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Italy

13 million strike against Berlusconi

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On April 16 2002 around 13 million Italians took part in a general strike in opposition to the social policies of the Berlusconi government. The strike was called by the three main Italian trade-union confederations (CGIL, CISL, UIL) and by all the alternative trade unions, in particular the network of Cobas (alternative trade unions). Hundreds of thousands of people, moreover, took part the same day in multiple regional and local demonstrations, organised by the CGIL, CISL and UIL and by the social forums and the movements against neo-liberal globalisation. The general strike, the first for twenty years, attracted record levels of support - around 90% of workers, according to the unions.

[<https://npa31.org/IMG/jpg/cgil1.jpg>]

The initiative, which had become increasingly urgent in a climate of social mobilization, was inevitable (despite the moderate leaderships of the big union confederations) after the decision of the Berlusconi government to continue its ultra-neo-liberal reform of the labour code and in particular to pursue the abolition of article 18 which lays down the right to be re-employed for any worker wrongfully laid off.

Once again, and in an even more significant manner, Italian society has shown its vitality and its capacity for mobilization, with this strike coming after an impressive series of demonstrations and movements throughout the past year: Genoa, opposition to the war, the mobilization of students against the educational reforms and anti-racist demonstrations.

All this has been accompanied by a resumption of strikes and labour struggles almost everywhere in the country. Thus the general strike and the more 'traditional' mobilization of the workers to defend their own rights can link up, almost spontaneously, with the 'movement of movements', organised in the Social Forum which had also participated in the big CGIL demonstration of March 23.

On April 16, alongside the workers and the trade unions, the global justice movement participated, with the idea of a 'generalization of the general strike', and a multiplicity of local initiatives, like the occupations of temporary job agencies, colleges or universities, and a very youthful and lively presence in the trade-union demonstrations. Now a new phase is opening, where the movement must take the initiative in social mobilization, given the uncertainties of the trade-union leaderships, which are once again disposed to reopen negotiations with the government rather than to pursue the social struggle.

In this context, the idea of a referendum for the extension of article 18, to companies of less than fifteen employees, has been floated by the metalworkers' federation of the CGIL, and taken up by the PRC at the institutional level.

At the political level, the need to build a common front of opposition to the right wing government remains obvious, according to the proposal advanced by the PRC, but without losing sight of the idea that any alternative must involve a break with neo-liberal policies and war. In this context of huge social effervescence, the perspective advanced by PRC leader Fausto Bertinotti on the eve of the general strike, of the construction of a European anti-capitalist left based in the social movements, becomes more credible - with the European Social Forum in Florence in November being central to this.