

Facing the Coronavirus-Capitalist Epidemic in Italy

By mid March Italy has become the epicentre of the COVID-19 pandemic with a dreadful progression of deaths. By March 25 the number of people who died being infected by coronavirus is 7,503, about a third of the world total and twice as many as China. Within Italy, the Lombardy region (over 10 million inhabitants) accounts for almost 4,500 deaths due to coronavirus. This data significantly underestimate the true death toll, as many people are dying in their homes or hospices without even having been tested for coronavirus, because hospitals have no more beds for the sick.

This high death toll, which in the last week has grown by 500 to 800 people daily, is due to poor crisis management by government, healthcare and civil protection authorities (testing only the severely ill, not searching for and isolating their contacts in recent days), aggravated by their heeding to the employers, who have been lobbying against shutting down non-essential businesses. This policy has kept millions of people crowding trains, buses, cars, factories, offices, warehouses day after day, spreading the disease. Past governments' cuts in the public healthcare system made the explosion of coronavirus infections more deadly because of insufficient availability of lung ventilators (only 5,000 in the whole of Italy at the beginning of the epidemic) to help the weakest patients overcome the respiratory insufficiency caused by the virus. Many of them (the oldest as a rule) died choking because there were no more ventilators available.

Therefore it is clear that the number of deaths was not inevitable, and that its main cause is to be found in a policy that has put profit over lives, in the healthcare system and in society. We have tried, with SI Cobas's limited forces, to oppose this policy and mobilize workers to defend their and other people's lives, and against this capitalist government and social system.

Chronology of a Crisis

The government proclaimed the state of emergency for the coronavirus infection on January 31, but no concrete measures were taken until February 23, when a "red zone" of 10, later 16 municipalities, was isolated in the province of Lodi, Lombardy. But by the time the area was closed up, the virus had already been spreading outside it, mostly in the bordering province of Bergamo, while big events are forbidden countrywide.

A statement by SI Cobas on February 26 demanded that strict safety measures and equipment (face masks, gloves, disinfectant, overalls) against the infection be adopted in all workplaces – an obligation for all employers under the Legislative Decree No 81 of 2008 on workplace safety. If they are missing, workers should not start working and claim full pay. The statement also says that the freedom of workers to organize and struggle cannot be suppressed with the excuse of coronavirus.

Another statement by SI Cobas Milan of February 27 reported the occurrence of a worker found positive to the coronavirus test at a GLS warehouse in San Giuliano, near Milan. SI Cobas claimed disinfection of the premises, and the test for all workers in the same department before going back to work. Public health authorities, though informed, only intervened after workers refused to go back to work. The number of daily deaths jumped from single digits in the week to March 1, to nearly 40 daily in the following week. By this time hotel workers were not being called to work, and by March 4 nearly all hotels in Milan shut down. The same occurred for entertainment and sport related workers. Workers should receive a subsidy (see below).

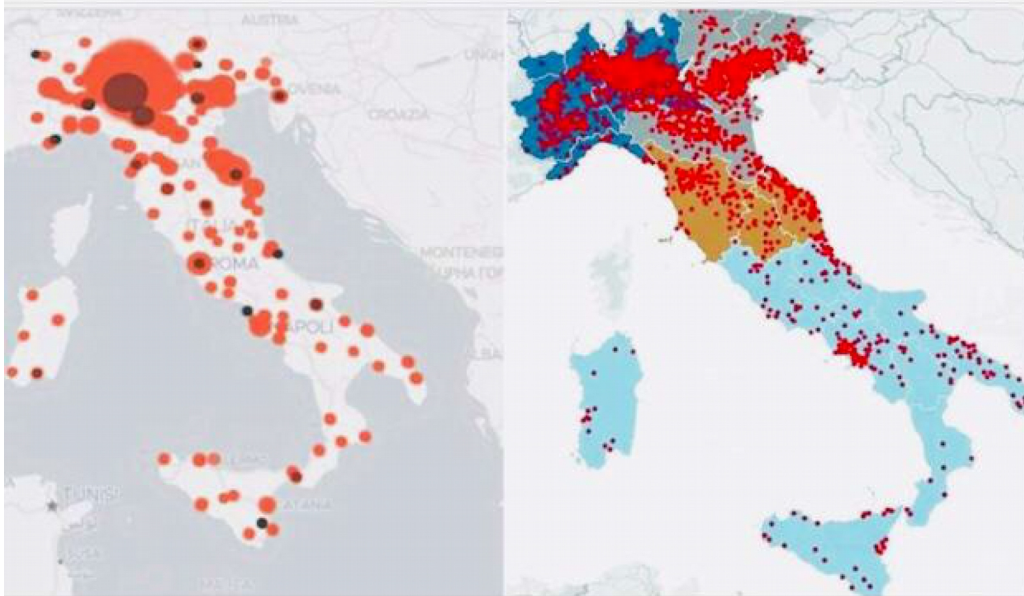
On March 1 the Government issued a new Decree, expanding the measures to the whole of Lombardy and some bordering provinces. Only on March 5 all schools, universities and kindergartens were closed, countrywide; on March 8 restrictions were introduced to movements of people within the enlarged “red zone” and milder restrictions were introduced for services in the rest of Italy. On the same day 133 deaths were recorded. On the following day restrictions to movement of people were extended countrywide. On March 11 a new decree ordered the closure of all “nonessential” commercial businesses (however, the list of “essential” ones included cosmetics and others). Manufacturing and transport continued working. On March 11 SI Cobas called a strike for all workers of the province of Modena, protesting against the death of a worker in a meatpacking factory and the death of 9 inmates after a protest in the prison of Modena – protests flared up in 40 prisons in Italy due to the suspension of visits of relatives and the lack of measures against contagion.

