

First day back... at a school that's closing

Federazione dei Comunisti Anarchici

12 September 2008

The 2008–2009 school year is just beginning. It will, according to Education minister Gelmini, be the last for Italy's public education system which significantly improved learning rates from the late 1960s to the latter half of the 1980s increasing and modernizing the various subjects and activities that students were engaged in, increasing the number of teachers, guaranteeing the right to an education for all those who used to be discriminated against by being inserted into special classes, thus getting rid of the obscene practice of selection on the basis of class that was a product of fascism. It was a school system that for some time was — consistent with the secular, pluralist and anti-racist tradition — actively engaged in welcoming the children of immigrant workers and treating them as equals.

But the Berlusconi cabinet's Executive Order DL.137, issued on 1st September 2008 with the strong support of the minister, Gelmini, seriously threatens the country's state school system, which risks being replaced with a mere baby-sitting service for infants and a dumping ground for (mis)educating adolescents to become ignorant and flexible for the work market, with the cost of all this being placed firmly in the lap of the country's regional authorities.

Gelmini's attack comes as the latest in a series of attacks on public education which started in the 1990s with the first staff cuts (which have never stopped since and indeed are on the increase) introduced as part of harsh new neo-liberal policies to contain public spending and privatize communal services. The system which created parity between public schools and private schools, introduced in 2000 (L.62/2000) by the then minister Berlinguer (centre-left), turned education into a marketable product and diverted large amounts of public resources into private and/or religious-run school. But uncertainty over the future role and functions of public education came in no small way with the Berlinguer reform in 1997 and the Moratti reform of 2003. Throughout these years, every single Budget has made further cuts of thousands of education jobs and there has been absolutely no interest whatsoever on the part of the State or Italian capitalism in investing in the public education of Italy citizens and new citizens. Education and culture are now just goods to be bought and sold in the marketplace, with one's own money, everyone getting as much education as they can afford and, why not, even going to the extent of getting a school-mortgage for one's children's education. In other words, a slow return to class-based schools.

Gelmini's Executive Order and finance minister Tremonti's Fiscal Order are perhaps the last loop in the noose around the neck of our public education system. At every level — primary, middle and high — jobs have been wiped out. 40,000 primary school jobs, 13,000 jobs in middle

schools and 35,000 in high schools. 200,000 precarious workers with no more hopes. The plan for Southern regions (surprise, surprise!) is that there will be no new jobs or supply posts offered until 2013! The mere act of bringing back single teachers for primary school classes means the loss of 40,000 jobs, the waste of hundreds of hours in workshops, group activities, cooperation, open classes, and many opportunities for open learning experiences. It means a return to the grey polymath, to punishment for bad grades, to uniforms, for the greater good of the hierarchy and authoritarianism... but then isn't that what Italy voted for — order and discipline?!

And once the forthcoming Aprea Bill on the reorganization of scholastic institutes appears, we will learn that the requisites for becoming a teacher will be a vocation and the teacher's "attributes" (sic!), that it will be the job of school managers to test applicants. And that schools will have become (in spite of the Constitution) foundations with holes in the seat of their pants and no more trouble from those pesky trade unionists.

Lastly, the Gelmini Order marks yet another step towards Italy's executive gaining total autonomy from the parliament, part of a process which is emptying the country's "bourgeois" institutions of all significance, where delegated democracy has become a tragic fiction and government a place where power is concentrated and protected from all criticism and all means of verification. At this stage, the process, which we anarchist communists long ago began to denounce, is irreversible — irrespective of whatever those incurables on the left who aspire to a seat in parliament say.

But the plans for super-teachers as envisaged by the Berlinguer reform (together with the CGIL, CISL and UIL) and Moratti's "tutors" were defeated and never introduced thanks to a grassroots mobilization by the world of education and by the many direct-democracy committees that sprang up around the country. Full-time school hours resisted the Moratti reform thanks to the same mixed teacher-parent committees, who organized themselves and personally demonstrated their opposition and their determination to defend public education as a right, as something they had an immediate interest in due to their material living conditions. So today too, a largescale grassroots mobilization is needed in our schools, in our towns and regions, one that involves families, teachers, professional and cultural associations, so that we can put a stop to the annihilation of the public school system in this legislative black hole.

The FdCA supports all grassroots union and mass initiatives (starting with the strikes on 3rd and 17th October and including the leafletting of schools) in the hope that they can become the starting point for a wide, united movement to defend and win back the right to education, to the best public education possible.

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