

A new strike wave and student movement against Berlusconi's "reforms"

Wed, 05/11/2008 - 16:26

Workers and youth in Italy are fighting back against attacks launched by Silvio Berlusconi's government, which won a landslide election victory in February. In mid-September one million workers supported a one-day general strike called by the largest union grouping, the Confederazione generale del lavoro (Cgil)

On Friday 17 October a grouping of Italy's smaller but more militant unions, Cobas (Confederazione dei comitati di base), CUB (Confederazione Unitaria di Base), and SdL (Sindacato dei Lavorati Intercategoriale), called a general strike. Bus, rail and tube workers brought city transport systems to a halt. Workers from the education, health and emergency services also took part in large numbers. In Rome, 300,000 demonstrated from Piazza della Repubblica to Piazza San Giovanni in Laterano, a major success.

The third general strike was on Friday 24 October when the three biggest trade union federations the Cgil, Cisl and Uil mobilized 10 million workers and office employees in a four-hour general strike

On 17 October, as well as the major Rome demonstration; 80,000 took part in Naples, 50,000 marched in Milan and Florence saw 40,000 on the streets. Bus, rail and tube workers brought city transport systems to a halt in a series of strikes, staggered to cause maximum effect. Workers from the education, health and emergency services also took part in large numbers. They were joined by school and university students protesting the attacks on the education system by Education Minister Maria Stella Gelmini. The Gelmini "reforms" (Bill 133 passed in August) promote privatization of university-level education. Other measures mean that in schools no new teacher can be hired until five have retired. The aim is to use "natural wastage" to cut 87,000 teachers' posts over the next three years. Gelmini's decree also reintroduces compulsory school uniforms, a grades system, including ones for "behaviour," and the segregation of immigrant pupils in "classi ponte" (bridge-classes). In Milan, when students tried to occupy the Politecnico they were attacked by the police leaving three hospitalized and several less seriously injured. Clashes also occurred in Bologna when youth invaded the main railway station. Berlusconi threatened to send the police in force if students occupied schools and colleges.

Then on Friday 24 October the three biggest union federations the Cgil, Cisl and Uil mobilized 10 million workers and office employees in a four-hour general strike. The next day huge demonstrations organised by the main opposition party the Partito Democratico (PD) took place across the country, estimates of which vary from one million to 2.5 million. Towns and cities involved included Milan, Florence, Bari, Turin, Naples, Bologna, as well as in the vast Circo Massimo in Rome. They were under the slogan "Salva l'Italia" (Save Italy) and carried the national tricolor. On October 30 huge demonstrations took place against the educational reforms with student organizations calling upwards of one million demonstrated in Rome and that ninety per cent of schools were closed for the day. A hot spot of the movement seems to be Naples and the region of Campania where a 60 high schools were under occupation in the city and 120 in the

region surrounding it. But the movement is nationwide and there were militant actions in Venice. Berlusconi's threat to send in paramilitary police to clear the occupied schools led to a public outcry which forced the cavalliere to back down. Student organisers have called for a further day on action in the universities on 14 November.

Clearly the most militant sectors of workers and youth have recovered from the setback they felt when Berlusconi swept back to power in an electoral rout of the left. Rifondazione Comunista lost all its seats in Parliament, in punishment for its support for the neoliberal policies of the government headed by Romano Prodi. Now Cobas and the other left unions, students and teachers unions in both high schools and universities and the far left groups.

Italy is now plunging into recession and major battles lie ahead. The mass social movement against the education reform can be an inspiration for an even wider wave workers struggles. True Italian workers will have to recover ground lost; re-building the local coordinations of struggle that played an important part in the mass mobilisations at the turn of the new century, but which withered in the years of the disastrous Prodi, Veltroni, Bertinotti government. The regrouping left however is still enormously influenced by the libertarian and syndicalist ideas that, against their wills to be sure, allowed reformists like Walter Veltroni and Fausto Bertinotti to derail the mass movements of the 200-2003 period. Whoever does not fight for a perspective of power, in a revolutionary way, simply cedes leadership to bourgeois reformists and the union bureaucracy to tie the workers to electing bourgeois governments at the critical moment. For this reason Italian revolutionaries urgently need to begin the campaign to build a new revolutionary communist party of the working class.

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