On March 10 workers at an assembly line of Fca in Pomigliano struck against the lack of safe conditions. Fca decided to close the plant for a few days, for maintenance and sanitation. In the week to March 15 workers in several warehouses and factories, especially in the COVID19-stricken areas, struck asking to shut down works.

On March 14 the Government, the Employers’ Associations, and the official unions CGIL, CISL and UIL signed a “protocol” on the safety on workplaces. The purpose of this protocol was to give a justification for keeping all production activities running, even when safety cannot be guaranteed.

But facts showed a clear relationship between manufacturing activity and the spread of the coronavirus:

P. S. guardate linea diffusione virus (dx) e confrontatela con lavoratori del manifatturiero (sx). Forse se le fabbriche le chiudevamo 15 giorni fa qualcuno oggi era ancora tra noi, compresa la nostra libertà di movimento.



Comparison between manufacturing employment (left) and the spread of the virus infection (left).

Exempting nonessential production and transport activities from the stop caused the continuation of the spreading of contagion for two more weeks, with its tragic consequences we are witnessing today. Instead, the government put the blame on and fined people walking or jogging in the countryside.

On March 16 a joint statement by **SI Cobas** and **AdL Cobas** (the two unions have kept unity of action in the logistics and transport sector for many years) called for workers to abstain from work in all non-essential activities, guaranteeing production and transport only for food, pharmaceuticals and other healthcare related products.

This leaflet, summarizing the statement, was distributed among workers (English translation)



STOP ALL NON-ESSENTIAL ACTIVITIES TO STOP CONTAGION

SI Cobas rejects the Government - Employers - Official unions (CGIL, CISL, UIL) agreement which, in order not to stop profits, keeps factories, warehouses, shops open, puts the lives of workers at risk and allows contagion to keep spreading among the population.

SI COBAS AND ADL COBAS TRANSLATE THE STRIKE WARNING THEY ALREADY PROCLAIMED INTO THE INDICATION FOR WORKERS TO STAY ALL AT HOME TO PROTECT THEIR RIGHT TO HEALTH AND LIFE, CLAIMING THE IMMEDIATE CLOSURE OF ALL NON-ESSENTIAL ACTIVITIES AND FULL WAGES TO ALL WORKERS.

We request shutting down all activities and services for at least two weeks, with the sole exception of essential services, such as **food and drug and medical supplies**, where all **safety measures and equipment** must be fully guaranteed.

Workers who stay home must receive **100% of their wages**. They can only be used for sanitation, which must be completed before the activities reopen.

This position is based on a cold examination of the epidemic data.

Although the Civil Protection reports try to soften them, data show a very strong progression up to **3590 new infected people and 368 deaths** yesterday of Sunday 15 March, for a total of **over 20 thousand infections tested and 1,806 dead**. In reality, actual infections are already hundreds of thousands and the dead are bound to exceed China's 3,000.

