

18th and 19th October: two special days in the fightback in Italy

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Tens of thousands of workers, young people, migrants and activists from the environmental movements peacefully filled up Rome's streets in two extraordinary days of mobilisation on the 18th and 19th of October.

Autumn 2013 has been yet another autumn of crisis, of factory closures, of cuts and privatisation, of widespread poverty. But the first time in many years this autumn has not seen any action taken by the trade union confederation – not even one of those ritual CGIL marches of a few hours or so that we have become so used to in the years of opposition to the Berlusconi government.

Here we are not even talking about a 'friendly government' because the Letta-Alfano – of broad agreement ("larghe intese") both in its style and in the substance of its social and economic policies makes no attempt at all to distinguish itself from the preceding one year government (of Monti – Tr note).

That is why the general strike initiative taken up for last Friday (18th October) by the main rank and file trade union organisations (the USB, CUB and COBAS) has transformed the character traditionally associated with the autumn strikes organised by the confederation. Even the 'official' data on the numbers participating in the strike seem to confirm a significant degree of support in a lot of the public sector, in many branches of the health service and particularly in public transport with a good number of cities completely closed down by the protest.

There was a large demonstration with lots of workers from the public and the private sectors as well as migrant worker with large numbers organised by the USB but also with a better than expected turnout from COBAS members.

The day was a long one, especially in Rome, because the traditional morning demonstration was prolonged into the afternoon with a strong platform of speakers in San Giovanni square as well as many 'speakers' corners' among which we think the ones on European politics and trade unions today were particularly good. At the end of the day there was an evening concert with the support of many artists like the Banda Bassotti, the 99 Posse, Ascanio Celestini, Assalti Frontale and so on. Hundreds of activists stayed overnight in the square in tents waiting for the second day of struggle.

On Saturday the 19th there was the steady arrival in the square of thousands of demonstrators organised by the movements defending housing rights and in defence of the environment such as No Tav but also No Muos, committees against the incinerators and around the waste disposal issue.

The Saturday demonstration was an extraordinary success, it was even bigger than the day before. Tens of thousands of demonstrators – the most realistic estimates put the numbers between 50 and 100,000 – marched for hours in a climate of tension and a state of siege created by the authorities responsible for public security. This atmosphere was stoked up even more by all the media which

were looking for a repeat of the incidents that took place on the 15th October two years before. Despite all that and a disgraceful provocation set up by the Casapound fascists amid the complete indifference of hundreds of police and carabinieri, the demonstration ended without any major incidents or disorder which demonstrated the political coherence and real determination of the demonstrators and organisers.

The only relevant disruption actually took place in front of the entry to the ministry of the economy, when a squad from the tax police abruptly attacked the demonstration because someone have thrown some eggs and bottles against an institution which is one of the main bodies responsible for the social massacre that is destroying the future of millions of citizens. On these matters and against the arrests made we are also publishing a communique from the comrades of the Marches region.

After a long route the demonstration reached the square in front of the Infrastructure Ministry which is responsible for both housing policy and the large scale public works that are devastating the environment. Here again the demonstration turned itself into an encampment in anticipation of the promised meeting of a movement delegation with the minister, Lupi, to demand a resolution of all these social and environmental problems. At the time of writing the camp is still going on.

Over and beyond the events of the two days – whose significance we had already foreshadowed in the concluding document of our founding assembly of the 20/22 September – what took place represents something new – a first significant breach in the social calm in a country like Italy where, despite the brutal bosses' and government offensive, there has been a worryingly passive response. Tens of thousands of workers, young people and migrants have gone out and demonstrated without the support of the trade union or political apparatuses, even with the boycott of the railway system which is supposed to be at the service of all as a state body. It took place in a situation of blatant indifference from the world of institutional politics and was opposed by a hostile mass media. Along with the fact that it happened in an atmosphere of a state of siege and of a criminalisation of the movement, in an apparently deserted city, this event is of a political importance that is unprecedented in recent years. Perhaps it is true that on the 15th October in 2011 there were more people on the demonstration but then there was at least the small apparatuses of the FIOM and of ARCI that helped build the numbers.

Furthermore the deliberate choice made by the organisers of both Friday and Saturday to bring about a sort of relay or link between the two initiatives points to a good way forward, that of a unitary convergence between all the social movements who are fighting on different fronts against austerity and the pro-boss policies. Thanks to the strike on the 18th there is a particular role for organised working people within this unitary front. In fact the decision made by Camusso, Bonanni and Angeletti the day after the demonstrations to call regional protest strikes against the stability law evidently appears to be a result of the confederal apparatuses' concern to try and avoid other sectors of workers joining in with the struggles of the more radical sectors involved this weekend. These other sectors, not involved in the demonstrations, are being hard hit by the crisis and are being deprived by the total passivity of the CGIL, CISL and UIL of any opportunity to take action

We also need to comment on the national demonstration which took place a week before these two 'red' days of the 18th and 19th of October. We are referring here to the 'La Via Maestra' (the best way forward) demonstration that came of an appeal whose first signatories were, among others, Maurizio Landini and Stefano Rodotà. We have already written about the explicit and implicit ambiguity of this initiative. It has to be said that the demonstration of the 19th has completely overshadowed the impact of the demonstration of the 12th. Not just because the second demonstration was double the size of the first but also there was a different social and political basis to it. On the 12th we saw the discontented march, those people of the left who are the orphans of anti-berlusconism, defeated as a result of the severe weakening of the workers and leftwing movements, a people who still believe

that the film of history can be reversed, that there can be a return to a climate of social compromise and political co-management that just is not possible in this historical period.

On both the 18th and 19th we saw people demonstrate who were full of anger and who wanted a different future but who had no illusions about the non-existent possibility of linking up with the centre left and who have a growing understanding of the necessity of direct action and mass self-organisation.

The difference between the 12th and the 18th/19th cannot be reduced to a simple counterposition between moderates and radicals even if the complicity of some of the promoters of the 12th in the criminalisation of the promoters of the 19th October demonstration does not help a possible dialogue between the two mobilisations.

This obviously does not mean that the dozens of thousands who demonstrated on the 12th are necessarily condemned to an impotent moderation. Indeed we need to work hard so that what has come out of the 18th and 19th mobilisations can stimulate some rapid re-thinking and provide a framework for breaking with the illusions peddled by the FIOM or SEL leaderships and for coming to an understanding of who are our true allies and true enemies as well as who are our false friends.

Neither does this mean that the political reality of our country has been transformed nor that the 'movement of movements' that demonstrated on the 19th is in itself sufficient to bring about this transformation. The absence of political protagonists that are capable of positively working with movements of this type can feed depoliticisation and a drift to extremism or movementism. The lack of clarity in the relationship with the labour movement, a justified scepticism towards trade unions that to some degree risks being extended to those sectors of class struggle trade unions, risks a self-isolation and a re-affirmation of a closed counter-position between those who have some rights and certain minimum conditions in the world of work and those who have not.

But all these problems are best dealt with in the heat of a concrete mass mobilisation than an academic discussion around a table.

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P.S.

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