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Pandemic in Italy

Covid-19 opens up a new political period in Italy

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Nine hundred and nineteen people died in Italy on Friday 27 March from Covid-19, the highest number of deaths anywhere in the world on a single day. Antonello Zecca is an organizer with the Sinistra Anticapitalista (Anticapitalist Left) in Italy. He has written extensively on Italian politics, social and labor movements, and the Left, many of his articles, including his most recent on the Covid-19 crisis, can be found at *International Viewpoint*. Here, Zecca replies to questions from *No Borders News*.

No Borders News: Briefly describe the state of the pandemic in your country or city. How many people are infected? How many have died? What do experts expect in the coming weeks in terms of how fast the contagion will spread.

Antonello Zecca: Italy has been hit severely by the new Coronavirus. The virus has been spreading all over the country with the number of overall cases reaching 53,578 on March 21. And these numbers are set to grow. The worst affected area is Lombard (the nation's most industrialized region) with 25,515 reported cases, followed by Emilia-Romagna (6,705), Veneto (4,617) and Piedmont (3,752). All these areas are located in North Italy. Although reported cases are at a much lower figures in the other parts of the country, no one should underestimate the impact Covid-19 is having, and will keep having in the coming weeks, including in those areas that are currently spared a mass contagion. Experts differ about how fast the contagion will spread in the coming weeks. As a matter of fact, no one can predict how long will it last and when peak will be reached, as defined by two or three consecutive days of decreasing infection rates. To date, however, there are 4,825 dead, with some 50% of those in Lombardy.

NBN: What practical measures has your national government taken to respond to the crisis? Have they acted responsibly or were they unprepared? Briefly describe measures your government is taking now to contain the virus and treat people infected with Covid-19. Is there a state of emergency, are schools closed, etc.?

AZ: The Italian government did not respond as swiftly and as effectively as it should have to this health crisis. It closed airports to all flights coming from China after the outbreak, but it did not do the same for connecting flights. Instead, it should have stayed open to flights coming from China but instituted checks for all passengers for any signs of the infection to then put them on precautionary quarantine. When the first case was officially reported in Italy, the government did nothing responsible to stop people from panicking. And a few days later, the national government joined together with local councils and politicians from all over the political spectrum sponsored ads claiming that Lombardy, "Italy's economic capital and most important financial center" was "running normally," thereby contributing to people underestimating the threat. After the surge in cases, the government took harsh measures by putting Lombardy, Veneto, and Emilia-Romagna on lockdown and, finally, on March 9, declared the whole country on lockdown. Among the main measures the government has taken thus far are to prohibit public gatherings, close schools and colleges, order pubs and bars to close at 6 pm, shut down big shopping malls, severely restrict the number of people allowed at supermarkets at any one time, and promote social distancing. The Ministry of Health has even taken harsher measures such as imposing severe restrictions of outdoor physical exercise, even individuals exercising by themselves, and the closing bars and restaurants located at airports and train stations. And yesterday the government took the much-anticipated decision to shut down all non-essential economic sectors.

NBN: How has your health care system responded to the crisis? What are your health care system's greatest weaknesses? What are its greatest strengths?

AZ: Our health care system was ravaged by a decade of funding and provision cuts, leaving it a shadow of its former

self. 37 billion euros were cut and more than 70,000 beds vanished into thin air. ICU beds amount today to just 5,090, while the Ministry of Health states 2,500 more ICU beds are needed to tackle the crisis. The beds to population ratio is currently 3.6/1000, down from 5.8/1000 in 1998. The number of available healthcare professionals was not even sufficient to respond to the needs of an ageing population in ordinary times and has buckled under the stress of the Covid19 outbreak. Last but not least here, as neoliberal cuts were being implemented, the system was increasingly fragmented into regional management, breaking up state management and hampering national funding system. This resulted in economically stronger areas getting more resources while weaker areas fell behind. Worse, in recent years, public financial support has flowed into a growing private health care system. Thus, the Italian healthcare system was not well equipped to respond to the crisis when it hit. Even after all this, the Italian health system's greatest strength lies in still being a single-payer system as well as its dedicated and terrific professionals who, despite being constantly neglected by successive governments, have demonstrated the greatest humanity, discipline, and sense of self-sacrifice for the common good.

NBN: Describe the official political response to Covid-19 in your country from the far-right and conservative parties, to liberal and social democrat parties, and the parties of the left if applicable.

AZ: The crisis led to some initial confusion in the political mainstream. It hit like a tsunami and put this mainstream to test. The current Italian government is an alliance between the center-left Democratic Party and the center-right populist Five Star Movement, which has been handling the emergency since it started. The governing parties' response has centered around appealing to people's sense of responsibility. They were later compelled to take harsher and harsher measure to try and stop the spread of the disease, but they always stopped short of enforcing these as they relied on people upholding them on their own, which has mainly happened so far. These measures were undoubtedly necessary to stop the epidemic to reach catastrophic proportions.

However, a criminal flaw in government's strategy was giving in to pressure from Confindustria (Italy's Chamber of Commerce) that all factories and plants should be kept running, even non-essential ones, like food production, distribution and sales, and pharmaceuticals not directly involved in meeting emergency needs. Especially in the worst hit areas, which are also the most industrialized, this amounts to committing mass murder since as many as 300,000 workers commute every day to workplaces and back, helping to spread the infection among the population while infecting their own families as well.

Right, conservative, and far-right parties, while in the first place trying to reassure the general public that everything was going well, too, recently adopted a much more aggressive stance and started demanding that all non-essential factories and plants be shut down until the crisis was over. They understand how they can take advantage of the situation by promoting a demand in tune with the sentiment of millions, thereby placing themselves as the frontrunners in next political period. However, they have also promised the bosses' association that they will put forward an aggressive pro-employer agenda for lower taxes, including something akin to a flat tax system. As of today, the government finally decided to shutdown non-essential factories and plants in consultation with the bosses' association and trade unions' representatives, but until the decree is published, there will still certainly be a struggle about which sectors are to be considered essential and which are not.

