

# Same old stories? Trade unions and protest in Italy in 2011

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The demand for politics over markets, a key message in the Occupy and Indignados movements, is also key here. A considerable drop in trust is clear: trust in all national institutions and political actors (parliament, parties, and trade unions).

The history of Italian protest is certainly a rich one - this is the country that produced one of the largest Communist parties in western Europe, along with a strong and politicized labour movement, often ready to join forces with other social movements. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Italian 'long autumn' was compared to the 'short French May' as the student movement was accompanied by a widespread cycle of protest. In the 1980s and, especially, the 1990s, the collapse of 'real socialism' and the gradual strengthening of neoliberal views had obvious repercussions on the Italian Left, but in the 2000s Italy harboured an extremely vital movement for global justice - the strength and influence of those mobilizations culminated in the hosting of the first [European Social Forum \(ESF\) in Italy](#) [16]. Since 2010, students have protested frequently and intensively against what they consider as attacks on public education, including budget cuts and fees increases. On several occasions, especially during innovative 'lessons on the street' they were joined by concerned parents and teachers as well as by the population at large.

Notwithstanding all this, the most visible protests to sweep the global North, in the forms of what have been labelled the 'Occupy' movement and the 'Indignados' in Southern Europe, saw only a weak following in Italy. Some camps were set up in Italy's main cities, but they usually remained small in proportion. The Global Day of Action on October 15 saw hundreds of thousands of demonstrators in Rome, but the day ended in violent outbursts that neither the protest organizers nor the police were able to control. So what was going on with protest in Italy in 2011? Were things really as quiet as they seemed? In our study we surveyed all the protests reported in Italy in 2011 in the centre-left newspaper *La Repubblica*, looked at documents and websites from social movement organizations and also drew on information from surveys administered during annual protest

marches throughout the year.

What we found from our overview of protest throughout the year seemed to resemble protest as usual, albeit with much focus on attacks on social rights in a time of austerity, yet the survey showed a surprising change in the attitudes of union activists.

## Unsung trade unions

After scouring *La Repubblica*, we detected a total of 172 separate protest events that took place in Italy in 2011 – enough for a good overview of the most visible contentious actions taking place. Of those protests, 2 out of 5 were organised by informal groups, more than one third by trade unions, and one third by other formal associations. Trade unions were therefore the single most active civil society actor organising protest in the country in 2011 (since the other classifications are aggregates). Most of those unions were rank-and-file organisations, present both in firms and in new professions (such as call centres) that are generally ignored by traditional unions. However, among the traditional unions the leftist union Cgil (Italian General Confederation of Labour) and in particular its metalworkers' branch (Fiom) mobilized in around one third of the events where a union intervened.

This finding on the prevalence of unions also held out in terms of the social groups represented in the protest events: around one third were initiated by workers. The issues of protest too were dominated by work and labour, 16.9% of those identified to be exact. This salience of labour issues is connected both to the economic crisis and the new management of FIAT which has transformed the automobile group into a transnational firm less interested in protecting its Italian identity. The current manager, Sergio Marchionne, has gradually broken up the traditional system of negotiations with Italian unions, national government and even with the enterprise association, threatening the dismissal of non-profitable firms like [Termini Imerese](#) [17], imposing harsher working conditions via referendum, and even firing unionized workers. This has translated into a harsh conflict involving demonstrations, strikes and judicial trials. New Prime Minister Mario Monti has also shown little inclination towards concerted action with trade unions.



Mario Monti meets head of Fiat Sergio Marchionne in front of new Fiat Panda, March 2012. [Demotix/Simona Granati](#) [18]. All rights reserved.

Although trade unions were not the only actors present in Italian protest in 2011, they were certainly important enough to merit interest, especially in view of their historically strong role in fomenting contention in the country. What is more, the attitudes of those who participated in protests were drastically critical of institutional policies that addressed austerity through a radicalization of neoliberal recipes of budget cuts, deregulation and the liberalization of markets (including, once again, the labour market). This is what clearly emerges from surveys carried out at trade union and precarious workers' marches in 2011: the Labour Day (LD) marches in Florence and Milan (EuroMayDay), and a national general strike (GS) in Florence on 6 May. If we compare these to similar surveys carried out at protest events at the turn of the century such as the Genoa anti-G8 protest in 2001, the first ESF in Florence in 2002 and the Global Day of Action against the war on Iraq on February 15 2003, we note a clear tidal change in the opinions of union members in Italy (especially given that the events surveyed at the beginning of the century were if anything more 'radical' arenas than trade union marches, albeit not the EuroMayDay march).

## Plummeting trust

First, we observed a low (if variable) degree of trust in different institutions among the marchers. Trust was lowest for the national government, growing only very slightly when looking at the national parliament (only 2.4% for EuroMayDay; 5.9% for the GS and 10.7% for LD). This is all the more true for political parties and trade unions. The percentage that trusted political parties moved from 1.6% for the EuroMayDay parade to 15.2% for the LD; it is significant that even the GS participants expressed minimal trust in parties (5.9%). Trust in trade unions is higher, but still low for demonstrations called by the unions themselves: only in the LD was trust in unions expressed by slightly more than half of participants (52.3%).

Comparing these findings with the earlier data, a considerable drop in trust is clear: trust in all national institutions and political actors (parliament, parties, and trade unions) is lower than registered at the demonstrations we surveyed at the beginning of the decade. The decline of trust in political parties and the parliament is the most striking, dropping from about a quarter of marchers to just 7% for political parties and from about one fifth to just 6% for the parliament, if we compare last year's data with the anti-G8 protest in 2001.

Marchers asked for power to be handed back to political institutions. Politics over markets, a key message in the Occupy and Indignados movements, is also key here. Only between 11% (for the GS) and 26% (for the EuroMayDay parade) believe that neoliberal globalization can provide opportunities for economic growth, while more than 80% (over all demonstrations) think that globalization increases inequalities, and even more (86%) believe it requires institutional control through the building of institutions of global governance (79% for EuroMayDay, 87% for LD and 90% for GS).

While extremely critical of the workings of existing institutions, activists did however express a very eager quest for politics - to the point of demanding increased power for the very institutions they mistrust. When moving from any assessment of responsibility to potential solutions, they agree that it is necessary to strengthen all levels of governance. On the national level in particular positions are rather different from those expressed by ESF activists in 2002, and the national level is the only one that registers virtually no difference between the three demonstrations. For the other levels, the GS closely mirrors the total results, with the EuroMayDay scoring approximately 10% lower and LD 10% higher. On average, among the three demonstrations in 2011, 73.3% of the protestors called for the EU to be strengthened (compared to 43% at the 2002 ESF) and 70.5% for the local level of government to be strengthened, while 53.9% favoured strengthening the national level (compared to 22% for ESF) and 51.3% supported the building of institutions of world governance (compared to 65% for ESF).

All in all, levels of mistrust and calls for power to be returned to the political process are therefore substantially high (and apparently growing) among precarious workers and union members protesting in Italy in 2011.

What this appears to indicate is that while the Italian scenario of protest was indeed dominated by

the usual suspects, trade unions, in 2011, union members and precarious workers alike share the radical points of view expressed by the anti-austerity groups that have sprung up across the rest of Europe: there is a demand for substantive, meaningful politics over markets.

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