The government had to take drastic measures to stop the infection, but **under pressure from the bosses, it took only half measures with great delay: the millions of workers** in factories, warehouses, transport and even shops - from electronics to cosmetics! - are told to do what we are forbidden to do as

citizens: to continue traveling and attending crowded places. This way, workplaces continue to be sources of contagion, infected people and deaths will continue to increase.

Workers must not accept to put their lives at risk for the bosses' profits!

The law on safety in the workplace (article 44 of Legislative Decree 81/08) states that workers can leave their workplace in the face of a “serious, immediate danger that cannot be avoided,” such as the current coronavirus epidemic.

The government-employers-unions agreement actually denies this right: 1) **it is up to the employers to decide whether to continue** production or not; 2) sanitizing workplaces and the adoption of protective measures and equipment is left to the employers, **without control by public health authorities**; 3) If any worker falls ill with coronavirus, **no quarantine is mandated** for his/her colleagues; 4) **If the face masks are not available, work can continue**, except where the “safety distance” of one meter cannot be kept. Yet several studies have shown that the distance of **one meter is not sufficient** to prevent contagion, **nor are common masks a guarantee**; 5) The agreement also does not worry about how workers go to work: **trains, buses, cars pooling are all potential contagion vehicles**, which the agreement leaves open; 6) The agreement allows working 8-10 hours day after day, even at distances of less than one meter, but **it does not allow workers to meet in assembly** to defend their rights and health collectively, even if they comply with safety standards ! We do not accept that the virus be used as an excuse to prevent workers from organizing! 7) Coronavirus has been proven to survive up to two days on surfaces: **delivering parcels becomes another possible infection vehicle**. One more reason to stop the logistics warehouses. Non-essential products can wait two weeks!

Several factories in Bergamo and Brescia, and even the FCA Group, have closed for these reasons, in the face of workers' protests. In the face of the dramatic progression of the infections and deaths, the Lombardy Region itself has proposed shutting down all non-essential activities.

The government-employers-unions agreement betrays workers who have gone on strike in recent days in order to stop putting their lives at risk by working. We say: **life before profits, close all non-essential activities**, until the infection is stopped!

We are risking our lives also because **the Italian health system only has 5,000 lung ventilators** to save the most seriously ill, and many have been left to die because there are not enough lung ventilators for everyone. This is the result of cuts in healthcare spending. Germany has 28 thousand ventilators, almost 6 times as many with one and a half as much Italy's population. **One F35 fighter costs more than 7,000 ventilators**, it would have sufficed to buy one

less to save thousands more people at any time. **Enough with cuts to healthcare, invest in life, not death!** Especially in times when environmental devastation, the result of this capitalist mode of production, will possibly lead to new major health emergencies.

Healthcare personnel have been cut for years and they were not enough for the needs of normal times. Now doctors, nurses and other staff are subjected to deadly workloads and very high rates of contagion because safety rules are not observed: hospitals are now the most dangerous outbreaks. **Immediate hiring** in healthcare is required, and strict compliance with safety standards for all staff.

We are not facing a normal union dispute for economic reasons. This is about health and life, not only of the workers concerned, but of the whole community.

For these reasons, starting this week we call for a real mass abstention from work in defence of everyone's health and life!

SI Cobas organized the abstention from work in several dozen warehouses, starting from March 18 (see the list of stopped warehouses as at March 17 here: https://facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=1215168492015179&id=306442629554441). It was not an easy campaign, because bosses and foremen would call workers, threatening them that they would lose their wages and jobs. The discussion was: our struggle is not for money, but for life, yours and your loved ones; for money we'll fight once we are safe. With many companies agreements were reached to assure transport and distribution of food and pharmaceutical products.

Hundreds of workers have published their pictures with their children or spouses, holding a notice saying "I'm staying at home. *"non sono carne da macello"* I am not flesh for the slaughterhouse – the same expression we use for "cannon fodder."

See <https://www.facebook.com/sicobas.lavoratoriautorganizzati.9/videos/1297404213798553/>

On March 16 the government issued a new decree supporting companies and workers that had to stop working because of the coronavirus crisis, and for emergency investment in the public healthcare system, for a total of €25-billion.

On March 20 the Interior Ministry, upon request of transport companies, ordered prefects to intervene against conflicts in the logistic sector that were causing a slowdown in the delivery of "essential products": the truth is that SI Cobas and AdL Cobas were assuring transport of essential products, but companies would try to mix them with nonessential goods, increasing the number of workers at risk.

