

Muslims, anti-globalization movements labeled enemies of the "West"

Racist vomit from Italy's PM Berlusconi

Stefan Steinberg
29 September 2001

In a brief visit to Berlin last Wednesday, Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi identified Islam and opponents of global capitalism as the targets of a "Western crusade" for "civilised values," in the wake of the terror attacks in New York and Washington.

Berlusconi began his day with a breakfast with Russian President Vladimir Putin, who was also visiting Germany. The Italian prime minister emerged from this meeting with Putin to tell reporters, "Europe must revive on the basis of common Christian roots".

Standing beside German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, he declared later at a joint press conference that he and his host "consider that the attacks on New York and Washington are attacks not only on the United States but on our civilisation, of which we are proud bearers, conscious of the supremacy of our civilisation, of its discoveries and inventions, which have brought us democratic institutions, respect for the human, civil, religious and political rights of our citizens, openness to diversity and tolerance of everything." He concluded, "This respect certainly does not exist in the Islamic countries."

At the press conference, Berlusconi stated that his discussions with the German chancellor had been carried out "strong in this pride, this awareness" of Western Christian civilisation.

In a further remark, Berlusconi expressed his hope that "the West will continue to conquer peoples, like it conquered Communism." Finally, he went on to draw a parallel between the terrorists who carried out the airplane hijacks in America and anti-capitalist protestors. There was a "strange unanimity" between then, he said, both were the enemies of Western civilisation.

Berlusconi's extraordinary and blunt remarks immediately provoked a number of critical responses by politicians in Italy, across Europe and from many Arab countries. Belgian Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt, whose country currently holds the presidency of the European Union, commented, "I can hardly believe Mr Berlusconi made such remarks, because the EU is based on values such as multiculturalism and the meeting of different civilisations."

Romano Prodi, president of the EU Commission and a former Italian prime minister, declared, "Europe, together with the United States, wants to fight terrorism not Islam. I totally condemn any statement that identifies Islam with the groups responsible for the dreadful terrorist attacks. We will not fall in any way or under any circumstances into a war of civilisations. We are building a Europe that is humane and open to all traditions and all religions. We cannot give in to hate and confrontation."

Several French, British and Italian newspapers also published editorials and articles sharply criticising Berlusconi for his remarks, with the British *Guardian* newspaper asking rhetorically, "With civilised friends like these, who needs barbarians?"

Arab commentators also condemned Berlusconi for failing to distinguish between the fundamentalist elements said to be behind the US terror attacks and hundreds of millions of followers of the Islamic religion worldwide.

It is necessary to make two fundamental points, however, in connection with the "outrage" now being expressed by European leaders, politicians and media concerning Berlusconi's profoundly reactionary

outburst.

Firstly, the European politicians now condemning Berlusconi's comments are quite aware that he heads a government that contains openly neo-fascist and racist parties. Nevertheless, they overwhelmingly declared their willingness to work together with his new government following its election in May of this year.

Berlusconi's coalition government is composed of his own organisation, Forza Italia (FI), together with the neo-fascist National Alliance (NA) of Gianfranco Fini and the separatist Northern League lead under Umberto Bossi. Forza Italia has its roots in the media-mogul's own personal business empire, the NA is the successor to Italy's main post-war fascist party, the Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI), and the main pillar of Northern League policy is the demand for the political and financial independence of the wealthy north of Italy (Padua). Following the rightwing's electoral success in May, Fini was appointed as Italy's deputy prime minister and Bossi was made Minister of Devolution.

Bossi is well known for conducting flagrant racist campaigns against immigrants in general and those of Arab origin and with Islamic beliefs in particular. Northern League party propaganda regularly rails against what it describes as "Muslim invaders and common criminals from the Third World". Employing the vilest ethnic chauvinism, Bossi characterises the inhabitants of the Italian Po valley as the "chosen and pure race". Prior to the last elections the League held a protest march through the town of Lodi to protest the decision by the local mayor to make property available for the building of an Islamic mosque.

Although well aware of Bossi's political record, such current critics of Berlusconi as Romano Prodi declared his conviction that it would be possible to work together with the new rightwing coalition following the election of the Berlusconi government in May.

The second point that needs to be made regarding the official political reaction to Berlusconi's comments is that while a number of European politicians and media outlets have made a point of condemning Berlusconi's derogatory remarks about Islam because of the potential fall-out internationally, there is a deafening silence regarding the parallel he draws between terrorism and the anti-global capitalism protesters.

This summer, mass protests against the meeting of

G-7 heads in Genoa erupted in violence following brutal assaults on demonstrators by the Italian police. Under international political pressure Berlusconi was subsequently forced to hold an inquiry into the activity of the Italian security forces and the possible role played by agent provocateurs in Genoa. Some European politicians, visibly shocked by the extent of the anti-globalisation movement, indicated that it was necessary to "listen to the case being made by the protesters."

In the wake of the terror attacks in America, and under the guise of the "struggle against terrorism", Western governments have all increased the repressive powers of the state. Berlusconi's remarks that anti-globalisation protesters must be included in the crusade against terrorism now fall on more fertile soil. He is certainly not alone amongst European leaders in seeing an opportunity to undertake an offensive not just against "terrorism" but also against all opponents of global capitalism and in particular the Italian and European working class.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact