Millions demonstrate in Rome against Berlusconi

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Between two and three million people converged on Rome March 23 to protest the policies of the Berlusconi government in the biggest demonstration in the history of post-war Italy.

The rally was called by the trade union movement CGIL, which was associated with the Italian Communist Party (ICP) until the demise of that organization. The CGIL remains the most influential trade union body in Italy. Originally, the union planned to protest against plans by the right-wing government to gut legal protections for workers against redundancy.

However, four days prior to the protest a government adviser was murdered and an offshoot of the Red Brigades reportedly claimed responsibility. In response, the organizers of the protest expanded its aims to embrace opposition to attacks on democratic rights and opposition to terrorism, as well as the defence of the welfare state.

The rally was an impressive mass demonstration against the Berlusconi government and everything it represents—politically, socially and culturally. The six different marches that streamed together in a sea of mainly red trade union and party banners to the central gathering at the ancient Circus Maximus were clearly visible even from the air.

Together with the CGIL, the entire parliamentary and extra-parliamentary opposition took part in the march—including the most varied, internally divided sections of the centre-left Olive Tree alliance and the Party of Refounded Communists (*Rifondazione Communista)*, which had previously rejected joint action with the Olive Tree alliance.

Also taking part were anti-globalisation groups, their contingent comprising some 200,000 participants, and the movement *Girotondi*, which was founded at the start of this year at the initiative of academics and artists in protest against the authoritarian nature of Berlusconi regime.

According to one observer, the participants represented "in terms of age, sex, occupation and background a cross section of the Italian population unlike almost any other mass meeting—people like those you usually meet everywhere on the street, in bars, behind counters, on the bus."

Teachers marched together with the unemployed, students with factory workers, pensioners with students. They came from all over the country in 10,000 buses, 60 special trains, four ships, private cars and airplanes.

The demonstration of March 23 has effectively destroyed the impression carefully cultivated by the Italian and international media that Italians, or at least a majority of Italians, are firmly behind the government of Silvio Berlusconi. This illusion could previously be maintained because the widespread aversion to the Berlusconi government lacked any organized political expression. In its five years in office, the Olive Tree alliance had prepared the way for Berlusconi with its own right-wing social policies, and then abstained from any effective opposition following its electoral defeat in May 2001.

The main leader of the demonstration was 54-year-old Sergio Cofferati. The CGIL chairman from Italy's industrial north is a member of the Left Democrats, the main successor organisation to the dissolved Italian Communist Party. He is generally regarded as an opponent of the Left Democrats' current leadership.

At the party conference last autumn he supported the candidate of the left wing, Giovanni Berlinguer, who was defeated in his battle against the party's present chairman, Piero Fassino, the candidate of former government head Massimo D'Alema. Cofferati, whose term in office as trade union head is due to expire in June, is now regarded as the most likely successor to Fassino and future head of the anti-Berlusconi opposition.

Cofferati has been a full-time trade union functionary since 1975. In 1994, during the period of the first Berlusconi government, he was voted head of the CGIL with its 5.4 million members. Unlike the leaders of two smaller trade union bodies, Cofferati has refused up to now to take part in discussions with the government on the dismantling of workers' rights. He has justified his stance by saying one could talk about tariffs, but not about rights.

He has rejected the government's current plans to undermine redundancy protection with the argument that when the dam is broken, there is no stopping the flood. This standpoint, distinguishing Cofferati from the Olive Tree alliance's readiness to compromise, has made him popular and contributed to the massive outpouring at the March 23 demonstration. His standpoint corresponds to the mood of broad layers of the population that are not prepared to passively tolerate the attacks launched by the government.

Cofferati's position, however, cannot disguise the fact that his perspective does not go beyond the political framework within which the Left Democrats have operated since their formation. Cofferati's ally, Giovanni Berlinguer, is a younger brother of the former CP chairman, Enrico Berlinguer, who was instrumental in leading the party towards the social democratic mainstream.

Cofferati's stance during the period when his own party friends headed the government is symptomatic of his politics. When Left Democrat government head D'Alema announced plans for massive cuts in pensions in the summer of 1999, Cofferati reacted with loud verbal protests and threats of a general strike. When the government subsequently "gave way" and announced it would cut 15 billion lira instead of 16 billion, he declared the cosmetic change a huge success and called off the protests.

Cofferati's current posture of intransigence towards the Berlusconi government should therefore be regarded as less an expression of a genuine alternative perspective and more the result of his fear that the continuous decline in membership of both the Left Democrats and the trade unions threatens to undermine their control over the growing popular opposition.

Four days before the Rome demonstration, government advisor Marco Biagi was murdered in Bologna. The professor of labour law was fatally shot in his home.

Subsequently, in a long letter an organisation calling itself "Red Brigades for the construction of a fighting communist party" (BR-PCC) admitted responsibility for the murder.

Biagi, who had long been a member of the Italian Socialist Party,

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participated as an advisor to Labour Minister Roberto Maroni (the Northern League) in drafting the labour "reform" law opposed by demonstrators on Saturday's protest. Regarding the controversial issue of protection against redundancy, Biagi is said to have differed with his own minister and argued that modernisation of the labour market should not begin by removing legal obstacles to the layoff of workers.

