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Italy

Italian general strike on 16 December: difficult but indicating some valuable potential for mobilization

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On 16 December 2021, an eight hour general strike took place in Italy, called by the CGIL (Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro - Italian General Confederation of Labour) led by Maurizio Landini and the UIL (Unione Italiana del Lavoro - Italian Union of Labour) led by Pierpaolo Bombardieri - two of the three main trade union confederations - against the finance law that Mario Draghi's government is preparing to pass in parliament. [1]

It was a very difficult strike, with a very limited preparation time, being launched on 6 December, and on the eve of the Christmas holidays. The risks of major failure were many.

The five street demonstrations organized - in Rome for the central regions, in Milan for the north, in Bari for the southern regions, and in Palermo and Cagliari for Sicily and Sardinia respectively - were well attended, with a strong presence of factory workers: non-attendance at the workplace was strongest among metalworkers, those in transport and agri-food but lower in other sectors, including public administration.

Italian panorama

After two years of pandemic, with nearly 140,000 victims, a devastated health system, five million people in absolute poverty, millions of unemployed and precarious workers, hopes and illusions were great among certain social sectors that, with the budget law for 2022 and with the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) - already launched by the government - significant available resources (for the PNRR nearly 200 billion euros, for the finance law 33 billion euros) would be used for a vast plan of public investment and massive hiring of staff to guarantee the school system, health, transport, adequate social services and the famous ecological transition. In other words, that social "compensation" would be granted to the working and popular classes that have suffered so much and are still suffering from the socio-economic and pandemic crisis.

The reality of the choices of the ruling class and the government - which fully guarantees the interests of those who dominate under the Bonapartist leadership of Mario Draghi, with a composite and broad government majority, and with a purely cosmetic opposition from the far right of the FdI [Giorgia Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia] - has been quite different. [2] The bourgeoisie's objective is large scale processes of industrial restructuring and further precariousness, subordination and exploitation of functional labour power in order to ensure the revival of Italian and European capitalism. There is a great risk of a serious new defeat of the workers' and trade union movement and of a deep and dramatic social and political regression. In addition, the processes of closures of workplaces, relocation and mass redundancies are in full swing, involving hundreds of thousands of workers. They involve hundreds of factories, some of whom have engaged in extremely hard and prolonged struggles, including GKN [automotive components] in Florence and Whirlpool [household appliances] in Naples.

The PNRR drawn up by Draghi allocates more than one hundred billion euros of European money [Next Generation EU plan] to capitalist companies without any constraint on use, in addition to the 170 billion that have been transferred from the state to companies over the last 10 years and the 40 billion in total that the current budget law gives to bosses for the next three years. The government has also removed the freeze on evictions and dismissals. It had drafted a competition law that pushes for the privatization of public services. It has confirmed the shameful Monti-Fornero law on pensions. It has attacked the so-called "citizenship income" which, for better or worse, guaranteed the bare survival of millions of people, especially in the South. It continues the so-called "differentiated autonomy" which, in fact, divides the country by always favouring the richest regions at the expense of the poorest. It

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introduces a tax "reform" that reduces progressive taxation and promotes middle and high incomes, allocating a few crumbs to the lowest. It abolishes IRAP [Imposta regionale sulle attività produttive], the tax that finances health for small and medium-sized enterprises; this is seen as a first step to abolishing it also for big companies, according to the wishes of Confindustria, the Italian employers' organization. In addition, the government has been careful not to return the Euros37 billion withdrawn from the health system in 10 years and the Euros30 billion withdrawn from schools; while blocking of the renewal of the three-year contract (the last was for 2019-2021) for public sector employees. On the other hand, it increases military spending by 5.4% (26 billion per year).

The leaderships of the majority trade unions, which for many years were completely subordinated to the choices of the bourgeoisie, supported Mario Draghi's government from the beginning, in the vain hope that, given the resources available, the former head of the European Central Bank would respond to some of their limited demands. These can be summarized as follows: a partial reform of the pensions law; more resources for social safety nets that would provide some additional guarantees to those who lose their jobs; a tax reform that would meet the needs of employees who are alone in Europe in having seen their wages fall over the last thirty years (and what has the bureaucratic leadership done to prevent this?); an amendment to the laws on precariousness with a unified employment contract in all sectors of work; a comprehensive demand for more resources to be allocated to health and education.

Negotiations continued slowly for months without the CGIL, ICFTU and UIL getting anything, not least because all the main trade union leaders categorically ruled out any prospect of strike and struggle. In the end, they were reduced to demanding that at least the Euros8 billion still available in the finance bill be used to improve employees' wages through tax breaks. The government parties have responded with tax changes that go in the opposite direction: reducing tax rates and thus progressive taxation and granting improvements in favour of middle and high incomes, including those of the independent private sector. A few crumbs have been allocated to lower incomes. Even Draghi's promise to postpone tax cuts on the highest incomes for a year in order to allocate a few hundred million more to workers has been swept away by the majority of political forces supporting the government.

