The Current Social Crisis in Italy when sectors of the petty bourgeoisie mobilize

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The mobilization of certain sectors of Italian society (the so-called *forconi* –pitchforks), which took place at the beginning of December, demonstrates how the country is now entering a new phase of its social and economic crisis. In the past the social groups that this movement represents shied away from certain forms of action that occurred on this occasion: road blocks, improvised rallies, and mass demonstrations in the Italian piazze.

Participating in this movement are sectors of the petite bourgeoisie, which due to the economic crisis have experienced setbacks in their incomes and interests; small-business owners, market stall sellers, artisans, truck drivers, and small agricultural entrepreneurs. But other more or less marginal sectors of society also joined in: groups such as youths from the cities' peripheries, the unemployed, and also a certain number of students. All these aspects were particularly apparent in a town like Turin, for most of the 20th Century a city with one of the strongest working class movements and the industrial powerhouse of the country (as well as the site of FIAT's headquarters). For in contrast to what the centre of the city may showcase to visitors, its recently restored royal palaces and buildings, life today is one of significant impoverishment for many of its inhabitants.

A subsequent attempt by the *forconi* to realise in Rome a further big demonstration did not succeed, due to internal divisions (some of their more well-off sectors such as the agricultural entrepreneurs and truck drivers believed that benefits would be gained by negotiating with the central government –and thus disassociated themselves from this attempt); however, this does in no way mean that such protests are not the result of profound and serious causes, and there is every chance they will happen again in the near future.

The economic crisis and the petty bourgeoisie

Significant sectors of the Italian small and medium bourgeoisie have for many years benefitted from relative and tranquil prosperity (for some of them the result of tax avoidance and evasion), but today, after six years of economic crisis, their social and economic pillars have begun to founder and for many of them a rapid decline in living standards and into poverty is beginning to seem a real possibility. These sectors are affected not only by the dynamics of the economic crisis, but also –as is the overwhelming majority of Europe's population– by the austerity policies of the European fiscal

compact put in place by the various governments of the bourgeoise.

For several years these policies have massacred the living standards of working men and women, both in the private and public sectors, decimating their salaries, their job security, and the welfare state –all in the name of "sacrifices" demanded by neoliberalism and which have the sole purpose of guaranteeing profits and annuities for the captains of industry and grand bourgeoisie, as a class and as individuals. More recently, in order to guarantee this transfer of wealth from the bottom to the top, the ruling class calls for sacrifices from broad sectors of the middle classes, thus impoverishing these intermediate sectors of society, although they remain fundamental for maintaining the political and social status quo.

"To squeeze" is the verb that best describes the contemporary policy of crushing and decimating the rights and living standards of the majority; it is a verb foisted above all on the working classes but now it also impacts sectors of the petite bourgeois and so determines their social disarray. The situation here described is one of the distinctive traits of serious economic crises, which are then transformed into political and social ones as well, resulting in lacerations to the social fabric across society as a whole. This is one of the reasons why we now speak of an epochal change occurring in Europe.

Turin and the social and economic crisis

In many cities such as Turin, the crisis has taken numerous and dramatic turns; once the industrial powerhouse of Italy, it was a city with a strong and militant working class movement, and where although there had always been social inequalities, none quite like the ones present today. In just a few years unemployment has reached staggering proportions; in fact, in the whole region of Piedmont the number of those out of work or laid off is several hundreds of thousands.

