

Coronavirus sparks nationwide strikes in Italy

Wednesday 18 March 2020, by [TAMMA Paola](#) (Date first published: 13 March 2020).

Unions are calling for a halt to all non-essential production to ensure safety and sanitation of workplaces.

Italy's coronavirus epidemic has triggered nationwide strikes running from shipbuilders in Liguria in the north to steelworkers in Puglia in the south, forcing the government to open negotiations with union bosses.

While governments across Europe are calling on employees to work from home, there are many Italian workers whose jobs can only be performed in supermarkets, factories, docks and steelmills.

Spontaneous strikes started on Thursday and are now [mushrooming throughout Italy](#), with workers concerned their employers were not guaranteeing protection from the spread of the virus.

On Friday, Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte held a [video conference](#) alongside the health, economy, labor and economic development ministers, to mediate between the two sides.

After 18 hours of negotiations, trade unions and employers signed a safety protocol.

"For the good of the country, for the protection of workers' health. Italy does not stop," tweeted Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte.

The protocol "will allow companies in all sectors, through the use of social safety nets and the reduction or suspension of work, [to ensure] the safety of the workplace," trade unions Cgil, Cisl and Uil said, [La Repubblica reported](#).

Workers' fears

Rome on Wednesday adopted a [decree](#) asking workers to work remotely and take paid leave, advising the closure of "non essential" production lines and encouraging social distancing and sanitation in industrial sites. Yet it stopped short of ordering a complete shut-down of production, and left it to companies to "self-regulate."

Some factories, like automaker Fiat Chrysler, [announced](#) the temporary closure of sites to allow for sanitation and reorganization of production. Others have equipped workers with face masks and gloves.

But this was not enough for many factory workers, who lamented that their employers were unable to guarantee "social distancing" measures.

"Factory workers are not citizens for 24 hours minus eight. It is not tolerable that they see their everyday life protected and guaranteed by many rules, but once they have passed the factory gates

they are in a no-man's land," Francesca Re David, representing factory workers for trade union Fiom-Cgil, told [La Repubblica daily](#).

Workers at the shipbuilder Fincantieri in Liguria, where a worker tested positive for coronavirus, declared a strike on Thursday, which is ongoing and has spread to other company dockyards in the peninsula. Workers at Ilva, a steelworks in the southern region of Puglia, declared a 10-day strike due to lack of protective equipment.

The country's three main trade unions, Cgil, Cisl and Uil, on Thursday [called](#) for the closure of all factory lines until March 22 except for those providing "essential public services" and the health sector, in order to "sanitize, secure and reorganize all places of work," and declared a strike unless these conditions are met.

Growth concerns

On the opposite front, business leaders oppose bringing production to a halt, calling instead for a "balanced solution to the serious situation of the moment, reconciling different needs and avoiding causing damage that could prove irreparable." Confindustria, the Italian industry lobby added [in a note earlier this week](#) that any further restrictions would "inevitably have an impact on turnover and employment."

Confindustria's Lombardy representative Marco Bonometti on Thursday called the strikes "irresponsible," [accusing trade unions](#) of "exploiting this phenomenon."

Trade unions fired back, saying strikes were "understandable." Workers should "think first of all about their health," said Elena Lattuada, Cgil's representative in Lombardy, speaking to Radio Popolare on Friday.

They call for the closure of non-essential production sites, and protection of all workers exposed, such as supermarket employees, and delivery workers.

"Grocery supermarkets can close and sanitize on Sundays, guaranteeing the possibility of shopping in better conditions ... Home delivery may be necessary to deliver first-aid goods but [we have to] avoid compulsive shopping," said Lattuada.

"It's not just about factory lines."

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