

# The Anomalous Wave so far: The Education Rebellion in Italy (October - November 2008)

A text on the door of an occupied classroom says:

*“Liberate the classroom XIII. From today, this classroom becomes a laboratory of permanent mobilization. We don’t want to say only no, but we want to construct collectively our (multiple) yes. This classroom is for: study groups about the law 133, Gelmini and Brunetta decree; seminars about the role of the university today; assemblies and moments of encounter and participation. Lecture strike, free your times, participate in the mobilization.”*

## INTRODUCTION

Hi, I would like to say a few words about the “anomalous Wave” movement in Italy, a movement of students and precarious workers that’s opposed to the new Gelmini Education Reform Bill. (Maria Stella Gelmini is the Minister of Education, renamed by the students as ‘The Gelminator’). I have not been in Italy for the last year but I still have plenty of contacts and have had the chance to talk with people that are part of the movement there. I will be brief and schematic and won’t make a complete summary of events but I would like to put forward an analysis of this movement. I’ll emphasise a couple of worthwhile points that, in my opinion, come out of the actions of the movement and of the Italian political context.

Firstly, two quick points to start with. This is the strongest and most determined movement that Italy has known in the education context since the so-called movement of the ‘Panther’ (Pantera) in the 1990’s. Very much in the mind and activities of this new movement is the recent example of the French struggles against C.P.E (1).



*Gelmini as 'Blessed Ignorance' / WARNING: Students Are Pissed Off!*



## THE GELMINI LAW and THE HISTORY OF THE WAVE

On June 25<sup>th</sup>, the Berlusconi government passed the decree concerning the Education sector entitled ‘Urgent provisions for economic development, simplification, competitiveness, stabilization of public finance and tax equalisation’. This becomes the provisional Law 133 on August 5<sup>th</sup>.

Without going into the details of the whole reform, I will highlight only some central aspects here. The Berlusconi government is persevering in the reform of the national education system and in its destruction, a process that was already started during the previous legislature with the Moratti Bill (a former education minister). This program of reform was not so different in inspiration from a previous reform, implemented by the centre-left government in 1997 (the Berlinguer reform) that has begun to weaken the public university system. The new Gelmini reform or Bill 133 has the aim of completely reforming the national education system alongside financial proposals to reduce public funding for

education and research. These reforms concern all levels of education, from elementary schools all the way to university. Amongst other plans, the reform plans for:

- The return to single teachers in primary education classes. (At the moment there are different teachers for different subjects).
- The introduction of a compulsory uniform in elementary schools.
- The creation of separate classes in primary schools for Italian-speaking pupils and for foreign pupils who do not speak Italian.
- The re-introduction of a 'behavioural' mark that can be used to impede a pupil's progress onto the next year.

These proposals are coupled with a reduction on all levels of funding for education. Specifically, there are proposals for a reduction of workers in the education sector and, of course, there are no plans to integrate the millions of precarious workers that have been working in the sector for years. The issue is very similar in the university context, where thousands of precarious lecturers and researchers, who are in effect part of research teams, have no guaranteed income for the future. The reduction of the quality of the teaching would be felt in the primary schools, but would be felt more strongly in the universities. An important issue is the reduction of the workforce and the absence of any solutions for workers stuck in a system that relies on an extremely precarious work culture (especially for university researchers).

The issue of funding weighs heaviest upon Universities. The neo-liberalism of this law is to encourage universities to become private foundations, reliant upon private money. The ultimate aim is to create an education system where there are 'schools of excellence' that access most the available money (public and private). Such a system would eventually lead to the impoverishment of most other universities.

In September, there is an immediate response to the 'reforms' when the high schools and Universities re-open after holidays. A new movement begins. On October 3<sup>rd</sup>, the autonomous network of high school collectives takes to the streets of Italy. Gelmini cancels an appearance on October 13<sup>th</sup> at a symposium in Milan for fear of protests and it is by this time, with classes beginning at Universities, that the first lappings of the Wave are heard: 'We won't pay for your crisis', 'Cut resources to bankers and war missions, not school and universities', 'We are the coming society! We are not the problem! We are the solution'. Week by week the movement grows: in the

elementary schools where teachers, parents and kids unite in denouncing the reforms; the high school collectives network their struggles, often through blogs and Facebook-type sites; in Universities, precarious faculty members and professors join student assemblies and discuss the crisis. New slogans appear: 'We have started so that we wouldn't stop' and 'We shall never go back!'.