It is now obvious that the petite bourgeoisie –and in particular shopkeepers, already hurt by the general economic crisis– were going to suffer from a reduction in commerce and revenue, due to the simple fact that if such large numbers of working men and women lost or saw seriously diminished their purchasing power, the ripple effect on small business could not be avoided. The economic crisis first hit workers, now its consequences are on small business owners and shopkeepers, who have also had to confront the guillotine of budget cuts applied locally by city councils, called on by the central government to be the general managers of austerity policies. Furthermore, planning regulations previously existed which delineated and controlled the number of new commercial enterprises, but the almost complete liberalization of the market, coupled with the enormous power of large distribution chains, has crippled local shops, beginning with market stall sellers, squeezed out of the marketplace not only by large shopping malls but also by the cutthroat competition between the remaining small shops. The latter now open and close doors continuously, changing hands over and over, due to the owners' discovery that there is little or insufficient revenue in their operation. Within this phenomenon there is a further and new aspect; many among the new shopkeepers come from the working class, many from the ranks of the unemployed; vast numbers of young men and women who in the past were dependent workers may have gathered just enough of their families' last funds in order to set up a small shop in search of income, only to then realize that it is insufficient to make a living.

The lockout of shops which took place in Turin during its first day was near total, both as a conscious and autonomous choice of the shops' proprietors but also due to the presence of active groups of the organizers that moved around the city forcing store owners to pull down their shutters through a number of means. The closure of the city's wholesale markets continued into the following

days, “guaranteed” by the abovementioned groups.

Perhaps the most significant development that was observable was the participation of large sectors of the young inhabitants of the periphery of the city, who with street blockades and patrols expressed their anger and frustration for the social price they are being asked to pay, and conditions in which they must live their lives. On the streets there were numerous students with many of the same motivations, and whose frustrations have not found more productive avenues for expressing dissent –but this phenomenon was already witnessed in the recent past: the points of reference during these demonstrations are the national flag and anthem, amply demonstrating the weight of the dominant paradigm and ideology of today.

The role of right-wing forces

All these social and economic phenomena just described are then masterfully directed towards the political objectives of the sectoral organizations, which have been very effective in creating an ideology and identity where only the figure of the independent worker and entrepreneur is able to guarantee the prosperity of Italy, while all others are “thieves”, be they politicians, public sector workers (often called “parasites”), or even those workers that benefit from a small safety net when made redundant. It is quite easy to create divisions among the popular social classes when all are experiencing great difficulties and there is little solidarity among groups of workers.

Indeed, the very important role that right-wing and extreme right-wing forces played in the organization of the demonstrations was undeniable and a cause for great concern. These forces were visibly present, they guided groups of youths and shaped the dynamics of the protest, which were often unclear and confused. Through the streets of the city groups of right-wing football hooligans marched together with Italian neo-fascist elements such as Forza Nuova and Casa Pound; reactionary and fascistic slogans and attitudes could be heard throughout; there was also a dangerous confrontation between some sectors of reactionary forces and trade-union workers belonging to FIOM, the largest union representing metalworkers.

Notwithstanding the apparent disorganization, there nevertheless was a clear direction and astute planning behind the unfolding events, a sort of show of strength on the part of right-wing forces, which is then used as a recruitment tool. Lastly, the role played by the police forces needs to be discussed, it was clearly permissive, and entirely different from their behavior during demonstrations carried out by the left. Various signs point to a correlation, not only based on sympathies towards the reasons and frustrations of the forconi, but one which points to an organizational rapport between the police hierarchy and right-wing elements. The most troubling manifestation of this was the blockade of access routes to the township of Pinerolo, on the outskirts of Turin, a blockade planned and managed by fascist forces together with organized crime, well-known tax evaders, and with the complete connivance of the police.

It is in this context that the judiciary in Turin distinguished itself for all the wrong reasons, for at dawn of the same day it ordered police searches against activists of the NO TAV movement protesting the construction of high-speed rail in the Susa Valley; searches which culminated with the arrests of four young activists under “terrorism” charges!

The petty bourgeoisie and right-wing forces

It is all too clear by now that the social classes under discussion (on the streets the demonstrations were largely composed of market stall and small shopkeepers), together with the large number of unemployed, can become the mass-movement base of fascist and ultra-reactionary forces. When

coupled with the potential reactionary radicalization of sectors of the petite bourgeoisie this can bring great dangers to the working classes. The current situation can turn dangerous quite quickly because for many years now there has been no working class mass movement to counter it, and the responsibility of the leadership of the trade union movements in allowing this state of affairs to come about is particularly damning.

