

“Salviamo l’Italia”. Demo Diary

Judith Harris (October 26, 2008)



Acres of people filled Rome’s enormous Circus Maximus to protest the government and listen to the leader of Italy’s Democratic Party Walter Veltroni. Government cuts to education are high on the demonstrators’ agenda; so are racism and xenophobia.

ROME – Monday, September 15. Students and teachers in some 70 Italian schools showed up dressed in funereal black, in a protest against Education Minister Mariastella Gelmini, 35-year-old lawyer from Brescia and a member of Premier Silvio Berlusconi’s Forza Italia party. Gelmini plans to restore the old-style single teacher in all Italian elementary schools. Placards carried by some protesters denounced her plan as “Jurassic Schooling.” The minister responded by accusing the



demonstrating grown-ups for exploiting young children. The Government says that, of all the cabinet, Gelmini is the single most popular figure after Berlusconi himself.

Mid-October. In Rome Minister Gelmini is addressing the assembled MPs. In the speech she defends the government's planned school budget slashes of E. 9 billion (\$12 billion) and the elimination of a large number of schools. Inadvertently she gives her critics poison for their arrows by mispronouncing the word *egida* (in English, *aegis*). From what the British would call the back-benchers come snickers, catcalls and guffaws. ([Click here to hear a defense of her and to see her speak, in Italian](#) [2].)

Friday, October 24, midday at the Pantheon. With each passing autumn day the students' anger has increased, and today the tourists in the piazza in front of the Pantheon are stumbling over Rome University students, who are sprawled on the (not terribly clean) paving stones as their professor, standing and gesticulating, lectures. The students listen keenly despite the obvious discomfort and take notes. The same scene is taking place in front of the Senate building, Palazzo Madama, where the pro-government coalition senators seemed singularly indifferent to the student protest against the government's deep cuts in school funding and inevitably in university funding as well. It's a good thing for the open-air classes that the weather is holding warm and bright.

Saturday, October 25, 7:30 am. Protest day has begun. Police are setting up road blocks, and Piazza Venezia is already crowded with young and older Italians, obviously just arrived from outside Rome. They are clutching maps to try to figure out where they are to begin the giant, nationwide march that has been called to support the student demands. Placards in front of the Senate say things like "Roma Libera" (Free Rome), and "We are not afraid of you" (of whom? Police? The government?) More interesting is the sign saying, "We [students] are not going to pay for this financial crisis." Their final destination: the ancient Circus Maximus, where the leader of the opposition Partito Democratico, Walter Veltroni, will speak later in the day. But some demonstrators have moved on to the outlying Cinecittà, blocking traffic there. Police appear nervous.

Saturday, October 25, mid-afternoon. Inside the vast Circus Maximus the crowd is immense. Walter Veltroni and former Premier Massimo D'Alema speak in turns, predicting that this demonstration signals "the end of the honeymoon" with voters which Premier Berlusconi has enjoyed since last Spring. University authorities and respected professors, like those holding outdoor classes on uncomfortable cobblestones, openly sympathize with the students. So does this reporter, but frankly, I muse privately, that honeymoon won't be over until the anti-Berlusconi factions stop shooting themselves in the hoof, as per their open rift with the Italia dei Valori party.

Saturday, October 25, midnight. Most fortunately, the day is over without a trace of violence, and that is a true victory. Students are continuing their occupation of a building at the La Sapienza, the ancient University of Rome whose campus is in buildings designed under Fascism.

Sunday, October 26, morning. Left-of-center newspapers trumpet the success of one of the most imposing anti-government demonstrations in recent Italian history. The left claims a turn-out of 2.5 million, the center speaks of perhaps 400,000, and the right, no more than 200,000. Even if the figure is a "mere" 200,000, this is twice the size of the historic 1970's metal-mechanics' workers march on Rome.

"Berlusconi will make a mistake if he just shrugs this off," concludes the authoritative Stefano Folli, deputy editor-in-chief of the financial daily *Il Sole-24 Ore*. But then, he goes on to ask, does the left have an identity? The answer is: probably not.



Meantime, my own thoughts turn elsewhere: to the Government’s proposal to have separate, short-term schooling for immigrant youngsters so that they can learn Italian and hence be better inserted into the Italian schoolrooms subsequently. It sounds rather a good idea—that is, until I hear, on Radio 3, a well-spoken schoolteacher from Venice saying, “Rubbish. We have had in Venice plenty of immigrants’ children in our schools, and they all learn Italian within three months. There is absolutely no need for such an expensive, useless and latently racist extra schooling, which will also add another layer of bureaucracy.”

In the light of the reasons behind the demonstrations, which is to say the budget slashes for schooling, her words make all too good sense. Is anybody listening?

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[1] <http://ftp.iitaly.org/files/veltroni-alla-manifestazione-del-pd-al-circo-massimo>

[2] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-MuqExiyhY4>