

## Report from Rome by Galliano Maria Speri

### Eleven million poor in Italy

*Some sociologists have the gall to flaunt the fact that the so-called consumption boom is just reviving the feudal oligarchy!*

Two years ago, then-Prime Minister Bettino Craxi set up a commission on poverty, headed by Prof. Giovanni Sarpellon, who produced an initial report showing that about 19% of Italians, roughly 11 million people, live in indigence. Naturally, given the pervasive optimistic rhetoric, such figures were not to be paraded before public opinion. Hence, after its first report, Professor Sarpellon's commission did not receive the minimal funds to keep operating, and will probably soon be dissolved.

But poverty certainly did not disappear in the meantime. The Censis research institute, inspired by the sociologist Giuseppe De Rita, has conducted studies on the basis of which it states, although without quantification, that some one-third of Italians live in poverty—a lot more than 11 million.

The most recent figures, which have been kept tightly under wraps, are those put together by a commission on wages chaired by former labor leader Pierre Carniti, and set up by Ermanno Gorrieri, when he was labor minister under the recent Fanfani government.

Between "leaks" from the commission's soon-to-be-published report, and statements by ex-Minister Gorrieri, a more defined picture starts to emerge. Gorrieri says that the poor person is one who has \$310 a month at his disposal, or \$517 for a couple. This category would also include a family of four, which is still very common in Italy, earning \$843 a month.

In Italy, several million workers have an annual income of \$13-15,000, which after various deductions, ends up being only slightly more than \$833 per month.

Given that this is not a very pretty statistic, it is preferred to bandy about the figure of the over \$1 million which spendthrift Italians burned up during the Christmas holidays, to vaunt an opulence which undoubtedly exists, but can not be generalized to the entire population. A department store clerk earns \$750 per month, while a hospital orderly does not even make \$833. If the orderly has three children, his wife must work to support them, and if she cannot, that family will go hungry.

With such low wages, no couple can support more than a few children. The present average is 1.3 children per family, marking a tendency toward the shrinking of the society and a rise in the average age.

As for the elderly, the minimum Inps payment (the Italian equivalent of Social Security) at the end of 1986, it was \$329 per month, and the average was \$575. Some 4 million people are in this category, and therefore fall below the poverty line. In the big cities, where the weakened urban fabric has destroyed the solidarity structure of rural villages, things are much worse, because those expelled from the labor market who do not find a new job, are swelling the ranks of the hoboes who sleep in the train stations covered with rugs.

Besides actual misery, there is another level of poverty which the statis-

tics do not even consider: the poverty of the worker or grade-school teacher with four children to support who can still buy a winter coat for the children at the used-clothing stands, and cook a roast on Sunday, but has no money to buy a book or attend a concert.

There also is a poverty we could call "social," exemplified by the collapse of services and infrastructure. The same money buys a lower and lower quality of public service. This has led the more well-to-do layers to use private chauffeurs, private clinics, and couriers. Those who cannot afford these extra expenses have to put up with being squashed in overcrowded buses or hospitalized in public institutions that may take out your appendix but leave the patient with a "present" of viral hepatitis.

Institutes like the Censis admit that one-third of Italians are poor, but also speak of an unprecedented boom in private consumption. To justify this, sociologist Giuseppe De Rita coined the term "composite family income," which include "the first job of the head of the household, his second job, the son's part-time job, the wife's job, the grandfather's pension, etc." In other words, the worker who earns \$833 a month and must support four kids is not poor, according to De Rita, but must simply learn to make do—maybe by sending grandpa out to hawk contraband cigarettes.

The only truth in Censis's analysis is its admission that these trends are creating a financial and political "oligarchy." Journalist Giuseppe Turani, writing on the Censis study in Count Caracciolo's *Espresso* weekly, finds it most advantageous that "in a certain respect, the oligarchy brings about well defined responsibilities. . . . The oligarchy always has the problem of having to admit new members and hence to concede to these a certain protection to carry out their activities."