As a result, the union leaderships found themselves with their backs to the wall; not only have their demands in no way been met, but they have been denied any mediation and consultation role. The CISL, which has always been the confederation most closely linked to the various governments, has encountered no "difficulty" in accepting the government's measures. The leaderships of the CGIL and UIL, for their part, had to try to free themselves from the grip of the government and, therefore, they declared a general strike for 16 December.

The situation for the apparatuses of these two confederations had become too critical both for their credibility with their members and the working class in general, and for maintaining a minimum of room for manoeuvre vis-à-vis the government. Indeed, it is clear that the decision of Maurizio Landini and Pierpaolo Bombardieri to go on strike was provoked not so much by their awareness of the serious condition of the working classes and their deep malaise - a malaise that they have experienced for a long time and which was expressed in particular, during the autumn, by mobilizations in many factories to defend employment - but by a fact: their role as a consultative apparatus was questioned by the Draghi government and the parties that supported it. Increasingly, their relationship with part of their base was fraying.

During this period, these apparatuses wasted entire months where instead of subordinating themselves to Draghi, they could have built the most explicit and strong initiatives possible in the workplaces and, in the process, promoted a general struggle to wrest economic, social and essential rights for working people.

The declaration of a "general strike" thus came late, without adequate preparation and without the leaders of the CGIL and the UIL seriously indicating that they wanted to embark on a new path, with the risk that action which was poorly implemented without the necessary determination would further encourage the demoralization of sectors of

the working class.

But all these considerations did not prevent the most radical and conscious sectors of trade union activists - starting with the opposition current in the CGIL (Il sindacato è un'altra cosa. Opposizione CGIL) - fully engaging in building the strike, conceiving it as an initial stage of a broader social mobilization. The initiatives of the rank-and-file unions had been generous and even significant, but totally insufficient. And it was precisely the GKN collective in Florence that had demanded and indicated, over all these months, the need to build a general and generalized strike. [3]

Carrying through a general strike (even if some important sectors such as schools, health and part of the postal service were absent) was a difficult challenge not only for the two trade union confederations that had declared it, but also and above all for the working class as a whole, because a strike potentially has a significant impact on the political balance of power between the social classes in our country. Years and years of political and ideological social offensive, unopposed by the majority trade union organizations, have led to confusion and demoralization, with an impact on the political consciousness and unity of the working class, making the implementation of a general strike more difficult than ever.

The rank-and-file trade unions chose not to join, on the basis of their demands, the 16 December strike, contrary to what the GKN workers had asked them to do.

What emerged from the strike?

The first element, a positive one, is that there are still significant sectors of the working class ready to mobilize and take to the streets: the five demonstrations were big, more than 30,000 in Piazza del Popolo in Rome, not much less in Milan all'Arco della Pace, the one in Bari was more limited, as of course were those in the two islands. In Milan, but also in Rome, there was a strong working class composition (especially metalworkers), not only factories that are struggling to defend their jobs, but also many others that are on the contrary, especially in Lombardy, in full productive recovery. Moreover, this potential for mobilization had already been expressed in recent months in certain struggles such as those in logistics (with a strong presence of migrants), among the workers of Alitalia, then at GKN in Florence.

In the squares, it was possible to perceive the satisfaction of workers at having emerged from the demoralizing immobility, to finally participate in a broad mobilization, to go out to the workplaces, to get on the buses, to walk in the demonstration discussing and even joking with comrades, to be able to socialize their condition and their state of mind by joining other sectors of workers, by reconnecting with the historical features and combativeness that are expressed in these demonstrations, to affirm their opposition to the government and the bosses. It is worth noting the presence not only of retirees, but also of many students who, in some cities (Rome in particular), occupied schools, as well as young people.

But all this was not taken for granted. If only because the anti-strike offensive of the employers' forces was conducted with maximum firepower. In the form of a very violent unified reaction of all components, both economic (the employers' organization Confindustria and its partners) and political, including the Democratic Party (PD), and their media tools that covered the protagonists of the strike with insults and completely obscured the event. There has been a great unity of the bourgeois class against the working class, which has dared to speak out to express its own condition of exploitation and oppression.

And here we can detect a second positive element: the simple declaration of the strike has broken the ideological and political narrative of the presumed unity of intent of the whole country built around the figure of the infallible

Bonaparte, Mario Draghi, a vulgar mystification to hide his economic and social choices which are violently anti-popular. The strike highlighted the deception and injustice of the government actions, the dramatic condition of the workers and the desire to make known and assert their interests as well as their rights, breaking a framework of political debate in which there is only the nauseating and simulated confrontation between the different bourgeois political factions (all united against the workers) and putting back on the agenda the effective content of social confrontation.

The leaderships and apparatuses of the CGIL and the UIL have, in turn, won a small victory, the demonstration that they are alive and "essential" for the maintenance of the so-called social peace. They hope that this will push the government and the bosses to recognize again the place they occupy and their role and therefore, also, be ready to make some concessions to the workers. Hopes that may be disappointed because the intention of the bourgeoisie is all too clear. It wants a complete victory. Only very tough struggles can break this project.