*The banner means 'Let's Wash Them All Away'*

On October 17<sup>th</sup>, the national strike called by some Italian unions against the Berlusconi government becomes the first No Gelmini day of action. 300,000 people protest in Rome. Thousands of students, break away from the main demo, outflank the police and block the Ministry of Education. Similar events happen in Milan where a break away group of students criss-cross the city blocking traffic before an assembly of pupils, students, precarious teachers and so lay siege to the Milan Education Department.

The next week, the protests escalate. On October 21<sup>st</sup>, assemblies are being held in many Universities and students once more take to the streets, blocking traffic and then beginning to block railway stations. In Milan, the police respond with baton charges at the Cadorna station. In response, the students begin a sit-in on the roads snarling up the usual movement of city traffic.

Following on from a call out from the occupied La Sapienza University in Rome, a Day of local mobilizations is taken up for November 7<sup>th</sup>, with a follow up national demonstration in Rome, one week later, on November 14<sup>th</sup>. (See Appendix 1 + 2).

## THE FUTURE?

One of the most important events to come out of the Wave has been the two day open assembly held at the occupied Sapienza University in November. This was a mass talking shop to debate and plan the further dynamics and activities of the Wave. Divided into 3 topics,

thousands of students from all over came to discuss 1) Teaching: how the University system has been shoe-horning students into becoming mere 'human capital', the emphasis being on creating a final product – a streamlined and disciplined individualized worker ready to battle for his/her place in the labour market. 2) Welfare and Right to Education: how student fees and debts act as a kind of 'privatised welfare' ensuring servitude, the ideology of work and exclusion for many. 3) Training and Employment: a critical re-evaluation of the neo-liberal aspect of education to once more separate learning from the 'needs' of the economy. One demand would be a social wage for students (and beyond, of course!). What is important is to 'eliminate the hierarchies and crystallisations of power' in the University to enable learning and the production of knowledge to be once again autonomous, inclusive and democratic.

The Sapienza debates were clear and united. The students and researchers are not defending the University as it is. They want 'autoriforma': self-reform of the Universities as written by themselves. The crucial theme of the debates was that any reform must come from below, from the students themselves.

The next mass mobilizations will come on the 28<sup>th</sup> November when a national day of action will see more demos, teach-ins and blockades. A general strike has been planned for the 12<sup>th</sup> December. A radical initiative has been called for a week of actions to be held before the Strike that would focus on the struggle for a direct income through students mass practice of 'auto-riduzione' (self-reduction) whereby only a certain percentage of prices would be paid in canteens, on public transport and for public entertainments (cinema, theatre etc).

## THE MOVEMENT: SOME KEY ASPECTS

### (2) Innovation and Transversality (2)

These two aspects are integral to the movement. Innovation begins with the choice of slogans and the actual forms of the struggle. The slogan "We Won't Pay For Your Crisis" has been very quickly entered the collective imagination. It expresses well both the resistance of students and precarious workers to reforms that will destroy their future, and people's reactions to the consequences to the capitalist

crisis.

The first mobilizations took place in September, when the financial crisis became manifestly real. "We Won't Pay For Your Crisis" has become an expression for a movement that acknowledges the economic reality beyond the boundaries of the education reform. It has given the movement a more transversal dimension: the 'Wave' targeted not only government ministries but also the headquarters of Confindustria (Italian bosses confederation) and the Stock Market in Milan.

The slogan "We Won't Pay For Your Crisis" becomes a sort of collective outcry for all those who are subjected to an existential precarity and to an increasing uncertainty about their future. The movement's transversality is manifest in the composition of the 'Wave' - teachers, students, researchers, parents and their sons/daughters, precarious researchers, university professors, school personnel. This transversality has been successful in creating a sense of consensus. When city traffic is blocked, solidarity is forthcoming (and I assure you that blocking the Via Tiburtina in Rome, without being run over by cars, is already amazing. Doing it amongst the cheers of the drivers is a kind of miracle). During the protests, during the actions and in media polls, a widespread support for this movement has emerged that has few precedents in recent history. Placards hang from windows, in solidarity with the actions and the phrase: "they are right!" often accompany the actions. In recent times this is quite unusual in Italy!



*Blocking the Cities / Blocking the Train Stations*

Another slogan that has emerged is "I am not scared!": this was proclaimed right after Berlusconi threatened to use riot police to evict the occupiers of the schools and universities declaring that 'occupations were violence' (3). This slogan was also used after the

violent provocations of armed fascist groups in some of the demos but I'll return to this later.