A statement by SI Cobas commented:

A note just released by the Interior Ministry to the Prefects invites them to “prevent the blocking of distribution due the protest activity by some trade unions, which takes the form of generalized and coordinated abstention from work in the sectors of logistics, transport and shipment.”

After two weeks behaving as Pontius Pilate, the Conte government appears to be realizing only now that the situation is out of control within a sector which is more strategic than ever for the supply of basic necessities and which employs over one million workers.

A sector that is certainly not out of control because of our unrest, but because of the employers' will to speculate on the coronavirus emergency, putting their profits before the general interest and the health of workers and refusing to define safety rules capable to truly protect the flow of basic necessities.

Workers, healthcare workers, caregivers and all citizens must know the truth!

And the truth is that SI Cobas, together with Adl Cobas, have been trying in vain for 2 weeks to open a negotiation with the Government in order to guarantee the full operation of the flow of essential goods while suspending non-essential ones and provided there is compliance with the basic measures of prevention and protection of safety in the workplace.

However, the government has preferred to protect only the profits of the multinationals, by signing a “Safety Protocol” which does not guarantee safety at work and the prevention of the infection, nor the prioritisation of the supply of basic necessities: a protocol that in these hours is called useless even by the very unions (CGIL-CISL-UIL) that have signed it!

In the last few days hundreds of logistics workers have contracted CoVid-19 because the employers' hunger for profits requires them to work in warehoused crowded with hundreds of workers in order to handle goods that in 90 per cent of cases are NOT of public necessity (clothing, cosmetics, appliances, all kinds of goods).

And a worker who contracts the virus inside his/her workplace is a potential vector of contagion for hundreds of other workers and citizens ...

To ensure the regular flow of basic necessities there is only one way:

IMPOSE THE ACTUAL CLOSURE OF ALL NON-ESSENTIAL ACTIVITIES, IN ORDER TO CONCENTRATE ONLY ON ESSENTIAL SERVICES, AVOID TRAFFIC CONGESTION[...]

On March 22 the Government eventually ordered to shut down (by March 24) all nonessential business, including manufacturing not included in a list of essential production (strategic, i.e. military production was added).

A joint statement by SI Cobas and AdL Cobas commented:

NEW GOVERNMENT DECREE: LET'S IMPOSE THAT ONLY AND EXCLUSIVELY REALLY ESSENTIAL ACTIVITIES STAY OPEN. THOSE WHO GO TO WORK TODAY MUST DO IT FOR THE SAME PURPOSE AS THOSE WHO WORK IN HOSPITAL, PHARMACY OR FOOD STORES.

After two weeks behaving as Pontius Pilate, the Conte government has issued a new decree, which was supposed to impose a new curb on production activities, pretending to acknowledge what our unions have been claiming, and which hundreds of spontaneous and organized strikes have been demanding for days. In particular, we had insisted in reporting that the logistic sector was out of control, certainly not because of our struggles, but because of the employers' will to speculate on the coronavirus emergency, putting their profits before the general interest to health and refusing to define clear safety rules capable of really protecting the flow of indispensable goods.

Workers and health-care workers must know the truth! SI Cobas, together with AdL Cobas in the last two weeks have been vainly trying to open a negotiation with the government in order to guarantee the flow of essential goods at the expense of non-essential ones and in compliance with the basis prevention and workplace protection measures.

However, the government has preferred to protect only the profits of the multinationals, by signing a "Safety Protocol" which does not guarantee safety at work and the prevention of the infection, nor the prioritisation of the supply of basic necessities: a protocol that is even being called "useless" by the very unions (CGIL-CISL-UIL) that have signed it!

In the last few days hundreds of logistics workers have contracted CoVid-19 because the employers' hunger for profits requires them to work in warehouses crowded with hundreds of workers in order to handle goods that in 90 per cent of cases are NOT of public necessity (clothing, cosmetics, appliances, all kinds of goods).

And a worker who contracts the virus inside his/her workplace is a potential vector of contagion for hundreds of other workers and citizens ...

To ensure the regular flow of basic necessities there is only one way:

IMPOSE THE ACTUAL CLOSURE OF ALL NON-ESSENTIAL ACTIVITIES, IN ORDER TO CONCENTRATE ONLY ON ESSENTIAL SERVICES, AVOID TRAFFIC CONGESTION.

