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Workers Revolt: the Demands of the Ciompi

The demographic disaster of the Black Death (1347-1350) and economic troubles of the fourteenth century deeply disturbed the social stability of Europe. Workers and peasants revolted against the rulings of elites across Europe. In 1378 an urban revolt broke out in Florence, Italy. The revolutionaries, the Ciompi issued their demands to the Florentine Republic that was dominated by an oligarchy of wealth merchants. Although concessions were initially granted, by 1382, the reformed rescinded.

Source: The Society of Renaissance Florence: A Documentary Study, ed. Gene Brucker, (New York: Harper and Row, 1971, pp.236-39)

(July 21, 1378) When the popolo, and the guildsmen had seized the palace (of the podesta), they sent a message to the Signoria... that they wished to make certain demands by means of petitions, which were just and reasonable... They said that, for the peace and repose of the city, they wanted certain things which they had decided among themselves... and they begged the priors to have them read, and then to deliberate on them, and to present them to their colleges.

The first chapter, (of the petition) stated that the Lana guild would no longer have a (police) official of the guild. Another was that the combers, carders, trimmers, washers, and other cloth workers would have their own (guild) consuls, and would no longer be subject to the Lana guild.

Another chapter (stated that) the Commune's funded debt would no longer pay interest, but the capital would be restored (to the shareholders) within twelve years.

Another chapter was that all outlaws and those who had been condemned by the Commune... excepts rebels and traitors be pardoned. Moreover, all penalties involving a loss of limbs would be cancelled, and those who were condemned would pay a money fine... Furthermore, for two years none of the poor people could be prosecuted for debts of 50 florins or less. For a period of six months, no forced loans were to be levied... And within that six months' period, a schedules for levying direct taxes (estimo) was to be compiled...

The popolo entered the palace and (the podesta) departed, without any harm being done to him. The ascended the bell tower and placed there the emblem of the blacksmiths' guild, that is, the tongs. Then the banners of the other guilds both great and small, were unfurled from the windows of the palace of the podesta, and also the standard of justice, but there was no flag for the Lana guild. Those inside the palace threw out and burned... every document which they found. And they remained there, all that day and night, in honor of God. Both rich and poor were there, each one to protect the standard of his guild.

The next morning the popolo brought the standard of justice from the palace and they marched, all armed, to the Piazza della Signoria, shouting: "Long live the popolo minuto!"... Then they began to cry "that the Signoria should leave, and if they didn't wish to depart, they would be taken to their homes." Into the piazza came a certain Michele di Lando, a wool-comber, who was the son of Monna Simon, who sold provisions to the prisoners in the Stinche... and he was seized and the standard of justice placed in his hands.... Then the popolo entered, taking with them the standard of justice... and they entered all the rooms and they found many ropes which (the authorities) had bought to hang the poor people... Several young men climbed the bell tower and rang the bells to signal the victory which they had won in seizing the palace, in God's honor. Then they decided to do everything necessary to fortify themselves and to liberate the popolo minuto. Then they acclaimed the woolcomber, Michele di Lando, as signore and standard-bearer of justice, and he was signore for two days... Then (the popolo) decided

to call other priors who would be good comrades and who would fill up the office of those priors who has been expelled. And so by acclamation, they named eight priors and Twelve and he (Sixteen) standard-bearers.

When they wished to convene a council, these priors called together the colleges and the consuls of the guilds... this council enacted a decree that everyone who had been proscribed as a Ghibelline since 1357 was to be restored to Guelf status... And this was done to give a part to more people, and so that each would be content, and each would have a share of the offices, and so that all of the citizens would be united. Thus poor men would have their due, for they have always borne the expense (of government), and only the rich have profited.

... And they deliberated to expand the lower guilds, and where there had been fourteen, there would now be seventeen, and thus they would be stronger, and this was done. The first new guild comprised those who were employed in the dye shops and the stretching sheds, menders, sorters, shearers, beaters, combers and weavers. These were all banded together, some nine thousand men... the second new guild was made up of dryers, washers, carders, and makers of combs... In the third guild were menders, trimmers, stretchers, washers, shirt makers, tailors, stocking makers, and makers of flags... So all together, the lower guilds increased by some thirteen thousand men.

The lord priors and the colleges decided to burn the old communal scrutiny lists, and this was done. Then a new scrutiny was held. The Offices were divided as follows: the (seven) greater guilds had three priors; the fourteen (lower) guilds had another three, and the three new guilds had three priors. And so a new scrutiny was completed, which satisfied many who had never before had any share of offices and had always borne the expenses.

Questions:

1.) Who were the workers who made up the Ciompi?

2.) What were their demands for change in the guilds and the government?