This cry of resistance is thrown into the face of the government, the police and fascists. But more than anything this slogan represents an alternative and an opposition to the model of "security before anything" that is used by all Italian political parties as a form of governance (from the super repressive laws of the Right to many of the politicians and Mayors of the Left). The connection made between 'not paying for their crisis' and 'not being afraid' is at the same time a program of struggle *and* a declaration of radical refusal of the imposition of an economic model (starting within the national education sector), of cultural forms (racism) and of repressive actions (police). The movement call itself the "anomalous Wave", referring to the fact that it does not rely on traditional forms of representation, that it is transversal and not predictable. The Wave is more emotional than organizational, more improvised than structured. In relation to its anomalous nature, the recognition of "being precarious" as a common identity is central, as the different subjects that participate in the movement recognise themselves in this condition.

This precarity has to do with conditions now, and also with the prospects in people's later lives.



*The Assembly at Sapienza, Rome 15-16<sup>th</sup> November '08*

## 2. Forms of struggle and the French model

The Anomalous Wave is original and interesting also for the forms of struggle that it has been using. As of November 1<sup>st</sup>, there are numerous occupied universities (at least 20) and dozens of occupied high schools all over Italy, not just in the main cities. In most cities, the movement has organized a series of *al fresco* meetings and lectures. Dozens of teachers (amongst them Left playwright Dario Fo and Astro-physicist Margherita Hack) have given public lectures, on academic subjects but also on topics informed by the movement. This open-air events have been realized by professors, precarious researchers but also groups of students practicing a conscious process of self-education ('auto-formazione'). As well as the open air meetings, the occupied university and school buildings host mass assembly meetings where the Wave is discussed and actions proposed, banners and posters are made up but also the question of education and the institution of the University itself is debated. Some times these assemblies last all through the night where participants speak of 'Free University' and 'Free Knowledge'.

The movement makes itself visible, of course, through strategies such demonstrations, sit-ins, protests at Ministries etc.

One of the most interesting strategies is the blockaded the city: often protests block the circulation of cars in the city centre and train stations are among the most important targets. The strategy of blockading the city is a type of public action that is not limited to the territory of the schools and university, but it has a possibility to invest and involve everyone, not just students.

One of the most important aspects is the non-involvement of the political parties in the movement. The movement is very conscious of the recent historical and cultural defeat of the Leftist parties, and it refuses to be represented and instrumentalised by anyone. The old Leftist student groups don't have much credibility but they go to meetings with the Government.

The relationship with the Unions is purely functional, but the movement is not in a subaltern condition: the day of the union strike on October 17<sup>th</sup> was simply a day of general mobilization for all. The unions follow behind this movement. The Wave is simply more advanced and radical in its forms of struggles than the unions. The strategies of the movement are informed very much so by the recent

struggles against the CPE. Wildcat demos are already part of the modus operandi of the movement and are a widespread practice: people go to demonstrations, they avoid the cops and try to stop the city! The intensity of the actions is also influenced by the struggle against the CPE: it has already been two weeks with demos everyday, with a very strong determination that 'with the Gelmini, we will not return to school!'. There is also explicit use of the French 'manif sauvage' (wild demonstrations) in the language of the Wave.

The movement has also tried to take space in the media with symbolic actions such as the invasion of Rome Film Festival (The slogan: 'This movie is old!') and it has faced on more than one occasion police repression. Berlusconi's cops have baton-charged and beaten students in Rome, Milan and Bologna but they have not succeeded in diminishing the strength of the Wave.

### (3) The Fascist and the Anti-Racist Wave

One of the questions that crops up often in the media: are the Left and the right united in this student movement? Is the opposition of extremes going to destroy the movement. These questions make reference to the rather invasive presence of extreme rightwing groups in the student demos (in particular Blocco Studentesco that is close to the fascist social centres in Rome).

In a context in which the Leftist parties have completely lost their credibility, the extreme right has tried to enter the movement with the slogan 'Neither Red nor Black, Free Thought' (*It's crap but it rhymes in Italian*). This strategy worked for a week during the demos of the high school students amongst which the fascists had managed to be at the front of the demo of 15,000 students. On the 29<sup>th</sup> October, the day of the passing of the Bill, fifty fascists armed with clubs tried to do the same thing in Piazza Navona, Rome but a group of university students and people from the local social centres expelled them from the piazza and the movement. The intervention of the fascists was to provoke the criminalisation of the movement and did contributed to justifying repression.

