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Italy

Reflections on the social situation

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The social framework of the relations between the classes and fractions within them in Italy today is characterized by deep contradictions. On the one hand there are significant mobilizations around demands and on the other there is an extreme difficulty in resisting the steamroller of an employers' and governmental offensive which challenges the popular conquests of wage earners won in the second half of the 20th century.

The movements are back

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/18fiom.jpg>]

In recent years we have seen a significant revival of big mass movements in Italy. Moreover in the midst of the rapid development of the movement against capitalist globalization, we have seen the extraordinary days in Genoa in July 2001. Then came the rise of the anti-war movement, which started at the time of the Afghanistan war and was confirmed at the European Social Forum in Florence (November 2002) and the international day against the war in February 15, 2003. Some hundreds of thousands of youth have come to the forefront of the scene and this indicates the resurgence of a new capacity to act and a repoliticization. All this in a political and social context still marked by the defeats of the 1990s and by the persistence of neoliberal policies which have been given a new impulsion, with marked reactionary traits, by the Berlusconi government which came to power following the elections of May 2001. In this context of revival of social struggles and sharper critiques of neoliberal policies (as well as the international financial bodies which inspire them), the traditional workers' movement, that is the organized movement of wage earners, has begun to express itself. Even in the 1990s large mobilizations took place in Italy. However those involved were above all public sector trades unionists. In the public sector, guarantees of employment were better than in the private and thus the relationship of forces was better and favoured a response.

The FIOM

In industry it was the FIOM [1] which involved itself in the new movement during the Genoa days. The leadership of the FIOM was increasingly concerned by the disintegratory effects of the politics of 'social dialogue' on the structure and strength of workers. This was seen in the challenge to contractual policies (since the late 1960s, national contracts have reflected the socio-political relationship of forces), by the obligation to define options at a time of deep restructurings in the main enterprises and the reduction of the workforce employed.

The FIOM leadership opposed the accentuated models of flexibility that the employers sought to impose on the trade union organizations. The other trade union forces, from the CISL [2] to the UIL [3] showed a disposition toward unlimited acceptance of subordination to the demands of capital. The Italian employers' organization, the Cofindustria, also challenged the policy of dialogue, but from the right, after having drawn all the benefits it could from dialogue. Two years ago, in the case of Zanussi (domestic goods company controlled by the Swedish group Electrolux), where the bosses demanded teams for the week-end, the FIOM took a different position from the two other federations FIM [4] and UILM [5] - the victory of the FIOM in the referendum on this reorganization indicated the tendencies which found a clearer expression in the recent period.

In the background, one found the process that had led the CISL and the UIL to sign the 'pact for Italy' - a pact that accentuated class collaboration through mechanisms, bodies, systems of dependence of a neo-corporatist kind. A

model where the strength of the union no longer depends on forms of agreement of the workers but directly on its relationship with the state structures and the employers' institutions.

The practice of separate agreements has reached its culminating point with those passed by the FIM and the UILM. These two federations signed an agreement where they accepted an employers' document - from the Feder Meccanica - meaning that the employers chose the trade union or unions with which they would sign a contract, independently of the real support they had among workers.

In the 1990s and even some time before, we faced agreements between the CGIL, [6] CISL and the UIL (for example, on pensions) which were heavily criticized and even fought by the workers. Today this kind of practice is being revived. The goal is clear - to marginalize the most representative trade union organizations (the CGIL and the FIOM).

Two years ago, the FIOM refused to sign the contractual renewal, which takes place every two years. It launched a referendum in which employees massively participated. This was one of the key moments of the struggles of recent years. The contract was rejected, but at the same time it remained in vigour to the extent where its application had been decided by other unions, in agreement with the Feder Meccanica. During the autumn the FIOM separated from the FIM and the UILM. The FIOM rests on a platform - validated by the vote of 400,000 metalworkers during the referendum on the contract - of breaking with the policy of dialogue and prioritizing the objective of significant wage increases and the struggle against casualization of labour.

The CGIL in movement

The attack by the Berlusconi government against article 18 [7] posed a big problem for the CGIL, at base fairly similar to that which was posed for the FIOM during the renewal of the metal industry's working agreements - the need to put limits to the acceptance of policies compatible with capitalist demands. The CGIL came under pressure linked to the changes of the social climate and a very broad willingness among employees to react to the degradation of working conditions. The success of the public sector strike in February 2002, organized by rank and file trade union organizations, was a supplementary alarm signal to alert the leadership of Sergio Cofferati of the pressure for the organization of direct action. That came out at the CGIL congress and the very significant demonstration of March 23, 2002, then the general strikes that followed.

The CGIL leadership has made some very general criticisms of the dominant neoliberal policies but it has not challenged the orientation to dialogue, which could have led to a broad discussion among its cadres and many union militants. It follows that it has not defined a coherent platform based on clear objectives of defence of workers. Thus the last general strike, while strongly supported, had no real platform, or rather a platform which placed at its centre opposition 'to industrial decline'. There can be few examples of strikes of such breadth with such vague objectives. Such an orientation indicates both the role played by this organization as a reference point for broad sectors of employees, but also its inability to project any kind of outcome to such a mobilization.

