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For the union activists arrested in Italy

On July 19 in Piacenza, Italy, six grassroots union activists have been put under house arrest. They are accused of having set up a criminal conspiracy disguised as labour union activity. This is the latest and most severe assault to the unions that since the early 2010s fight for the rights of workers in the logistics sector.

The accusations included in the 350-page dossier issued by Piacenza magistrates have been discussed in the entire country: the arrested are accused of having struggled to improve workers' conditions in one of the Italian economy's strategic sectors, an industry characterized by high levels of exploitation. It is a serious denigration of labour organizing, as the accusations include collective conflicts, forms of fundraising used to sustain the unions' activities, and the fact that better conditions and salaries have been won from both local firms and multinational corporations. But what else should a union do then?

The grassroots unions that struggle in the logistics industry in Italy, and in Piacenza in particular, are known internationally. Their ability to organize warehouse migrant workers is discussed in both labour and academic circles in Europe and the Americas. Indeed, recent struggles in Piacenza have been among the most enduring and radical. But they are not unique to Piacenza: strikes, picket lines and street blocks cyclically take place in other logistical

hubs, from Rotterdam's port to those of Hong Kong or Los Angeles. If there is something unique to the Piacenza case, it is the level of repression encountered by local labour unions. In the last few years, they have faced violent police charges, arrests, and almost daily lawsuits.

The state of exception endured by unions in logistics in visible in the ad hoc laws that have been issued to strike them. For instance, the 2018 "security decree" of minister Salvini re-introduced the crime of "street stoppage," which punishes with up to six years of prison time one of the main forms of struggle in the industry' that is picket lines to block the circulation of commodities. Just a few weeks ago, a new law introduced by the Draghi government abolished (in the logistics sector only!) the responsibility of multinational corporations when their subcontracting firms, such as cooperatives or temp agencies, fail to pay salaries. This was a well-established tool for workers to fight wage theft.

Grassroots unionism and social movements have already answered to the accusations with a large demonstration that took the streets of Piacenza in a show of solidarity with the arrested. Strikes and other initiatives continue in Italy and across the globe.

As academics, scholars, activists, unionists and workers, we stand in solidarity with the arrested. We call on intellectuals, jurists, politicians, journalists, artists and writers to add their voices to ours as we say: grassroots unions must have full freedom to act; the arrested in Piacenza must be freed.

For additional context (in Italian):
https://jacobinitalia.it/dallo-statuto-dei-lavoratori-allo-statuto-albertino/

https://ilmanifesto.it/arrestati-6-sindacalisti-a-piacenza-la-procura-in-guerra-contro-i-cobas

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