What is necessary is the mobilization of workers

Only a strong and militant class-based workers' movement can provide a buffer against reactionary tendencies; in order to respond constructively to the events taking place it is necessary for the trade union movement, beginning with its most militant branches, to construct widespread initiatives based on defending purchasing power, the minimum wage, job security, and proposing an altogether different economic policy; initiatives which must speak not only to the working classes but also parts of the lower middle class and even more importantly to the disaffected and unemployed. Towards this goal the organization of a general strike is an important aspect, for if there had been a true and genuine general strike many young people on the streets would have had a very different occasion to express their disaffection and dissent; moreover, it would be foolish to consider these current demonstrations as a real and constructive struggle against the politics of austerity and the governments that enact it, as some on the left have suggested.

To believe that the petite bourgeoisie and underclasses, at the time of the greatest globalist expansion of capitalism, can configure an alternative to global capital is not only an illusion –as it runs counter to every historical example– but is a dangerous error which can open the door to very real political tragedies. As Trotsky wrote, the petite bourgeoisie, this dust of history (many individuals not organized in places and chains of productions but still dependent on the social relations that they represent), has neither the role, nor the social or political force to express an alternative project to that of the dominant paradigm. The intermediate classes, in the struggle between the two fundamental classes are in the end polarized towards the one which more effectively shows its strengths; today, just like in the past, the ruling class can use sectors of the unemployed and of the petite bourgeoisie as a battering ram against the working class, in much the same way that Fascism made use of them. The Russian revolutionary, with reference to the Germany of the 1930s, wrote: "With every turn of the historic road, with every social crisis, we must over and over again examine the question of the mutual relations of the three classes in modern society: the big bourgeoisie, led by finance capital; the petty bourgeoisie, vacillating between the basic camps; and finally proletariat. The big bourgeoisie, making up a negligible part of the nation, cannot hold power without the support of the petty bourgeoisie of the city and the village, that is, of the remnants of the old, of the masses of the new, middle classes". And further. "For the social crisis to bring about the proletarian revolution, it is necessary that, besides over conditions, a decisive shift of the petty bourgeoisie classes, occur in the direction of the proletariat: This will give the proletariat a chance to put itself at the head of the nation as its leader. The last election revealed – and this is its principal symptomatic significance – a shift in the opposite direction. Under the impact of the crisis, the petty bourgeoisie swung, not in the direction of the proletarian revolution, but in the direction of the most extreme imperialist reaction, pulling behind it considerable sections of the proletariat". In conclusion he stated: " If the communist party is the party o revolutionary hope, then fascism , as a mass movement, is the party of the counterrevolutionary despair". (Leon Trotsky: " The turn in the Communist International and the situation in Germany", September 26, 1930).

_Building the working class struggle

Only with the working class conscious of its role as protagonist, of its strengths, and of its struggle to safeguard the working and living conditions of the popular classes can there be the force with which to polarize sectors of the petite bourgeoisie, or at least neutralize them in the antagonistic struggle with the ruling class. This is the urgent and important task that lays ahead, and which the return of the class struggle in workplaces can facilitate.

However, we are also faced with a question of time: the workers' and trade unions' movement must stand again on their own two feet; on the one hand they cannot demonize certain social sectors as such, they must not follow the leadership of the Partito Democratico and of the peak trade unions, the very same who subordinate the interests of men and women workers to those of the ruling class. While on the other hand the workers' movement must be aware of the fact that the forconi are guided by reactionary and right-wing forces (which have gained strength because of these very events), a challenge which has to be faced.

It is for this reason that the working classes –and the movements of the anti-capitalist left must contribute towards this goal with all their strength– have to begin today their own struggle, their own class revolt against the governments of the fiscal compact, which are none other than the ruling classes themselves.

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P.S.

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