During the definition of the current contractual platforms, the federations of the CGIL - with the exception of the FIOM - have not put the accent on trade union democracy. They are in agreement with the other trade union federations on platforms which integrate into policies of dialogue. Thus they have contributed to the isolation of the FIOM and weakened the revival in the movement affirmed from 2002. There is no doubt that conditions are not identical to those of the metalworkers' sector in many other professional categories. Thus, if one takes the sector of distribution, there is a strong non-concentration of the work force, great flexibility and casualized conditions of work. Which makes it difficult to know on what priorities it is possible to initiate a counter attack. Finally in many case the cadres and local

leaders at the head of the workplace trade union structures have continued on their path and signed agreements in which they accept greater flexibility and deregulation of labour, leading them into situations which are very hard to backtrack from. This shows the degree of confusion, the internalization of defeat and the inertia that perpetuates the orientation of dialogue.

Complex causes

The origins of this situation are many. First, the defeats of the 1990s. Then the objective effects of the fragmentation of the workforce produced by economic dynamics and deregulation. Finally, an internalization of defeat among many trades unionists and the fact that after 10 years of dialogue, many militants in the workplaces have become prisoners of this practice while the young militants have no experience. Sometimes the members of the leaderships have had a more long-term perception of the significance of some confrontations than the militants involved in everyday work. An example was FIAT where it was first the national leadership of the Fiom (with the rank and file structure SIN COBAS) which adopted a position of radical rejection of the company's plan, in a perspective of national confrontation integrating all units of production. At the local level, the initial reactions led the FIM and UILM to sign separate and local agreements in the FIAT enterprises at Cassino and Mirafiori (Turin). This has been notably the case in the Fiom for the FIAT factory at Pomigliano where an agreement was signed which fits in the logic of the FIAT-General Motors hook-up - closure of the factories in the north and introduction in what remains in the south of the model of Melfi, [\[8\]](#) that is exploitation pushed to the extreme. The negative evolution of the struggle at FIAT has had an effect on struggles everywhere.

Also, there are the limits of the politicization of the movement against capitalist globalization. More exactly, the difficulty of an understanding among those who participate therein of the link between a general critique of the capitalist system as a whole, including the international financial bodies, and the concrete definition of the very real adversary employees confront every day. Which involves the creation and appropriation of bodies to fight it, demands to stimulate a specific struggle which allows the accumulation of forces and to strengthen in a relatively stable manner an overall political battle.

Finally, there is the problem that the movements which oppose the state's neoliberal offensive need a political outlet. The forces of the moderate or social democratic left can certainly not offer this. And the forces which stand for an alternative to the system have not yet accumulated sufficient capital to position themselves credibly on this terrain.

The field of political action

It is in the workplace and in the social movement that one can judge the action of a party. The situation here is not easy. If the cycle of struggles which has begun does not develop there will not be maintenance of the status quo. Demoralization can affect sectors of employees and open the road to a counter attack by moderate sectors of the CGIL linked to the leading group of the DS. In perspective, we see the process of recomposition and reorganization inside the trade union organizations, a process in which the PRC should be capable of intervening to favour the elements of unification of employees in view of the consolidation of a class trade union.

[1] The Federation of Employees and Workers in Metal (FIOM) is the main federation in this sector and a member of the biggest trade union confederation, the CGIL. It has 350,000 members out of 1.6 million metalworkers (in the broad sense, which includes cars and machine tools).

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[2] CISL, Italian Confederation of Workers' Trade Unions, the second biggest confederation. It has 3.7 million members, half of them retired and has adopted increasingly moderate positions. It has a neo-corporatist orientation based around employers-government-trade union agreements.

[3] UIL, Italian Union of Labour. It has 1.7 million members and has the same orientation as the CISL.

[4] The FIM is the federation of metalworkers in the CISL confederation.

[5] The UILM is the federation of metalworkers in the UIL confederation.

[6] CGIL: Italian General Confederation of Labour. It is the biggest confederation with 5.3 million members, of which only 50% are still active wage earners. It is led traditionally by the spokespersons of the former CP, now the Left Democrats (DS). Today, it is led by a regroupment of forces considered on the left of the DS, but very much in a minority in this party. Inside the CGIL there is a left tendency which includes about 20% of the members and is called "Change of orientation". Over the last two years, the Fiom leadership has appeared as a left wing of the CGIL.

[7] Article 18 of law 300 is the result of the big mobilizations of the hot autumn of 1969. This article states that, when an employee is dismissed without good reason, the judge who rules the decision illegal orders the reinstatement of the dismissed worker. The employers have many possibilities to dismiss workers, individually or collectively, by appealing to economic or restructuring reasons. Nonetheless article 18 partially prevents anti-trade union reprisals and total arbitrariness in the relations between employers and employee. Recently, a judge has ordered the reinstatement of work of a FIAT worker at Termoli, who had been dismissed for having unfurled a peace flag at his workplace. Article 18 only covers companies employing more than 15 workers. In summer 2002, the PRC, Greens, together with the Fiom and the rank and file unions, gathered 700,000 signatures for a referendum in favour of the extension of article 18 to all employees.

[8] Melfi is FIAT's most modern factory. It began production in 1993 in the Basilicata region of southern Italy. FIAT built this factory with significant state and regional subsidies. The trade unions accepted completely specific work conditions in the name of job creation - team-work over six days, extreme intensity of work, lower wages. The FIAT directors have recently introduced a mechanism that puts workers inside the factory itself in competition with each other.