NBN: How have trade unions responded to the crisis? Especially public sector, education, and health care unions?

AZ: They have generally not lived up to the expectations that they would do anything to defend and protect workers' lives, health, working conditions, and wages. They did not demand that non-essential factories and plants, especially in the worst hit areas, should be closed until the crisis was over and only started to react as workers in many plants from the North to the South of the country started to go on strike spontaneously for their own health and safety. Next, the big trade unions (not the grassroots ones, which were never invited to any table and have kept up the struggle

from the very onset of the crisis) sat around a table with the bosses' association and the government and signed an agreement intended to ensure safe working conditions for all workers.

However, it is important to understand that Italian industrial is mainly comprised of small-sized companies (95%), which have weak unions, if they have unions at all, and whose working conditions are under the absolute control of the bosses. Besides, even in the biggest factories and plants, it is not only objectively impossible to abide by the safety measures mandated in the national agreement (for instance, maintaining at least one meter's distancing) but workers are often not even provided with any protective masks whatsoever, or have to wear the same one for days on end. What's worst, the unions went as far as to accept a one-time bonus of (gross) 100 euros to be handed out to all workers who showed up at work! Now they are trying to make up for participating in this crime by asking the government to shut it all down, which has finally happened, but only after the damage was done and workers' anger had been boiling over for days on end.

NBN: How have social movements (student, feminist, ecological, immigrant, indigenous, etc.) responded to the crisis?

AZ: Since we are on lockdown, no mass gatherings are allowed and no meetings are possible, but locally on-line meetings are being organized to try and respond to the crisis the best they can. The main goal now is to help the most disadvantaged, disabled, and destitute with their daily needs (shopping above all). So, the movements, each according to their actual capabilities in a time of great distress, will try to organize the provision some social services to these people. Many are also trying to use social media for the purpose of disseminating an alternative narrative framework, launching online campaigns, etc.

NBN: Are there any efforts to make demands for social justice, national health care, emergency economic measures for unemployment pay, stopping rent and debt payments, etc.?

AZ: In this regard, there are efforts being made by the Left, though these are still too fragmented and, are as of now, incapable of playing a substantive political role. Unfortunately, the Left is not yet able to take advantage of the fissures this tragedy has opened up to put forward demands that not only to tackle the emergency but, going forward, put the itself in a better position to fight back against the capitalists, who will certainly try to make the working class shoulder the burden of the post-Covid19 crisis, in the context of a recession that will hit the global economy hard in general, and hit even harder in a country like Italy.

In any event, the main demands from the broader Left are: adequate income guarantees for all workers who are out of work due to the emergency; income tax on the wealthy; full and complete socialization of public healthcare system; private health care system to fund itself entirely on its own without any contributions from the state; requisition without indemnity of private healthcare infrastructures to help tackle the emergency. The government has taken some measures that were likewise demanded by the Left and social movements such as suspending rent payments, a subsidy for the self-employed, and a two-month prohibition of layoffs in sectors closed by the Covid19 epidemic. However, the Left and social movements have also called for a generalization of these measures, whose scope still does not cover hundreds of thousands of people, especially those in the informal sector which is especially large in the South of the country.

NBN: Any final comments about the impact of the Covid-19 crisis and how you think it will impact national politics in the coming weeks and months?

AZ: Without exaggeration, one can say that this changes everything. Nothing will be as it used to be before the outbreak. Many people will crave to return to the old normal. However, the economic recession, whose scope will

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only be exacerbated by the Covid-19 outbreak and will continue after the health emergency has subsided, will prove that longing to be an impossibility. In all likelihood, the gap between the desire of millions of people to return to their previous lives and the objective circumstances preventing that from happening, will open a new political space, especially since the ruling class will try to impose even harsher sacrifices on working-class and common people alike. Unemployment will surge, austerity may be back on the saddle again, and the national debt as a percentage of the GDP will soar because of public emergency expenditures will be financed by new debts instead of taxing the rich, the corporations, and the biggest companies. And when all is said and done, the governing parties will demand that these debts be paid by the working people.

What's more, the crisis of the EU project will loom large over all this.

National politics is being badly shaken as this new political space unfolds, and there is more to come. Governing coalitions will be made and re-made, establishment parties will have to grapple with a radically different political landscape, and new political actors will emerge, for instance, centrist Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte's popularity appears to be on the rise given the general perception of his handling of the crisis. At the moment, the center-left Democratic Party, the major partner in the governing coalition, appears to have been somewhat strengthened by this ordeal while, on the other side of the mainstream political spectrum, far-right leader Matteo Salvini's League party will probably come out rather weakened. However, the League continues hovering dangerously around 27% in national polls, while the other party of the Right – the far-rightist Fratelli d'Italia (Italy's Brothers) – keeps going up in the polls (now at about 15%) because a more-or-less wide layer of the petit bourgeoisie (along with some segment of the popular classes) perceives it to be defending the "common people" against finance and big business.

For the Left, the Covid-19 disaster opens up an altogether new period. The recession will usher in big risks, but it will also bring about proportionally big opportunities. We are at a crossroads. If we eventually manage to match objective conditions – under which "the people can no longer live in the old way and the ruling class can no longer rule in the old way" – with our subjective ability to unite, organize, and put forward political and social demands that resonate with the masses' deepest feelings, and if we are capable of thinking and acting strategically, we will be able to make the most of a time fraught with grave dangers, but equally ripe for enormous change.

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Source: [No Borders News](#).

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