

The Crisis of Italian Universities: A Student Speaks Out

Judith Harris (October 29, 2008)



Students' protests over government cuts to education are mounting everywhere in Italy. Meanwhile, professors denounce the disastrous financial shortages of the university system.

ROME - It rained on the high school students' anti-government parades this week, but it did not dampen their spirits, even though Monday's demonstrations in Rome ended with serious clashes between right- and left-wing corteges, with three high schoolers injured.

The law that chops off funding for schools was approved on Tuesday by the Chamber of Deputies and passed in the Senate today (October 29th). As one of its consequences, those elementary schools with fewer than 500 students, and all of day-care centers with fewer than 50 children, will be closed. Many of the elementary schools are in mountain towns with long traditions of proud local



culture.

The demonstrations against this unpopular government action, justified to avoid cuts elsewhere in the budget, continued all over Rome today. Some schools, such as the prestigious Collegio Romano, whose graduates include three popes, are now occupied by students. Police were out in full battle gear with shields, and to reach my own home I had to have special permission to cross the no man's land in front of the Church of Sant'Andrea della Valle, a five-minute walk from the heavily protected Senate, where the debate now begins before a vote that will make the bill become law.

Besides high schools, disastrous financial shortages are facing universities. On this, I received the following eloquent note from Roberto Casula, a student at the University of Cagliari. These are entirely his opinions, and here they are, lightly edited for clarity:

It took only nine minutes for the Italian Chamber of Deputies to approve the terrible Law Number 133 Tuesday. Under its terms funds for Italian public universities have been cut by 1.5 billion Euros over the next three years, and the public universities are allowed to change their status from public to private. If a university decides not to change status, it will face the funding cuts. Therefore the easiest, but maybe the only, way for a public university to receive the same amount of money as it had in previous years will be to increase student-paid tuition.

As usual, we the students will be the victims of an attempt to reform the university system in Italy. Every year brings an increase in the tuition fees and a cut in funding in Italian universities. Those students who chose public instruction probably will have to pay the same amount of tuition as those in private universities.

The President of the University of Cagliari told us that in recent years the only way to avoid a deficit in our university's budget has been to increase tuition. Fees in private universities are high, and the Italian state already gives money to these universities, trying to put private and public schools and universities in an equivalent situation. The new reform brings the concrete risk that the public university in Italy will be killed.

This is not only a budget problem. It's a problem of democracy and pluralism. The State, in subsidizing the private system, which survives only thanks to the State's help, threatens both the existence of the public university and also the study possibilities for the many students who simply cannot pay higher fees.

Italian students in the Erasmus project this year will not find the same university when they to Italy in the next months.

The law also states that the turn-over in the Italian university has to be stopped. In the next years only one new professor will be hired when five retire. In Cagliari alone, sixty-eight professors will retire and only twelve will be hired.

Meantime, [French Premier] Sarkozy has announced an increase in the university funding. Both Spain and France have spent, in past years, almost 2000 Euro more than in the for each university student, and Germany over 1000 Euro. Italy, by contrast, cut the investments for every student by almost 500 Euro.



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