



March 8th, International Women's Day, a century-old event

E. M. (March 08, 2008)



Saturday March 8th Italian cities celebrated International Women's Day, a century-old event observed in many countries but that has particular significance for Italy, where women's rights and opportunities remain contentious topics of national debate

The large-scale marches held in Rome by Cgil, Cisl and Uil, Italy's most important trade unions, harken back to the highly political founding of Women's Day. Though the holiday is especially popular in the former Soviet bloc, where it benignly acts a sort of Valentine's Day or Mother's Day, Women's Day owes its history to the U.S. women's movement of the early 1900s.

In 1908, when oppression and inequality were spurring women to activism, 15 000 women marched through New York City demanding shorter hours, better pay, and voting rights in the first protest of its kind. Three years later, immediately following the declaration of International Women's Day in Copenhagen, a fire in a downtown-New York City garment factory claimed 140 lives. The victims, all



women—nearly all Jewish or Italian immigrants, either died in the fire or jumped to their deaths. The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire, as the tragedy is commonly known, drew attention to appalling work conditions across the U.S. and to labor legislation, which became a focus of future Women's Day proceedings.

The shadow of Women's Day labor history loomed large in Rome, suggesting that the work of women a hundred years ago was nowhere near done. At Saturday's labor unions rally, Equal Opportunities Minister Barbara Pollastrini spoke out against Italy's disappointing female employment rates. "We must be there in the squares, cities and institutions to hammer home our independence. We ask for more jobs for women, especially in the south."

At 46.9 %, Italy is well below the European Union's average percentage, of 58.8 %, for women in employment. In a listing of individual European countries' female employment records, Italy is second from the bottom, topping only Malta. And though the portion of Italian women that are company directors is comparable to the European average, women remain woefully under-represented in Italian politics. Only 13 out of 78 members of parliament are women.

In Rome The National Feminist and Lesbian Assembly led their own charge a day early. Friday they protested violence against women and defended women's reproductive rights, or in other words, a woman's legally recognized right to an abortion. Much like in the U.S., abortions have infamously been used by Italian politicians as a hook to energize the religious and right-wing electorate. And though abortions are permitted by law in Italy, anti-abortion sentiment runs deep.

In keeping with the spirit of the day, Italy's president Giorgio Napolitano reiterated unequivocally Italian women's pro-choice rights. This was in contrast to statements made by the anti-abortion figure, Giuliano Ferrara, who took advantage of the day to launch his "Abortion? No thanks" campaign. In a crush of journalists and onlookers his wife Anselma, and celebrity feminist Gabriella, were also involved in a heated altercation.

During a day that proved more impassioned than celebratory, in which women, more than in years past, took to the streets with fists raised, other issues such as underage prostitution and the rights of immigrant women were on the lips of demonstrators. Some concepts even transcended left to right-wing party lines. In Milan a local branch of the ultra-conservative Northern League waived the traditional handing-out of mimosa flowers and opted instead for cans of mace. "Rather than mimosa, the women of Milan are increasingly in need of safety", a Northern League representative said. All over Italy it seemed that the mood demanded something more than flowers, something more abiding and with the promise of action.

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