

Racial Oppression and the Police and Commandos in Italy

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In the last few years, we have seen an increase in discrimination and racial oppression in Italy. In particular, there has been an increase in physically and verbally violent acts that have led to terrible crimes: Muhammad Shazad Kan, a 28 year-old Pakistani citizen, beaten to death in Rome in 2014; Roberto Pantic, Roma, killed in 2015 by a gun while sleeping in his trailer; Sare Mamadou, killed by a shotgun in the chest because he dared to steal a rotten melon from a field; Emmanuel Chidi Namdi, a 36 year-old recent Nigerian asylum seeker, killed in 2016 because he dared to respond to an insult to his partner; and Soumala Sacko, killed by a gunshot in 2018 while looking for sheet metal to build a makeshift shelter for other workers.

The primary victims are often Roma and Sinti, then come women and men of African or Asian origin. Islamophobia is also growing and the attitudes against Islam express themselves in, among other things, repugnant episodes against places of worship but also in real attacks.

The media often pedals racist ideas in alignment with the positions of the extreme right that augment a climate of intolerance for “non-Italians.”

Discrimination is also elevated in workplaces where many immigrants frequently work such as black markets or under severely exploitative conditions. It is also very common for rental agencies or landlords to refuse to rent to immigrants or people of color. Others exploit these workers circumstances to rent overcrowded and dilapidated housing at exorbitant prices. Forms of discrimination are also present in banking, insurance, and in the provincial and regional municipal offices. Those seeking asylum, without residency, are forced to work in the black market and struggle to receive health care. Commercial businesses and the postal offices seem to play a more marginal role.

In the education sector, there are many difficulties that immigrants face in the early grades and dropout rates are very high for immigrant children, increasing dramatically by the end of compulsory education. The difficulties for immigrant students come in part from language acquisition, but also from the lack of inclusion by their peers. Different foods and a different religion are often the reasons given for exclusion. In particular, the right to education is denied to Roma and Sinti, many of whom live in the countryside and are not enrolled in school.

The role of religion and beliefs in general in discrimination are secondary to the previously cited issues, despite the growth of Islamophobia. The economic conditions play a factor in the discrimination and aggravate the other more commonly-recognized causes.

The intersection of race and class in the recent protests stands out as we see certain specific social groups participating in the resistance, in particular, logistic workers and laborers. The fight for civil rights, social rights, and unions are intertwined, and there is a growing understanding that racism is

used by the dominant class to divide the workers and to exploit the laborers who come often from different African countries but also from Eastern Europe.

It is not an accident that the first large mobilization of historic scale in Italy was born following the killing of Jerry Maslo, a South African laborer assassinated in August of 1989 in Campania. These mobilizations obtained a partial success, namely the regularization of many immigrant citizens often constricted to work illegally as farm laborers, even if the laws that were won required them to possess an employment contract, a system that allowed for exploitation of the “non-Italian” workforce.

In the last ten years, immigrant laborers have been among those most combative. One particular example was the revolt of Castel Volturno after the murder of six African boys at the hands of mafia-type masked commandos disguised as police. After the rebellion, workers locked arms and struck against the terrible living conditions and starvation wages.

Another rebellion occurred in Rosarno in Calabria, in January of 2010. A few hours before, a commando in an SUV shot everyone of African descent on the street. Following this ambush, hundreds of African workers headed for the town. The consequent damage was primarily material: overturned trash bins and damaged cars and windows. However, the response was brutal, even if it was silent. There was a real ethnic cleansing of the area. Thousands of immigrant workers were transferred in a few hours in police vans to save them from mafia squads who patrolled the streets seeking retaliation with rifles and petrol cans. In only three days, all the workers of African origin disappeared from the region, the Piana di Gioia Tauro.

Importantly, there were also strikes against the *caporalato*, agricultural bosses. On July 31, 2011, forty workers were harvesting tomatoes for very few euros per container, the three section plastic basket at piece wages. They were Sub-Saharan, Arab, Bulgarian, and Romanian. A boss asked the workers to divide the tomatoes by size. Everyone stopped working, then after forming a roadblock, they began their first assembly. The strike had an immediate and enormous effect; the first anti-*caporalato* laws were approved in Italy. The workers had started a struggle that improved working conditions for all.

Other important protests include those of logistics workers against unsustainable working hours in the absence of a system of clearly-defined working hours, non-compliance with health and safety rules, systematic wage theft, the denunciation of continued violence and intimidation, and a general disregard for the work contracts.

There have been many protests in the last few years in support of those seeking political asylum, which have won broad support but, as of yet, they have not achieved a significant victory because the progressive forces in government often pander to the racist positions of the far right. In the face of these protests, it is not rare for the police to intervene with brutality in an effort to discourage broader participation. While workers have continued mobilizations for labor regulations, recently there have also been important mobilizations in solidarity with Black Lives Matter. The size of these protests is certainly not comparable with other European cities, such as in France and England. However, many of the participants are young, often the children of migrants (called Second Generations), who are taking to the streets to condemn police violence, (which only increased during the lockdown), discrimination, and capitalism as a system that feeds on racism to divide the exploited. In some cities, there have been thousands of protestors and assemblies are being created to broaden the range of action of the mobilizations.

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P.S.

• No Borders News, 17 June 2020:

<https://nobordersnews.org/2020/06/15/gippo-mukendi-ngandu-racial-oppression-and-the-police-in-italy/>