

Italy's right-wing government unveils new attacks on workers

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Since the coming to power last May of the right-wing coalition headed by billionaire Silvio Berlusconi, party leaders and business interests have been chomping at the bit to extend and deepen the attacks on the working class that have been under way throughout the last five years of "center-left" government.

Through a series of bills, public statements and interviews given to the media, the Berlusconi government has outlined a range of attacks on pensions, the right to strike and the 40-hour work week, immigrants, welfare and public education.

Each of these measures is being worked out behind closed doors by government officials along with members of Confindustria, the national group of business leaders which exercises an unprecedented amount of influence over the Berlusconi regime.

A number of bills have already been introduced to parliament and others are being finalized as members of the parliament return following the summer recess.

Pensions: Berlusconi is seeking the elimination of guaranteed pensions for the elderly by 2004. The current pension plan would be replaced with a plan similar to the American model in which the amount of one's pension would be based on the contributions one makes while working. This would represent a vast cut in pensions for millions of low-paid workers and housewives.

This program is actually a continuation of the plan first put forward by the center-left Dini government a few years ago. In addition, the government is considering the idea of changing pensions over to a program in which each worker would invest his/her contributions in the stock market.

Furthermore, the government is proposing to rise the age of eligibility for new pensioners from age 50 to 56. In order to obtain support for this measure, the

government is combining it with a proposal to raise the minimum monthly payment to just under \$500 US. However, Finance Minister Giulio Tremonti hastened to add that this would only come about if there are funds available in the budget; this is an unlikely event since Italy's budget deficit is once again growing.

Destruction of full-time employment: Taking its cue from recent changes in Germany and France, the Berlusconi government is seeking to abolish article 18 of the Italian Constitution, which guarantees workers 40 hours work per week. Hours will fluctuate weekly for all industries; examples given by the government to *La Repubblica* included a range from 32-48 hours in telecommunications and 36-40 in the textiles industry.

Attacks on the right to strike: Workers in industries considered necessary to the economy would be prevented from striking by invocation of a law that has been on the books since the early '90s, but has not been enforced due to the government's fear of the reaction it would provoke among Italian workers.

Finance Minister Tremonti is calling for new laws that would more explicitly limit how often workers in a particular sector (public transport, for example) can strike, and which would threaten workers with stiff penalties should they defy a government order. Welfare minister Sacconi, however, is arguing that the existing laws covering individual trades can actually be interpreted to cover related trades. This would mean that a strike by airline mechanics would disqualify air-traffic controllers from the right to strike for a set number of months.

Other proposals would make strikes illegal unless an online referendum of rank-and-file workers is tabulated and scrutinized by government officials. In such a system, each union member would have to log on to a government website using a special password, and

declare his/her vote to strike.

Criminalizing immigration: Berlusconi's coalition partners, Gianfranco Fini of the neo-fascist National Alliance and Umberto Bossi of the far-right Northern League, have launched a joint attack on poor immigrants. The "Bossi-Fini Law," which will be voted on in a matter of days, will allow illegal immigrants to be jailed in prisons—not detention centers—for up to four years.

Immigrants who are not presently employed will be served with an order to return immediately to their country of origin. They will be given one week to leave, and if they have not left, they will be jailed for up to 60 days and then forcibly expelled and banned from returning for 10 years.

In addition, immigrants seeking to gain entry into Italy from outside the European Union must show proof of a job offer and a letter of sponsorship from an Italian citizen.

Welfare changes: Welfare laws in Italy are being modified at the regional level. Francesco Storace, the neo-fascist Governor of Lazio, the region that includes Rome, has most recently pushed through measure that excludes unmarried couples and single mothers from any welfare benefits whatsoever. Married couples with young children, as well as for those who are disabled, or are caring for an elderly family member will receive a bare minimum monthly income or \$500US, well below the poverty level.

These measures have already passed through the regional council, and it now moves to the right-wing controlled regional legislature, which is certain to pass it, overturning the previous law that provided for low-income families in need regardless of marital status. This measure is being hailed at the national level by the Undersecretary of Welfare, Grazia Sestini, of Berlusconi's Forza Italia, who called it a "political revolution" and an "example to follow" throughout Italy.

Another proposal seeks to attack women's right to an abortion. European Union Affairs Minister Rocco Buttiglione is pushing for a rescission of the right to have an abortion, established only 23 years ago.

Attack on Public Education: Letizia Moratti, the education minister, is calling for the dismantling of the constitutional guarantee of the public monopoly of elementary and high school education.

Moratti plans to institute results-based "merit" requirements for teachers to keep their jobs, as well as hiring private consulting firms to monitor and possibly intervene in the functioning of the school system. The form of testing is slated to change from oral exams given by a board of several teachers to a more standardized form. This has already been derided by the head of the CGIL Teacher's union, Enrico Panini, as "a mixture of the privatization of education and the reduction of knowledge and culture to a commodity."



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