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Italy

Millions rally against Berlusconi

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THREE million people, workers, youth, those in insecure employment, students, pensioners, immigrants, descended on Rome on Saturday March 23, 2002 for the biggest demonstration in the history of the Italian Republic. An immense rally, which surpassed even the hopes of its organiser, the CGIL, the main Italian trade union organisation.

[<https://npa31.org/IMG/jpg/pinocchio.jpg>]

The mobilisation was initially called to oppose the Berlusconi government's decision to 'reform' the Labour Statute, in particular article 18 (which lays down an obligation to rehire a worker who is unjustly dismissed). However, in the extremely effervescent context of the Italian social situation, the demonstration became the reference point for the various social struggles and anti-governmental initiatives. Coming just three days after the murder (claimed by the Red Brigades) of the author of the proposed reform of article 18, professor Marco Biagi, and after the attempt by the government to use the terrorist attack to smear the whole movement, the demonstration also presented a big opportunity for the social and democratic opposition.

The return of the 'Red Brigades' comes at a time of very heated social conflict. The government is attempting to carry out a significant restructuring of the social and democratic guarantees won after the Second World War - national labour contract, safeguards against dismissals, pensions, health and public education. The CGIL, traditionally linked to the PCI and subsequently the DS, but now rather critical of the liberal democratic line of the latter's leadership, has reacted with an intensification of protest, numerous strikes, last Saturday's demonstration and the calling of a general strike for April 5, 2002. This determination has created a convergence of the entire opposition, from Rifondazione Comunista to the centre left Olive Tree alliance, in a common fight against the government, and has forced the other two big union confederations, the CISL (moderate, Christian) and the UIL (once linked to ex-prime minister Craxi's Socialist Party, now linked to the Olive Tree) to break off negotiations with the government and the Confindustria (the employers' federation) and support the call for a general strike (although they argue it should be put off until April 19, 2002).

The assassination of Marco Biagi was immediately used by Berlusconi and the president of Confindustria to discredit the trade unions, in particular the CGIL, and the anti-globalisation movement in general. As this article was written, the CGIL, CISL and UIL cancelled their next meeting with the government because of a statement made by Bossi and the Minister of Defence, explicitly identifying the trade union movement as 'the water where terrorism swims'; the statement also attacked the Social Forum movement and its best known spokespersons, such as Agnoletto and Casarini.

However, the movement reacted by demonstrating again its strength, its capacity for social mobilisation, and radical and democratic approach. The Social Forum brought a contingent of more than 300,000 people to the demonstration, proposing that the intransigent defence of article 18 should lead on to a new 'season of social rights', starting from the extension of the Labour Statute to all new insecure contracts and the demand for a European social income for the unemployed and insecure workers.

The demonstration had immediate effects also on the moderate left. Its errors and *débâcles* have forced millions of people to defend their own living condition of life, organising around a new democratic participation. There has been an 'eruption from below' in political life, starting at Genoa in the demonstrations against the G8 summit and finally reaching the traditional trade union movement with the CGIL in the forefront. At the centre of this movement: a politics which is independent of bureaucratic alchemies; concrete demands - opposition to 'flexibility' of labour; a direct protagonism which should express itself immediately through the general strike; an intransigent defence of democracy against any terrorist barbarism and any cynical manipulation by the government.

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Just eight months separate this demonstration from the July days in Genoa. But there is an obvious link between the two events. We began, in a city emptied by the violence of the police, to march against the arrogance of the powerful. We have continued to mobilize against war and neo-liberalism, often alone. Today this little flux of rebellion has been transformed into an immense permanent movement, which continues to reaffirm the simple concept forged at Porto Alegre: another world is possible.