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ROME: Thousands of workers, students, pensioners and unemployed workers marched in heavy rain through cities across Italy on Friday to protest the government's handling of the economic crisis.

A daylong general strike by Italy's largest union curtailed services at hospitals and schools, shut down banks and post offices, while the demonstrations snarled traffic in Rome, Milan and other cities.

With Europe slipping into recession, anger over its economic woes has been bubbling over into protests and unrest across the continent.

Thursday's strike was called a month ago by the CGIL union to put pressure on the conservative government of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi.

In Rome, protesters waved unions flags and held up banners reading "united against layoffs" and "more jobs, more wages, more pensions, more rights."

The government said the strike by the left-leaning CGIL was politically motivated and would further damage the economy, which has contracted for two consecutive quarters.

Berlusconi's administration has passed a package that includes aid to needy families, public-works projects and mortgage relief, but unions want increased pensions and wages as well as lower taxes for workers.

"What has been done so far is completely insufficient," said Elvira Di Ciccio, a CGIL representative.

Many of those who marched through downtown Rome were workers who are losing their jobs due to the global economic downturn.

"There are thousands of people like me in Italy," said Paolo Ognibene, who worked in storage at a mall near Rome that is being shut down. "I have a wife and an 18-month-old daughter, and I don't see any future."