

March 1st: a new kind of strike and antiracist struggle

March 1st has been an important day for migrants' struggle in Italy and Europe. The idea of a French "day without immigrants" started in the fall of 2009, calling to a strike in the fifth anniversary of the law CESEDA, the new rule on immigration and asylum adopted by Sarkozy - at the time minister of the interior. After the adoption of the law CESEDA, a group of Sans-Papier organized a strike in 2008 claiming regularization, with the support of the union CGT. Then, with the creation of the minister of the national identity, France has seen a growing debate about racism and his colonial roots.

From this local perspective, to call a "day without immigrants" meant also to bring into the core of Europe the echo of the US 2006 MayDay, or "Great American Boycott", when millions of immigrants demonstrated against the draconian anti-immigrants law proposed by the Bush administration. The idea was, in France as in the US, to mark migrant's presence though their absence from labor activity and society in general. Few weeks later, in Italy a group of women, migrant and Italian, decided to pick up the idea and try to spread the word through facebook. In a very short time the French day and the Italian day went into the newspapers headlines, with mainstream media recalling the "Great American Boycott": the question was, will Europe see the same uprising? In the following months, groups in Spain and Greece did the same, and march 1st began to mean an European day of action, well beyond the original French idea.

In Italy the group on facebook saw a very quick grow, and in few weeks reached 40.000 contacts, few less than the more organized French group. But, more important, in many places different groups backed the campaign: a new kind of movement was actually growing. Migrant's coordinations, autonomous groups, antiracist movements started to work together with people that for the first time were joining an antiracist movement. After the Rosarno riots and subsequent deportation of around a thousand migrant workers, in January 2010, march 1st began to mean also an answer to the institutional and social racism widespread in Italy.

And the word was running: on march the 1st there will be a migrant's strike! This word, strike!, fuelled the idea of force that was behind this action: many migrants were perhaps for the first time in recent times Europe, decided to hit the production and thus to show, in this way, their role and power. Well beyond the intentions of the promoters, the idea of migrants' strike opened a new space of action for both migrants' movements and antiracists. The transnational perspective of migrants' struggle was clear, and although the French day had local implications, it spoke to all Europe, both because immigration law have nowadays an European dimension, and because migrant labor and migrant labor's struggle are transnational in their very essence.

We decided to be part of this movement and to take very seriously

the idea of a strike, and thus we created the “Coordinamento per il Lavoro migrante in Italia”, with groups and comrades from Bologna, Brescia, Milan, Turin, Mantua and Suzzara, Reggio Emilia and Parma. While the unions labelled as “dangerous” and “ethnic” the project of a migrants’ strike, most of the members of the movement seemed unaware of the true force of a strike led by migrants against the Bossi-Fini law. We must remember that the Bossi-Fini law links the residence permit with the labour contract via the “contratto di soggiorno”: in the midst of growing racism, precarity and the economic crisis, a migrants’ strike would be a powerful message. From the debate with workers and comrades we launched “10 thesis on migrant labor” (see here: <http://lavoromigrante.splinder.com/>).

Nonetheless, most of the participants in the movement were not involved in organizing labor strikes, and the word strike was understood in different ways, as “social strike” or “civil strike”. Although every form of action on march 1st was important, we decided to be inside the movement taking seriously his core. The work of the “Coordinamento” started from below, involving workers and union delegates. While some thought important to look after the unions for their involvement, we organized assemblies with dozens of migrants and Italian workers: if big unions refuse to join the movement, that doesn’t means workers will do the same. Against the charge of an “ethnic” strike, we discussed with both Italian and migrant workers the political meaning of migrant labor. Workers solidarity went beyond pure solidarity: many Italian workers understood that migrants’ deportability and legal blackmailing are a threat to all workers. At the same time, the erosion of migrants’ freedom with the Italian “security law” of the summer 2009 is a threat to the freedom of everyone. From this perspective to call a migrant labor strike is to call a strike from a partiality in order to talk about all labor conditions.

Our intention has been to give a signal of political possibility: first of all, that it is possible for the workers to organize themselves without the direction of the big unions. Most of them realized that soon after their own union refused to back them. Instead of complaining, they started to organize themselves as part of the union, they claimed the union for themselves, and that forced - for example - the CGIL of Brescia to declare his support to all workers that wanted to strike, although without calling the strike. In Brescia a big demonstration of more than 10 thousand people took place three weeks before march 1st, calling for a strike in that day. In Bologna, in a couple of weeks more than five big factories were involved: without any help from unions’ organization, workers and union delegates rallied in assemblies. The strike was thus formally called by the “Coordinamento”, and then supported by factories’ RSU (the workers’ representation within the factories). That happened after an assembly of more than 150 migrant and Italian workers on February 14th. In Suzzara, migrant activists that were also union delegates forced the union to call for one or two hours strike in three big factories. Also in Suzzara an assembly of dozens of people took place few weeks before march 1st. In Turin, activists and workers of the Porta Palazzo market - one of the biggest in town - coordinated their action to block it on march 1st. In Parma and Reggio Emilia the word spread into many RSUs and a number of factories were expected to strike on march 1st.

As a result, on march 1st, the “Coordinamento per lo sciopero del lavoro migrante in Italia” has been able to involve dozens of factories and other working places (see complete list here: <http://lavoromigrante.splinder.com/>): the strike was not only possible, it was there! Strikers were joined in big mass demonstrations of around ten thousand people in Brescia and Bologna, and many other strikers joined these demonstration without any organization. They just decided to strike, by themselves, on march 1st! In dozens of Italian cities there were demonstrations and rallies, including two other big demonstrations in Milan and Naples. In many places, it was the first time ever for an antiracist rally. At the end, march 1st has not been a new beginning: we have seen that only pre-existing groups were able to transform that day powerfully, but it brought a new energy, and a (old) new word and practice into migrants and antiracists struggles: strike! After many years, we have seen a strike outside representation: should we call the migrant labor strike a new kind of strike? At the same time, after years of antiracist demonstrations based on solidarity and the victimization of the migrants, we have seen a powerful mix of action and solidarity, a statement of force: should we call the migrant labor strike a new kind of antiracism practice? We believe we must.

For a photo and video report of the demonstration in Bologna:

<http://coordinamentomigranti.splinder.com/post/22335768/NEW%3A+PRIMO+MARZO++FOTO+E+AUDIO>