The limits and difficulties of the strike

All this leads us to examine the shortcomings and difficulties of the strike of 16 December. It was not a strike capable of paralyzing the country as a general strike should. Not only because certain categories were exempted from the strike [because having done it before, some sectors did not have the right to renew it, according to the standards established between the "social partners" and the institutions], but also because the abstention from work, the cessation of production activities, transport and services were partial and unequal; certainly with very important peaks, but also with very low levels in the offices, in public administration, as had already happened during the school strike, a few days before (10 December).

The CGIL and UIL announced extremely high percentages among metalworkers as well as in transport, agro-industry and construction. However, some of these percentages appear questionable or partial. A much more precise examination will be necessary in order to check the strengths, but also the many weaknesses. This situation was quite inevitable: given the general conditions of the working classes, it would have taken a long preparation time and suitable behaviour from the trade unions during all these months to raise expectations and awareness. It would have taken at least a few weeks with workplace meetings and discussions, and a platform with less generic objectives, immediately identifiable for employees. It would also have required trade union apparatuses - which are now dormant in their conservative routines - capable of being sufficiently active in building a difficult strike. If we want to joke, we can say that some union leaders had to watch vintage videos of past struggles in order to find a language capable of arousing passions and being credible in a combat role.

The struggle must continue

In any case, a breach has been opened. There is potential that can be exploited, provided that 16 December is conceived as a stage of a prolonged, difficult and hard mobilization, capable of broadening consensus and gradually polarizing broader forces.

Speaking from their podium, Maurizio Landini and Pierpaolo Bombardieri were aware that the credibility of their remarks (no one could seriously hope that the strike could now change the content of the finance law about to be voted on in parliament) was linked to what they would do in the coming weeks. [\[4\]](#) So, they had to say that this day was only a first moment, that they intended to build a path of sustainable mobilization to assert certain points of their platform of demands.

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Continuing the struggle is certainly possible and above all necessary if we want to have the strength - as demanded by the currents of class trades unionism - to affirm a platform of struggle with a clear and strong content: repeal of the rules on pensions; imposition of radical changes in laws that penalize precarious work and relocations; reduction of working hours for equal wages; a real progressive tax reform that makes the bosses pay; defence and validation of the "citizenship income"; rejection of differentiated autonomy that will further divide the country and the workers; adequate measures to combat global warming and preserve the environment and finally a comprehensive plan to revive schools and public health.

It is possible to move forward if we offer organizational tools of participation and political and trade union leadership to those "vanguard" sectors that have taken to the streets in a somewhat confused way, but which are fundamental to organizing and leading workers' meetings, as well as rebuilding a broad and unitary fabric of participation and will to struggle. Much will certainly depend on what the leadership of the CGIL (about which we have few illusions) will or will not do. And what will move internally, the spaces that the left opposition in the CGIL will be able to conquer, the weight that will be given to the most combative delegates and cadres who support a coherent class position.

The rank and file trade unions also have a role to play. They need to stimulate unitary action not only among themselves, but also with regard to all workers and, in particular, to those who found a point of reference in the strike of 16 December; without neglecting the sectors that hope more or less illusorily that Landini will show the necessary determination to face the bosses to the end. On the contrary, we know how much more tactical and contingent the action of the CGIL is than it should be. But the window that has opened means that we must know how to act in a contradictory context to move forward in the construction of a class trades unionism.

The forces of the radical left that supported and actively participated in the strike also have a key role to play in contributing fully to a process of consolidation and development of the resistance of the working classes against the government and the bosses.

19 December 2021

PS:

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[1] The last general strike was on 12 December 2014 against the so-called "Jobs Act" of the then Prime Minister Matteo Renzi of the PD, a law of increased precariousness of work that abolished once and for all the protection against dismissals contained in the historic Workers' Statute of 1970. In this case too, only the CGIL and the UIL had called for the strike, from which the third major union, the CISL, abstained.

[2] The parties that support the broad government coalition are Giuseppe Conte's Movimento 5Stelle, Matteo Salvini's Lega, Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia, Enrico Letta's Partito Democratico, Matteo Renzi's Italia Viva and finally Articolo Uno, the small moderate left party resulting from a split from the PD. The only opposition party (a "her majesty's opposition," entirely formal and insubstantial) is the Fratelli d'Italia party of Giorgia Meloni, which originated from the old Movimento sociale (MSI), heir to fascism. At this point, there is strong competition between Salvini and Meloni for hegemony in the coalition of "hard" right forces.

[3] The rank-and-file unions had organized a general strike on 11 October, a strike which received a fairly significant response in some sectors and also with bigger street demonstrations than in the past but was necessarily a minority movement given the forces involved and the very difficult social context.

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[4] The two secretaries concluded the demonstrations with two live speeches that were broadcast simultaneously to the five squares.