DRASTICALLY REDUCING THE OPERATIONAL STAFF IN WAREHOUSES AND SELECTING GOODS TO BE DELIVERED IS THE ONLY WAY TO GUARANTEE AT THE SAME TIME THE SATISFACTION OF PRIMARY NEEDS (HEALTHCARE, PHARMACEUTICALS AND FOOD) AND COMPLIANCE WITH WORKPLACE SAFETY AND PREVENTION MEASURES CONCERNING BOTH THE WORKPLACE AND THE OUTSIDE.

While China has reduced the spread of the epidemic and almost defeated the virus by closing all non-essential activities and while even dozens of mayors from Lombardy are calling on institutions to close all unnecessary activities and put a brake on the catastrophe, the disasters produced by the conduct of the Italian government and bosses are already there for all to see:

after a month the contagions continue to multiply unrelentingly! And the number of deaths is marking a new high every day (which is unfortunately bound to increase, involving other areas in the South). Unfortunately, even the new Decree does not differ much from the previous ones thus deferring substantial containment of the expansion of the coronavirus. It is therefore essential to continue the mobilization in order to obtain a real quarantine of all non-essential productions and to open a true and timely consultation with those who represent the needs and problems of a majority of workers in an important sector of distribution (transport and logistics).

The main routes of the Italian logistics sector extend into the Regions of Emilia Romagna and Lombardy, where the largest clusters of warehouses are located, from where the major routes of national distribution radiate and where hundreds of thousands of workers are concentrated every day. These are the same Regions, with Veneto, which are witnessing the major epidemic outbreaks and are the crux of the present emergency.

From a first reading of the new governmental provisions it is still not clear what the indispensable and essential activities are. [...]

It is therefore clear that the new Decree won't assure big results and it is therefore fundamental that in workplaces and in logistics we provide to keep to production and DISPLACEMENT OF ALL GOODS THAT ARE REALLY ESSENTIAL, while rigorously imposing compliance with safety rules.

As far as we are concerned, we are immediately available to discuss a Memorandum of Understanding with the employers' side and with the institutions to overcome the current flaws that can occur in the essential sectors, guaranteeing certain rules to avoid any spreading of the virus inside the warehouses and to the whole population, ensuring an appropriate use of social security nets for the current phase and when overcoming this epidemic.

At the same time, we will not allow workers' struggles to be used as a pretext to cover the serious responsibilities of government, employers and official unions, to oppose public health to workers' demands and / or legitimize any repressive actions. A real and timely deal with those who represent the needs and demands of the majority of freight transport and logistics workers.

SI Cobas

AdL Cobas

The mainstream unions CGIL, CISL, UIL, which one week earlier had signed the pass-for-all protocol, now under pressure from workers in several factories (a strike of metal workers in Lombardy and Emilia), threatened a general strike that was withdrawn on March 25 after an agreement was reached on minor changes.

Conclusion

This struggle for health and life against capitalist greed is important to have workers understand the true, inhumane class nature of capitalism and capitalist exploitation. In the next weeks with most workers at home we are trying to stay in touch with them through social media and teleconference meetings with shop stewards. Attendance is high.

We don't know how long this situation is going to last, how deep the scars this coronavirus-capitalist crisis is going to leave in our society, in terms of lives, of unemployed and poverty. Italy's economy has never recovered from the 2008-09 crisis, and unemployment is still high, more than double the official rate of nearly 10 per cent if we take into account discouraged people and all those willing to work if they could find a job. Workers with regular unlimited contracts are supposed to receive a subsidy of 80% of low wages and salaries and up to a maximum net amount of €1,129.66 monthly for up to 9 weeks. A survival income. Some categories of irregular and self-employed workers will get €600 for the month of March. The €25-billion expenditure package, followed by a new package of the same amount, will add to a public debt already above 130% of GDP.

If and when Italy will ever come out of this new crisis, the next issue will be: who is going to pay for Italy's huge public debt. After years of tax increases on wages and tax rebates on businesses and profits, we were already campaigning for the introduction of a wealth tax for the rich. A wealth tax of 10% on the richest 10% of the population (amounting to about €400-billion) would allow to repair our welfare state, and the healthcare system in particular, and reduce the public debt.

We hope that our experience can be of help to workers, union activists and comrades in countries where the spread of the pandemic is a few days or weeks behind our situation.

We also propose to hold a conference through internet (e.g. skype, zoom or any other channel) to exchange experiences, views, and to take joint international initiatives.

Roberto Luzzi for SI Cobas, Italy.