
Italy

General Strike: Prelude To Reality, or Farce?

by Claudio Celani

On April 16, a highly successful general strike paralyzed Italy, as 13 million workers participated in demonstrations in major Italian cities. Strike participation, according to trade unions, was as high as 95% in industrial factories. Factory owners claimed the figure was closer to 60%, which is still higher than voter participation in most industrial nations.

The strike had been preceded by a nation-wide demonstration on April 23, which drew more than 1 million workers into the streets of Rome. It was an impressive show of force, the largest labor demonstration in Italy's postwar history. The strike and the demonstration were called to protest the government labor reform plans, which include a proposal to loosen legal protection against layoffs. Similar to Germany, Italy has a provision, called Chapter 18, which forces entrepreneurs to re-hire workers dismissed for "unjustified reasons." The government insists that such a provision, which applies to firms with more than 13 employees, is an obstacle to job creation, because it hampers smaller firms that want to expand. Labor organizations, on the other hand, see in the government action a plan for labor recycling, i.e., of dismissing older workers in favor of younger, lower-paid workers.

Although the trade union argument is correct, observers have correctly pointed to the political character of the protest. In the last decade, the trade unions have accepted several reforms enacted by center-left governments, which have deregulated the labor market. On the other side, many government supporters recognize that Chapter 18 is a totally secondary issue. But both sides, the government and the trade unions, have chosen the Chapter 18 issue to stage a confrontation, which apparently is intended to end with a fatal defeat of one of the two contenders.

The main protagonists of this confrontation are trade union leader Sergio Cofferati and Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. Cofferati is Secretary General of the largest trade union, the CGIL. Together with the CISL and the UIL, the CGIL forms the so-called "united labor movement." Whereas all trade unions oppose the government reform plans, it was Cofferati who imposed a confrontationist line on his allies; originally, they wanted to sit at the negotiation table.

Knowing that he would rally popular support, Cofferati

has in reality pursued the design of changing power relationships inside the opposition. Since 1992, with the short exception of the Massimo D'Alema government, the center-left coalition has been dominated by a faction of technocrats, who have forced the traditional labor movement to accept austerity policies under the pretext of party discipline. This policy resulted in the 2001 electoral defeat of, and the demoralization and endless divisions in, the center-left coalition. One component of this, is the fact that mass protest risks being taken over by radical, anarchistic fringes, such as the ones that protested in Genoa at the Group of Eight summit in July 2001. With the labor mobilization against Silvio Berlusconi's government, Cofferati has now turned the tables, and is in the pole position to become the next candidate of the opposition when he retires, in a few months.

The Thatcher Poison

On the other side, the government decision to make Chapter 18 a point of confrontation is motivated by Berlusconi's insane admiration for former British Prime Minister Lady Margaret Thatcher. This element of right-wing populism cohabits with healthier impulses of Berlusconi's character, as shown by his foreign policy and other aspects of his economic policy, including his thrust for infrastructure development and industrial investment. Somebody has suggested to Berlusconi that the trade unions are his enemy, and that he should crush them, as Thatcher crushed the trade union movement in Britain. This is insane, not only because Thatcher destroyed Britain's industry, but because Italy is not Great Britain. Nevertheless, Berlusconi has acted publicly as if he intends to steer that course, and a decisive step in this direction was a demonstrative meeting with British Prime Minister Tony Blair on Feb. 15, in which the two former enemies signed a common "manifesto" for labor deregulation reforms.

This theatrical government-labor confrontation ignores the real problems to be addressed, such as the European Union's insane budget policy, as U.S. Presidential pre-candidate Lyndon LaRouche stressed during his visit to Milan last March (see *EIR*, April 5 and 12, 2002). Within the so-called "Maastricht parameters," an economic development policy is impossible, and social conflicts are inevitable. The decade-long austerity policy dictated by the Maastricht Treaty is the real cause behind the workers' protest mobilized by the trade unions, and at the same time the real obstacle to the job creation targets claimed by the government. A confrontation policy opens up a prospect of conflicts, which forces hostile to Italy are ready to manipulate, as the assassination of government adviser Marco Biagi, on the eve of the March 23 demonstration, shows (see last week's issue).

Biagi was a key figure in the government-labor negotiations, and one of the authors of the government labor reform plans. However, he was not a supporter of the confrontation line, and was suggesting that an agreement be found with the



Strikers in Turin. Labor unions and the government are being distracted from the real issue: the Maastricht criteria, which are preventing an economic recovery.

unions on Chapter 18. Biagi was killed on March 19, by so-called “Red Brigades” terrorists. The Red Brigades were believed to be extinct in 1989, after the Italian government succeeded in dismantling their terrorist operations throughout the country. However, they resurfaced in 1999, and killed government official Massimo D’Antona. D’Antona, like Biagi, was a labor expert. He was assassinated at a strategic moment, when the Italian government was opposing a land invasion of Kosovo, pushed by Blair. After the D’Antona assassination, all anti-war demonstrations stopped. Similarly, Biagi was killed at a moment when Italy is playing a key role in organizing against the so-called “Clash of Civilizations” scenario, which includes a war in Palestine and a U.S. attack against Iraq.

As LaRouche has repeatedly stated, there is no independent terrorist capability in the world. All terrorist groups are either an expression of a state power, or a force equivalent to a state. In the case of the Red Brigades, it has been documented that they have been an instrument of British, U.S., French, and Israeli intelligence circles. By choosing Biagi as a target, the terrorists have acted according to a well-known script from the “strategy of tension” years. In the 1970s, in a period of social unrest and labor strikes, terrorism was used to make Italy ungovernable by playing into staged left-right polarizations. Italy was made ungovernable for reasons of foreign policy, but the left-right scenario provided the cover for the destabilization. Similarly, Biagi was not killed because of the

labor policy issue, but because of Italy’s role in the current strategic situation.

However, the social conflict offers the pretext: Pushed by “public opinion” (the media), the conservatives accuse the left of creating the breeding ground for terrorism with their radicalism, and the left accuses the conservatives of using terrorism as a strategy to discredit and destroy the labor movement. Theater prevails more and more in place of reality, and actors become prisoners of their own ideology, like on the stage of a Classical tragedy, and thus bring doom upon their nation.

Thus, Berlusconi and his rival Cofferati are playing with fire. They might become prisoners of the ideological roles they have chosen to play, unless they decide to stop acting like foolish actors on a stage and address real issues. They have a golden opportunity, offered to them by the LaRouche movement. In both houses of Parliament, a resolution is being circulated, which calls on the government to organize a New Bretton Woods conference for a reform of the international financial and monetary system, as the only way to initiate a real economic recovery. The resolution has been signed by dozens of representatives of all political parties, and could be enacted into law, if it reaches a majority. The government should drop its labor deregulation reforms, and should challenge the unions—and the left—to support the policy expressed by that resolution. If conflict must be, at least it should be a real one!