

Student Power

by Chris Rose

When most people think of strikes, they think of factory workers asking for better pay and conditions, or perhaps refusing to work to support a colleague who has been unfairly sacked. It is not often that people associate strikes with school students.

But in Italy, it is different. While in many countries it is absolutely unthinkable, in Italy it happens almost every year. Some people may remember the “Paris spring” of 1968, when in the French capital university students and factory workers all went on strike in a crisis which almost made the French republic collapse, but for many this is a long time ago now. But in Italy, however, the tradition has remained. It seems that almost every autumn there is a reason to protest. Most of the protests are national, like the current opposition to the government’s planned educational reforms, but there are also protests against things like local issues such as heating in the classes or treatment of individual students.

And what do students do to protest? All over the country they go on strike, they have demonstrations in the streets, they occupy their schools, they have lots of meetings and sometimes they try to run the schools themselves for a period, setting up their own lessons and courses.

Are all the students behind this? Well, it’s difficult to say exactly. But what is certain, is that very few students object.

“I think it’s important to show what we feel” says one high school student, “The new school reform will be very bad for state schools.”

Other students are more sceptical. “I think it’s great!” says one student, “It means we get a few days off school.” Another student is openly cynical: “All the people who are doing this...



well, some of them are just troublemakers, others are people who are already planning to become politicians. They want to start their career now.” Others say that the strike leaders are being manipulated or used by groups from outside the schools.

Problems occurred recently when students from one school which was being occupied marched to another school which wasn’t protesting. The strikers stood outside the school and shouted and threw things at the windows. The non-striking students sat in their classrooms and did nothing, but their teachers went out and began to shout at the students from the striking school.

In Britain, and a lot of other countries, such action is unthinkable. Students are not allowed to go on strike, and if they did they would probably face severe disciplinary measures.

The strange thing about this, however, is that despite the number of school hours lost to strikes, Italian students are certainly no less intelligent than their European counterparts. Their national averages are the same as others, despite the fact that on average they spend up to 20% less time in the classroom – with strikes being only one of the many interruptions of the Italian school year.

Troublemakers or not, perhaps there is something to be learned from the Italian way of studying!

After reading:

Match the two parts of the sentences below.

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|---------------------------------------|--|
| 1. Strikes usually | a. are in favour of the protests. |
| 2. In France student strikes | b. go on strike. |
| 3. In Italy school students often | c. had a strong effect. |
| 4. Students go on strike | d. is similar to other European students. |
| 5. Their protests can | e. is very difficult for students to strike. |
| 6. Most students | f. make people think of factory workers. |
| 7. Some students | g. protested more than the students. |
| 8. In one school, teachers | h. take different forms. |
| 9. In the UK it | i. think the strikers' motives aren't clear. |
| 10. Italian students' academic record | j. to protest about all kinds of problems. |

Answers to activity: 1. f; 2. c; 3. b; 4. j; 5. h; 6. a; 7. i; 8. g; 9. e; 10. d