Previously, Biagi had advised Italy's centre-left government and was a personal friend of its temporary head and current European Union Commission President Romano Prodi. The document on social reform jointly agreed to last month by British Prime Minister Tony Blair and Berlusconi is also reputed to be mainly Biagi's handiwork.

In the letter claiming responsibility for Biagi's killing posted in the Internet, the ostensible perpetrators justified their deed by declaring that Biagi had supported a "new law for the exploitation of work". He was, the letter declared, a "leading exponent of the ruling equilibrium and the relationship between government and trade unions". The aim of the attack was to create the conditions for "transforming class contradictions into class struggle".

Berlusconi immediately attempted to exploit the murder for his own propaganda purposes, seeking to discredit the upcoming mass demonstration. He accused the labour unions of creating a climate that "feeds the inhuman ideology that moves the hand of the killers". In Italy, he said, with reference to his critics, "there is a spiral of violence resembling civil war". He called on trade union leaders to immediately return to talks with his government.

Carlo Taormina, a deputy in Berlusconi's Forza Italia party, expressed himself even more clearly, charging the CGIL with "objective responsibility" for the murder. "They have created the conditions that could be exploited by the terrorists," he declared.

On the evening before the Rome demonstration, Berlusconi made a speech on television where, in the name of Biagi, he praised the reform of the labour market and declared his intention of pushing ahead with the proposals at all costs. "We feel morally responsible to Professor Biagi to continue on the road of reform," he said.

He once again equated critics of his policies with terrorists, declaring that those who sought "reforms" would be the target of considerable hostility and "sometimes even physically liquidated".

Berlusconi's crass attempt to equate a peaceful protest against the government with a political murder backfired. Instead of being intimidated, many people felt impelled to join the demonstration. It was all too evident that the attack on Biagi bore the hallmarks of a deliberate provocation.

Among the many murky questions surrounding the killing is the mysterious background of the assailants. The Red Brigades last carried out assassinations in Italy in the 1970s and 1980s. At that time there was definite evidence of collaboration between the Brigades and right-wing terrorists, who carried out a series of bloody bomb attacks. The latter pursued a "strategy of tension" aimed at creating the conditions for a military or police putsch.

The most prominent Red Brigades victim, leading Christian Democrat Aldo Moro, was kidnapped in May 1978 and executed after weeks of captivity. The murder of Moro, who favoured collaboration with the CP, actually strengthened the right wing of the Christian Democrats. Since then, Moro's widow has claimed that this right wing was involved in the death of her husband.

The Red Brigades were crushed in the 1980s. Its leaders, who were sentenced to long stretches in prison, declared the dissolution of the organisation. Many of its members, who came mainly from upper layers of the middle class, admitted their guilt and declared their repentance.

It is therefore a complete mystery as to who is behind the new Red Brigades, which first hit the headlines in 1999 with the assassination of labour lawyer Massimo D'Antona. Observers regard it as entirely possible that the re-emergence of the Brigades is a provocation by either right-wing circles or state intelligence forces.

Suspicion and controversy were fuelled by the fact that Biagi's own security had been grossly compromised. He had received several murder threats—the last on the day before his murder—and had repeatedly asked for personal protection.

That such threats were to be taken seriously was clear from the murder of D'Antona three years previously. D'Antona was advising the centre-left government in the same capacity later assumed by his friend Biagi in relation to the Berlusconi regime. It is reported that the same gun used in the murder of D'Antona was used in the attack on Biagi.

The murder of D'Antona still remains unsolved. Investigators were astounded, however, by the remarkable knowledge of the public service possessed by the murderers, and suspected the involvement of a "mole" linking the state apparatus to terrorist groups.

Although these facts were well known, Interior Minister Claudio Scajola (Forza Italia) withdrew Biagi's bodyguard some months ago. Scajola was even publicly criticised for his behaviour by labour minister Maroni, for whom Biagi worked.

Biagi's widow was so angry over this negligence that she turned down an official state funeral for her husband and insisted on a private funeral service. Berlusconi had proposed a state funeral for March 23 as a counterweight to the Rome demonstration planned for the same day.

The massive participation in Saturday's demonstration and the prominence of demands for the defence of democratic rights are not least based on fears that the Berlusconi government will react to growing pressure by resorting to methods of violence and provocation. Such fears are entirely justified.

Berlusconi's style of government, based on a monopoly of the Italian media, is assuming increasingly authoritarian forms and the neo-fascists active in Berlusconi's government, as well as backers of Berlusconi (who was a member of the secret organisation *Propaganda 2*), were themselves deeply implicated in right-wing terror circles in the 1970s.

It is clear that the confrontation between the government and its opponents will intensify in the coming weeks. In his television speech on Friday evening, Berlusconi emphasised that he would pursue his attacks on workers' rights irrespective of the Rome demonstration. For its part, the CGIL has announced a general strike for mid-April.

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