The Anomalous Wave has often reiterated its anti-fascist and anti-racist character. These values have been evident in Milan where during all the demonstrations there were many slogans and placards for Abba, the young African man who was recently killed by two bar

owners with metal bars whilst screaming at him racist insults. The best response is the scream of thousands of voices: 'Abba is alive. We are all anti-fascists' to demonstrate the importance of these values.

The Anomalous Wave is complex and important in the Italian context. The situation is continually evolving. This analysis does not want to be exhaustive and here after there are some websites where you can find out what is happening day by day.

In English:

[www.anomalia.blogspot.com](http://www.anomalia.blogspot.com)

[www.edu-factory.org](http://www.edu-factory.org)

In Italian:

[www.uniriot.org](http://www.uniriot.org)

[www.globalproject.info](http://www.globalproject.info)

#### Translators Note

(1) The struggles against the CPE (Contract of First Employment) in February to April 2006 saw hundreds of thousands of participants in over 180 cities and towns across France. On March 18<sup>th</sup> up to as many as 1.5 million demonstrated across France, over half of the country's Universities were closed due to student blockades and mass meetings held. Motorways, railways were blocked as well as employers organisations. Nationwide days of action were held and some large Unions struck in the transport, education and mail sectors. On 28<sup>th</sup> March, an estimated 2 million people demonstrated against the CPE. Eventually, after an initial hard line, the government withdrew the CPE and re-write it. The in-the-street struggles against the CPE came in the wake of the November 2005 uprising in the banlieus (suburbs). Due to the intensity of the banlieu conflicts, the state had introduced nationwide emergency measures to break the rebellions.

(2) Transversality: A basic definition of this complicated term would mean 'to go across, through and beyond the usual political practices and processes'. Politics becomes open, transforming, unpredictable, communal, mobile etc.

(3) To highlight this possibility, emails of pictures of the brutal police raid at the Diaz school during the anti-g8 protests in July 2001 were endlessly circulated by school pupils and students after Berlusconi's comments. It was pertinent because the long-awaited legal investigation into that bloodbath was due to announce on Nov 7<sup>th</sup>, the recent national day of actions against the Gelmini law.

## APPENDIX 1

### NATIONAL CALL-OUT, ROME, 22<sup>nd</sup> OCTOBER 2008

To the faculties in mobilization, to the undergraduate and Ph.D. students, and to all the precarious researchers:

“We won’t pay for your crisis”, this is the slogan with which a few weeks ago we started our protest at the university of La Sapienza, Rome. A simple, yet at the same time immediate, slogan: the global crisis is the crisis of capitalism itself, of the financial and real estate speculation, of a system without rules or rights, of unscrupulous companies and managers. The burden of this crisis can’t fall on the educational system - from the school to the university - on the health system or generally on taxpayers. Our slogan has become famous, spreading by word of mouth, from town to town. From the students to the precarious workers, from the working to the research worlds, nobody wants to pay for the crisis, nobody wants to nationalize the losses, whereas for years the wealth has been distributed among few, very few people.

And it is exactly the contagion that has been produced in these weeks, the multiplication of the mobilizations in the schools, in the universities, and in the cities that should have stirred up a lot of fear. It is well known that a fearful dog bites; similarly, the reaction of President Berlusconi was immediate: “police against who occupy universities and schools”, “we will get rid of violence in our Country”. Only yesterday Berlusconi declared that he was willing to increase the financial support to the banks and that the State and the public expense would stand surety for the companies’ loans: in a few words, cutbacks to education, less funds for the students, cutbacks to the health system, but public money for the companies, for the banks and the private sector. We are wondering where is violence: is it a violence to occupy universities and schools or instead that of a government who imposes the Law 133 to cutback the funds for the education system refusing the parliamentary debate? Is the dissent violence or is it violence who intends to put it down by the police? Who is violent: who mobilizes for the public status of university and schools or who wants to sell them for a few private profits? Violence is on Berlusconi government’s side, while in the occupied schools and universities there is the great joy and indignation of who fights for their own future, or who doesn’t accept to be put in the corner or forced to be silent. We don’t want stay in silence in the corner, of who wants to be free.

They tell us that we are only able to say no, that we don’t have any proposal. There is nothing more false: the occupations and the meetings of these days are really building up a new university, a university made of knowledge, as well as of sociality, of learning, but also of information, and consciousness. Studying

is very important for us: and it is exactly for this reason that we think that the protests are necessary: we are occupying so that the public university can endure, to continue to study and do research. There are a lot of things that have to be changed both in the universities and in the schools, but one thing is certain: the change can’t pass through these cutbacks. Changing the university means increasing funds, to sustain the research, to qualify the educational processes and to guarantee mobility (from study to research, and from research to teaching). The cutbacks mean just one thing: transforming the public universities in private foundations, decreeing the end of the public university.

