly. Delia warned that any transfer of detained Italian citizens to Israeli soil would meet fierce political resistance. Workers across Italy could see that the same government spending their wages on weapons was standing aside while its own citizens were abducted.

The political responses: What they reveal

The opposition parties rushed to register their outrage. Democratic Party (PD) Secretary Elly Schlein called the seizure “yet another act of piracy in international waters by the Israeli government” and demanded that the EU intervene. Five Star Movement (M5S) leader Giuseppe Conte was more pointed: “Perhaps peace was sabotaged by those who continued to do business with Israel, by those who pretended not to see an ongoing genocide.”

Green-Left Alliance (AVS) leaders Nicola Fratoianni and Angelo Bonelli demanded “concrete acts against the fascist government of Netanyahu.” M5S parliamentary deputy Dario Carotenuto was himself aboard one of the flotilla vessels and sent a video message before communications were cut, reporting Israeli warships surrounding the fleet.

These statements should be taken seriously as evidence of the depth of the political crisis—but not as a sign of genuine political opposition. Conte was prime minister in a coalition with the far-right Lega that supported NATO and the EU and backed anti-immigrant decrees and

austerity. The PD's Jobs Act destroyed labor protections. And Fratoianni's party operates entirely within the framework of bourgeois parliamentary politics and NATO membership.

Their expressions of outrage over the flotilla are intended to absorb the resistance. They fear that working class opposition targets the root cause: an imperialist world order, backed by Washington, Brussels and Rome, in which Israel's blockade and bombardment of Gaza are not aberrations but an essential feature.

Prime Minister Meloni had already denounced the flotilla mission as "dangerous and irresponsible" at the European Council in Copenhagen. Foreign Minister Tajani did the mere minimum demanded by protocol: he dispatched consular instructions to embassies in Tel Aviv, Ankara and Nicosia and requested Israeli assurances regarding the "safety and dignity" of detainees—while carefully avoiding any criticism of the naval blockade itself.

Matteo Salvini of the ultra-right Lega, who has previously used his powers as a minister to order striking transport workers back to work, declined to do so on this occasion—not out of respect for the workers' cause, but because the government was simultaneously under pressure from road haulers threatening their own stoppage over diesel price rises.

A growing movement

Today's strike is the latest episode in a sustained cycle of working class resistance that the WSWS has followed carefully since September 2025. The USB explicitly linked Monday's action to the September 22, 2025 general strike, which marched under the slogan "blocchiamo tutto"—"block everything."

That strike was itself ignited by Israel's violent seizure of the original Global Sumud Flotilla, which provoked a million-strong demonstration in Rome on October 4, 2025—one of the most significant working class and popular eruptions in Italy in decades. In those weeks, dockworkers in Genoa, Livorno and Ancona refused to load weapons bound for Israel—a spontaneous rank-and-file act of class solidarity that forced even the CGIL bureaucrats to act.

Then came the November 28-29 general strikes against the 2026 budget—characterized by the WSWS as "a political eruption of the working class"—and the CGIL's own December 12 general strike. And now, May 18. This is not episodic. This is a class in the process of political awakening, striking repeatedly, with growing understanding, against the same enemy: a capitalist government that arms a genocide abroad while dismantling wages, services and rights at home.

The fact that the major CGIL, CISL and UIL confederations abstained from today's strike is revealing, and deeply instructive. CGIL leader Maurizio Landini—whose former spokesperson Massimo Gibelli publicly declared he no longer recognized his own values in the organization—steered the confederation toward separate, sector-specific disputes, deliberately keeping out of a mobilization against war. This is the function of the union bureaucracy: to channel working class anger into safe corridors, away from any political confrontation with the capitalist state itself.

The revolutionary potential and the tasks ahead

The USB was founded in 2010, when the right-wing, pro-business nature of the official unions became more and more obvious. It won new importance during the early weeks of the COVID-19 emergency, when it was highly active organizing walkouts and strikes. It is strategically positioned in logistics, transport and essential services, where a determined minority acting with coordination can halt an entire economy. That strategic power is enormous.

But the so-called "rank-and-file" unions are politically unequipped to achieve their own objectives. As the WSWS has warned consistently, the *Sindacati* die base—for all their members genuine militancy and instinctive anti-imperialist sentiment—remain limited by leaderships tied to anarchist, Stalinist and bureaucratic traditions, that cannot deliver a decisive break with the capitalist order.

The USI's anarcho-syndicalism, represented in today's coalition, offers no strategy for the conquest of political power. Refusing to handle weapons shipments is an act of courage; refusing to build a political party to replace the government that orders those shipments is a strategic betrayal.

The demand to invoke Law 185/90 to halt Italian arms exports to Israel is correct and should be fought for. The demand for conscientious objection rights for dockworkers is a legitimate democratic demand. But these are immediate demands that expose a deeper question: Who governs Italy, and in whose interest? The answer cannot be found in appeals to Meloni's Foreign Minister, in the PD's parliamentary motions, or in Conte's rhetorical flourishes. The answer lies in the working class seizing political power—not as a national project, but as an international one.

The same capitalist system that bankrolls Israel's blockade, that funds Italy's rearmament budgets, that dismantled the *scala mobile* and the Jobs Act—that system cannot be overcome on a purely national basis. The workers of Italy, Germany, France, Greece, Palestine, Israel and the United States face the same enemy.

The flotilla on the Mediterranean, boarded today in international waters, carried activists from over 40 countries. The working class movement it has helped ignite must develop the same international character—not as a symbolic gesture, but as a strategic orientation grounded in the construction of rank-and-file committees in every workplace and port, coordinated across borders and committed to a socialist program.

The May 18 general strike demonstrates, once again, that the working class is the decisive social force against war and reaction. What it now requires is a political leadership—an international revolutionary party—equal to the historical tasks that this movement is placing on the agenda. This means building an Italian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact