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Italy

# Oppose the austerity government

- IV Online magazine - 2014 - IV468 - January 2014 -

Publication date: Monday 6 January 2014

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### **We publish below the appeal signed by 488 trade unionists, members of the CGIL, for the next congress of the confederation.**

The crisis and twenty years of neoliberal policies, concretized by austerity and rooted in the European of finance and big capital, have considerably worsened the working and living conditions of the working class. During these years of crisis, using mass unemployment as a weapon of blackmail, successive governments have destroyed workers' rights, reduced wages and the level of pensions and undermined the "social state". This has often been done with the complicity of the CISL (Italian Confederation of Workers' Unions) and the UIL (Italian Union of Labour) and also of the leadership of the CGIL (General Italian Confederation of Labour), which, with an obvious loss of autonomy confronted by governments supported by the Democratic Party (PD), has been and remains unable to stop the drift.

For this reason, today we need another CGIL. A CGIL that offers an alternative model to that of the European Union (EU), of the Troika (IMF, ECB, EU) and of policies of budget cuts, a model that opposes restructuring and plant closures and that has the courage to propose policies of nationalization!

The pension system has been massacred under the effect of numerous counter-reforms. The last one, introduced by Elsa Fornero [\[1\]](#) has, in fact, abolished old-age pensions. The three trade union confederations, with a strike of just three hours, did not even try to oppose it.

The different social benefits have been reduced to the status of charity. And all relations between these rights and those associated with work and a decent income have been destroyed.

The "social state" is now reduced to the strict minimum: education, the health system and public services are suffering under increasingly heavy cuts.

Wages no longer meet normal needs; poverty is spreading also among those who have a job; inequality in the distribution between profits and wages is growing. With the abolition of the sliding scale of wages, the wages decided in national collective bargaining agreements have lost their substance in the face of inflation; negotiations at company level [\[2\]](#) have not in any way made possible a redistribution of profits. The pay freeze in the public sector, for a period of five years, is the most eloquent expression of this system.

Insecurity has spread throughout the entire working class and rights are no more than a memory of the past. The brutal violation of Article 18 [\[3\]](#) by the government of Mario Monti [\[4\]](#) - which the leadership of the CGIL did not oppose, as it had promised to do, thus losing all autonomy and accepting, in fact, the essential features of the orientation of the PD - has deeply compromised the relationship of forces in the workplaces.

Collective agreements at national level have been dismantled piece by piece, and the negotiation of contracts at enterprise level has ended up by becoming an instrument in the hands of employers to increase flexibility and lengthen working hours, to cut wages, to eliminate rights. In a word, to increase exploitation.

It is this objective that is served by the agreement between the CGIL, the CISL, the UIL and the employers' organization, Confindustria, on representativeness (5). This agreement has ratified the notion that anyone who does not accept an agreement signed by the national leaderships is de facto excluded from all recognized union activity. It binds trade union representatives to renounce conflict. It gives the company the right to demand the implementation

by all union representatives of the contract signed on the level of the confederations. In short, it fully accepts the "Marchione system" [5].

What have the union confederations done to defend the working class in the face of these attacks? The CISL and the UIL have become accomplices of the employers' system, thereby changing, almost genetically, the trade-union character of their organizations.

But what has the leadership of the CGIL done in recent years to make it clear that it is different and to impose itself in the field of rights and democracy? Too often, it has not done enough. And too often, it's not that it has lost battles, but that it did not even engage the battle, considering that the government and the employers had won in advance, rather than trying to resist them, in the name of a compatibility with the system, confronted with which it has always been workers and pensioners who have paid a high price.

Such a union is useless. It has become a bureaucratic caste, often used as an instrument of support for parties and political projects that have nothing to do with the interests of workers and pensioners.

And yet, more than ever, it is a union that we need! But that makes it necessary for the CGIL to change, radically and quickly!

Otherwise, with the broad coalition government, [6] new anti-worker and anti-people counter-reforms will be adopted. And the historical heritage represented by the CGIL and its federations will be dispersed, transforming the union - a fundamental instrument of struggle, democracy and human rights - into a useless structure, only capable of providing a few services.

We are workers' representatives and pensioners who belong to different currents of opinion within the CGIL. Over the years, we have maintained our disagreement with and opposition to the rightward evolution of the leading group of the CGIL, who have chosen not to fight against European austerity policies and to re-establish at any price unity with the CISL and the UIL and collaboration with Confindustria. It is not acceptable that at the worst time for decades, workers, those in precarious work, the unemployed and pensioners are represented by the worst of union leaderships. Faced with all this, we affirm the need to react and not to resign ourselves to the situation.

To change the CGIL we need a clear break with the policy of collaboration and with the practices of the bureaucratic apparatus. We must revive the tradition of conflict and struggle and build the foundations for a platform of demands that is rooted in the real situation of emergency of the country, in other words in the working conditions and lives of millions of workers, pensioners and the unemployed.

Our priorities are the defence of our rights, democracy, participation by workers and their vote for platforms, collective bargaining agreements, wage increases, the lowering of the retirement age, the reduction of working time, redistribution between profits and wages, the fight against job insecurity, the reconquest of national collective bargaining agreements and of Article 18 for everyone, as well as the defence of a public and participatory social state.

The next congress of the CGIL will provide the opportunity to try and take forward these priorities by proposing a radically alternative idea of what the CGIL should be today, how it should function and what should be its demands.

To this end, we believe it is necessary for workers' representatives and union members to decide to take back control of the CGIL and to challenge the very large section of the leadership which has taken shape as a bureaucratic caste.

## Oppose the austerity government

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We appeal to all those who do not accept the line of the CGIL to mobilize, to take the path of change, starting from below, and with this perspective, to produce an alternative document for the congress, a document that supports the need to make such a turn.

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[1] Elsa Fornero has been Minister of Labour and Social Policy since November 2011. Her counter - reform raised the age at which workers could retire with pension rights to 66, and even beyond that age.

[2] Taking the national wage agreement of the industry as a starting point, negotiation at company level was a decisive feature of the contractual system won thanks to the mobilizations of the 1970s; it often made it possible to improve the content of national agreements.

[3] Article 18 of the Labour Code provided protection against layoffs.

[4] The government of so-called "technicians ", presided over by former European Commissioner Mario Monti and supported by the Democratic Party as well as by Berlusconi, implemented austerity policies dictated by the Troika (EU, ECB, IMF ).

[5] We can summarize the conception of "social dialogue" defended by Sergio Marchionne, the Italian-Canadian head of Fiat-Chrysler, in one phrase: "either you agree or else I close the plant."

[6] The coalition government of Enrico Letta, member of the Democratic Party (PD), has broad-based support , ranging from the PD to the split-off from Berlusconi's party represented by the Deputy Prime Minister, Angelino Alfano.