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Italy

Resistance on the rise in Italy but political crisis on the left remains.

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This interview with Franco Turigliatto, ex-senator for Rifondazione and currently a leader of Sinistra Anti-Capitalista was conducted by Alain Krivine and originally appeared on the site of the French NPA.

How important was the general strike called by the CGIL and UIL trade unions on 12th December?

After years of total passivity from the big trade unions faced with the austerity policies of the last three pro-boss governments (Berlusconi, Monti and Letta) they finally called a general strike against the policies of the current Renzi (PD – Democratic Party) government. He is in alliance with the so-called New Centre Right of Alfano and a centrist party. In reality he also benefits from the decisive support of Berlusconi's Forza Italia (Go Italy) party even if it is not formally part of the government. Despite the demagogic propaganda of Renzi it is a government of the bosses aligned on the policies of the European troika. The strike was called by the biggest union, the CGIL, and the UIL, both of whose leaders are card-carrying members of the PD. It was a clear success with massive demonstrations in 54 towns (40,000 in Milan and Turin and 20,000 in Rome and Naples). The other big trade union, the CISL is very pro-government and did not join in the strike. The strike took place after two months of mobilisations. It began with the struggle around defending jobs, particularly in the engineering industry. Then there was the big national demonstration in Rome on the 25th of October with hundreds of thousands taking part. Finally there was the strike in the northern region led by the FIOM on the 14th November with a very strong anti-government demonstration in Milan. A 'social strike' took place on the same day called by the rank and file trade unions, the social movements, precarious workers and students. Demos were held in many towns. What forced the CGIL and UIL to call the strike is this context of struggle and confrontation with a government that is directly attacking the rights of workers and indeed the existence of the trade union apparatuses.

How are the government and the bosses attacking workers wages and conditions?

At the heart of the attacks is a new labour law called the Jobs Act which completely destroys the rights of workers in the workplaces. These rights had been enshrined in the 1970 Labour code, a conquest of the great post 1969 wave of struggles in Italy. The new law gives the bosses a free rein to hire and fire at will and to bully workers, to reclassify their status in order to exploit them more. At the same time there is the new budget which has two aspects: a big giveaway to the bosses with a sharp reduction in taxes on companies and new cuts in social spending by the state, regions and local councils. Furthermore there is a process of privatisation of state schools underway and finally there is a new decree law 'Unblock Italy' which unleashes property speculation and environmental destruction.

What are the consequences of the general strike on politics and the recomposition of the workers movement?

The fundamental question is whether this movement will continue after the 12th and really challenge the government's policies. After years of passivity something has changed but the path to the recomposition of the organised workers movement into a combative force is still very difficult. So we are still a long way from rebuilding a unity between the different movements and between the generations. This process is even more necessary, not just to stand up to the action of the capitalists who want a defeated and fragmented society but also to push back the increasingly threatening presence of the Lega Nord (the Northern League) of Salvini, who has made a nationalist turn and is now in full agreement with the French Front National and is linking up with the far right. Given the social degradation today it hopes to develop a racist, reactionary and anti-democratic project.

What has been the role of the political parties, the trade unions and the social movements?

The official mainstream parties of both right and left, which have governed together over the last few years, are all managers of austerity. The left forces are weak and divided even if there are attempts to unify and recompose the left around the Tsipras slate which at the European elections had won 4% of the vote. At the moment this project looks difficult partly because the main force, Vendola's SEL (Left, Ecology and Liberty), still looks for unity with the PD. What is left of Rifondazione is still very weak and suffers from internal divisions. Furthermore a big part of this left is still very dependent on, or tied in to, the CGIL or the left wing of the Fiom leadership.

The bureaucratic leadership of the CGIL is largely responsible for having acquiesced to neo-liberal economic policies for years. Today it has been obliged to take the initiative but it is difficult to envisage it building an overall movement capable of responding to the present bosses' offensive. It can also be seen in the way its main objective is to ensure it has a seat at the negotiating table, to play a mediating role with the government while safeguarding its apparatus and credibility among working people by reaching compromises that could limit the extent of the damage to workers' interests. This approach is also evident in the platform of demands it put forward on the 12th of December which was very general and did not call for the clear withdrawal of all the government proposals. Our organisation, Sinistra Anti-capitalista is doing all it can to raise the question of continuing the struggle on a clear radical basis and bringing together the workers movement and the social movements.

Are there any class struggle currents being organised in the trade unions or anywhere else?

A small but significant left activist current called 'A trade union is something else' emerged at the last CGIL congress. It is present in all CGIL industrial sectors but particularly strong among engineering or metal workers. On the other hand there are the various rank and file trade unions which can organise actions and mobilisations which are politically important but have a limited impact. There have been attempts to set up unitary initiatives between these different forces, for example on the 14th November but there is still a predominantly sectarian attitude so these rank and file unions made a big mistake in not supporting the 12th December strike. They cut themselves off from the broad mass of working people on this crucial day. It is difficult to challenge the positions of the majority trade union apparatuses with this type of approach.

What has happened with Beppe Grillo and his movement?

The Five Star movement (M5S) is the main parliamentary opposition. It leads significant democratic battles within the institutions, including against the Jobs Act. Today it is having problems even it still retains significant electoral support. In addition to the corporate type of political leadership organised by its two chief executives, the M5S is a movement that does not really intervene in the trade union or social struggles. It just does not relate to that reality. Many of its voters join in the social movements and were certainly in the demonstrations of the 12th but the party/movement as such, because of its political and class character (not right or left) and its strategy, is not capable of being an active protagonist in building a social mobilisation or movements in the working class. Rebuilding the workers movement is clearly not its problem. On the contrary its electoral success comes from a combination of people's rage and passivity. Rebuilding the workers and social movements is more than ever the task of the class struggle left.

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