The design and its tools are clear: Law 133 was approved in August, and against the protests of dozens of thousands of students. This government wants to wreck democracy, through the fear, through the terror. But today, from La Sapienza in mobilization and from the occupied faculties, we want to say that we have no fear and we won’t step back. On the contrary, our intention is to make the government retreat: we won’t stop struggling before Law 133 and the Gelmini decree will be withdrawn! This time we will proceed till the very end, we don’t want to lose, we don’t want submit to this arrogance. For this reason we ask all faculties of the Country to do the same: they want to repress the occupations, so a thousand faculties occupy!

Moreover, after the extraordinary success of the general strike on October 17<sup>th</sup>, we think that is the right time to give a united and co-ordinated answer in our cities. We suggest two national dates: a day of mobilization on Friday November 7<sup>th</sup>, with demonstrations spread all over the cities; a huge national demonstration of the educational world, from university to School, on November 14<sup>th</sup> in Rome, the day the unions proclaimed the general strike of the university; a day to be built from the bottom and in which the central figures have to be the students, researchers and teachers in mobilization. At the same time we think that it is useful to cross, with our forms and claims, the general strike of the school proclaimed by the unions on Thursday October 30<sup>th</sup>.

What is happening in these days tells us of a powerful, extraordinary and rich mobilization. A new wave, an anomalous wave that doesn’t want stop and that rather wants to win. We have to increase this wave and the will to struggle. They want us to be idiots and be resigned, but we are intelligent and in movement and our wave will go far!

*From the occupied faculties of the La Sapienza, from the University in Mobilization, Rome.*

## APPENDIX 2:

### **NOVEMBER 7<sup>th</sup> DAY of LOCAL MOBILISATIONS**

*A Short incomplete list of Wave protests to give you the flavour:*

**PADUA:** 10,000 in the streets. 3000 students wander the city blocking traffic before returning to assembly in city centre:

**MILAN:** Thousands in the streets, traffic blocking and a spontaneous demo at the Stock Exchange.

**VENICE:** 'If they stop the future, we block the city!'. 10,000 people block the main bridge between the mainland and Venice. A victory as previously they had been denied official permission to demonstrate on the bridge. A microphone is passed around for any and all to have their say. The crowd affirms the Wave's non-representability and right to speak on it's present and future. Later, students block roads on the mainland and in Venice.

**BOLOGNA:** Thousands enter the Central Station but are confronted by riot cops. The students decide to hold a 'communicative assembly' outside in the piazza. Later, the mass starts again to block traffic in the University district.

**BARI:** 10,000 people demonstrate led by children and teachers.

**GENOA:** 30,000 people take to the streets: Students, union members, teachers and so on. A large procession goes to the main station and occupies the tracks. Later, hundreds of students block the main flyover in the city.

**PARMA:** Two demos go through the streets and converge, after the student procession has blocked traffic in the densest part of town. Teachers and students stage a funeral for the 'Public University system'. Later, three main roads are blocked before an assembly was established in the Piazza Garibaldi, a meeting 'for the whole world to organize training for upcoming mobilizations in the coming days'.

**VICENZA:** 4000 people in the City. Students occupy a city roundabout for a mass assembly.

**TRENTO:** Demos and speeches on the Gelmini reforms and on the Wave. The Faculty of Sociology is occupied with a programme of lectures, public meetings and declarations of solidarity against the fascist provocation in Rome.

**VERONA:** 5000 students, teachers, parents block the entire city.

And so on:

### **ABOUT THIS TEXT:**

This text has been produced (in a bit of a rush) in solidarity with the Wave by some people in and around 56a Infoshop in London. We asked our Italian friend in Paris ([aquietoy.noblogs.org](mailto:aquietoy.noblogs.org)) to write something about the character of the movement and what he sent to us forms the main basis of this text. We've taken a few liberties with their text by adding in some details here and there and by also adding on news of some of the more recent events. The history of the Wave (after the explanation of the Gelmini Law) was entirely added by us. We also added the Translators Notes and Appendix 1 and 2.

56a Infoshop is a long-standing social centre living and breathing in South London since 1991. We sell books, papers, t-shirts and music. We also have a massive open-access archive. But we do not spend our lives in theoretical mode – we also like to act against the pressing conditions of the world as we find it right now. In this sense, this booklet is offer support and aid to the Wave in Italy but to aid and encourage action here in support of own our desires and revolutions.

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