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Pandemic in Italy

The meeting between Conte, Confindustria and the trades unions is a sick joke

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We are not meat for slaughter! This is the hashtag the workers of many workplaces from the north to the south of Italy have used in response to the restrictive measures adopted by the Conte government to stop the spread of the Covid19 epidemic - which has already infected 13,000 people. [1]

Workers have gone on strike in Electrolux in Susegana, at Pasotti in Brescia, at GKN in Campi Bizenzo, at Piaggio in Pontedera, in Avio at Pomigliano d'Arco, at Fincantieri in Palermo and there have been protests in the Dalmine and Same plants in the Bergamo area which have had to close after workers' action in a zone that has been particularly affected by the crisis. They have protested against the government's decision to not include workplaces of non-essential products within their measures to contain the epidemic (the food and pharmaceutical sectors obviously need to continue uninterrupted).

So according to the bosses the production of cars, washing machines and... arms (!) can continue as normal while millions of workers have to get to their places of work in crowded public transport and when there they are not able to respect the social distancing prescribed by the health authorities as a necessary means to contain the outbreak. At the same time factories and offices are often not set up to guarantee the minimum health and safety conditions required.

It was not more or less appropriate demands on paper nor the 'goodwill' of the bosses that pushed the Conte government this morning to convene an urgent videoconference between representatives of Confindustria and the trade unions to discuss making the workplaces 'safe'. Neither was it the action of the trade union confederation leaderships, who up to yesterday, limited themselves to making 'recommendations' to the bosses and the government to sanitise the workplaces and distribute protective equipment to the workers. It was the spontaneous strikes, the struggle and the self-organisation of working people which forced the Prime minister to call this meeting.

It was only today that Maurizio Landini, CGIL general secretary of the biggest Italian union, was pushed to say that the health of working people is more important than profits (quite a radical slogan and rather unusual from the mouth of CGIL leader). But he said it when the workers' spontaneous struggle had placed the health of workers directly on the political agenda.

At the time of writing Prime Minister Conte, at the end of this morning's press conference, stated that healthy conditions will be guaranteed for workers with the distribution of 'free protective kits'. It is a pity though that the sanitising of the workplaces and the provision of masks and gel is insufficient and are being delayed. Especially in the heart of the epidemic - Lombardy, Emilia-Romagna and Venice - non-essential production has been temporarily halted. In any case even this minimum gain is a consequence of the workers struggle.

However the main workers' demand to cease non-essential production was not really taken on board. The trade union confederations, including the FIOM-CGIL (metalworkers union), had more or less accepted the government/bosses framework, stating that in workplaces that met the requirements agreed work would continue whereas in others where this was not the case, there would be strike action. The trade union bureaucracy is reluctant to unleash any sort of real conflict. Maybe the protocol will be verified in all the big trade union organised workplaces (and even this is not completely certain) but what about the smaller places (where the majority of people work in Italy) where there is only a low level of trade unionisation or no trade union at all. Not to speak of workers in subcontracted teams.

Therefore the government has shown that it does not really care about the health of working people who actually

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drive the national economy but rather cares more for the balance sheet of the Confindustria bosses than the well-being of the millions of workers. Furthermore, in the dramatic situation where the mortality rates are so high in Italy - second only to China - (a fifth of the world's total) with the virus hitting the most industrialised area of the country and while there is still an unknown number of asymptomatic carriers, this refusal to halt production could be considered criminal.

The bosses do not want to interrupt non-essential production because it would mean them losing market share to their European competitors and their global business position which they might not be able to recover. Such a position does not understand that mass contagion of working people will hit their own interests since then they will find it difficult to maintain much production at all. At the same time this irresponsible attitude will put tremendous pressure on the health system that has been squeezed by decades of cuts in resources and staffing. This is evidence of the madness and irrationality of the capitalist system which in order to survive has to push our whole society in chaos and barbarism.

'Shutdown all unnecessary production' is the slogan of the day because workers are not meat for the slaughter in the name of profit.

#Lenostrevitevalgonopiudeiloroprofitti

13 March 2020

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[1] Conte is the Italian prime minister and Confindustria the bosses' organization.