

Berlusconi recasts Italian state television in his own image

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Prime Minister and media tycoon Silvio Berlusconi has used his majority in parliament to push through the reorganization of Radiotelevisione Italiana (RAI), the state-owned network of public television, radio and satellite stations. The changes effectively put an end to the RAI as an institution that, to a limited extent, provided a political forum for different social interests—not only those of big business.

The new RAI leadership is the mirror image of Berlusconi's "House of Freedoms" (Casa delle libertà) governing coalition. Members of the prime minister's Forza Italia, some of whom once worked for his Mediaset company, have taken the majority of directorships, while members of Umberto Bossi's anti-immigrant Lega Nord, representatives of the neo-fascist Alleanza Nazionale, and right-wing Christian Democrats control almost all of the remaining upper management posts. Only two persons with left-of-center political affiliations—Antonio Di Bella (Ulivo) and Paolo Ruffini (Margherita)—have managed to remain in leadership roles, and their departments have been severely cut back.

According to RAI's director general, Agostino Saccà, these sweeping changes were carried out with one aim: the reestablishment of political "pluralism" in public broadcasting. In fact, the opposite is the case. The Berlusconi regime has no intention of safeguarding democratic rights. Rather, it has set out to obtain total control of the media.

A consideration of the history of RAI and of Berlusconi's own statements reveals that his House of Freedoms coalition is bent on rolling back any and all advancements in the public life of the country won in the past by the Italian working class.

World War II wrought havoc on all areas of Italy's infrastructure, and it was not until several years after the restoration of a bourgeois democratic regime that radio or television signals could be transmitted. The first RAI (Radio Audizioni Italia), a privately funded organization run by the Piedmont Hydroelectrical Society (Società Idroelettrica Piemonte), was created in 1949, primarily for the purpose of rebuilding transmitters so that signals could be sent. By 1954, a new RAI was launched as a state-controlled entity.

The goal of RAI was to provide a "public service," not so much in the form of entertainment as in the dissemination of information. Another important goal was the spread of Italian as a national language. (In 1950, 80 percent of the population knew only their local dialect). Although the station was publicly owned and run by the state, financing was secured (from 1957) through a

combination of a direct taxation and private advertising.

Despite the RAI's contribution in this early period toward the development of an informed public, the political content of its broadcasts was clearly one-sided. Beginning shortly after the end of World War II, *Democrazia Cristiana*, or Christian Democracy (DC), was the dominant party in government, and it used its power to dominate RAI. As the saying went, "The political parties have their newspapers, the government has RAI."

In the wake of the workers' upheavals of the 1960s, RAI was reorganized into different party-controlled sections: RAIUNO (Democrazia Cristiana), RAIDUE (Partito Socialista Italiano), and RAITRE (Partito Comunista Italiano). Together with more openly political programming came a marked decline in the prevalence of "pure entertainment," such as variety shows, on RAI stations.

While the reform of RAI produced a more politically open media, neither the Socialist nor Communist Party functionaries brought into the network's leadership attempted to develop the socialist consciousness of the working class. In line with their general support for the bourgeois democratic state, they were content to increase the visibility of their organizations and promote their electoral agendas.

Just as the increase in political programming was taking place, the airwaves were for the first time opened up to private broadcasting. By the mid-1980s, Berlusconi had built a huge (and, thanks to his political connections with the Italian Socialist Party, nearly monopolistic) private television network, known as Mediaset. Its programming was devoted to relatively mindless entertainment, such as sit-coms, variety shows, soap operas and sporting events.

This type of programming attracted a large popular audience. In a bid to keep its market share (and advertising revenue), RAI began including more variety shows, as well as dubbed versions of American sit-coms. From a marketing perspective, this strategy worked. The RAIUNO has held onto the top spot for most of the past 20 years. A study by the University of Bologna concluded that by 1994 RAI and Mediaset programming schedules were "analogous."

The stated aim of Berlusconi's restructuring of RAI is the promotion of politically impartial programming. If Berlusconi's consistent use of his own media empire to flood the airwaves with his brand of right-wing populism were not enough to indicate the insincerity of this claim, a look at his recent activities removes all doubt of his hypocrisy.

As he was preparing to reorganize RAI, Berlusconi singled out three political talk show hosts for immediate dismissal. These were Michele Santoro, host of *Sciuscià*; Bruno Vespa, the host of *Porta a Porta* (Door to Door), an extremely popular political debate program, and Enzo Biagi, whose editorial-style program *Il Fatto* (The Facts) has been the top-rated prime time show on RAIUNO for many years.

Berlusconi justified the firings by charging that the talk show hosts were filling the airwaves with partisan slander against him. In fact, only one of these men, Santoro, is even affiliated with a left-of-center organization (Ulivo), and his commentaries have focused on issues that even an American network anchor would be hard-pressed to ignore: the conflict-of-interest issues posed by a head of government who has complete control over nearly every national media outlet, and the existence of a multitude of criminal investigations into bribery and Mafia involvement by both Berlusconi himself and high-ranking members of his Fininvest holding company.

The two other targets of Berlusconi's attacks, Vespa and Biagi, are centrist journalists who have made long careers by staying true to the "pluralist" method, that is, allowing representatives from all political parties onto their shows. For a demagogue such as Berlusconi, however, even this form of broadcasting is intolerable. He wants an unfettered monopoly of the media in order to silence all critics of his right-wing policies.

Berlusconi's proposals have met with considerable popular resistance. An overflow crowd turned out at a public meeting conducted by Italian film director Nanni Morretti, who appealed to Italian President Carlo Azeglio Ciampi to pressure Berlusconi to relent. Leading Italian academics began an on-line petition calling for a struggle for "freedom of information." Noted writer Umberto Eco has proposed that Italians boycott all products advertised on Berlusconi's Mediaset stations.

At the beginning of May, citing the threat of more "slanders" against right-wing candidates, the parliamentary majority asked the Communication Authority to remove *Sciuscià*, *Porta a Porta*, and *Il Fatto* from the air until the completion of nationwide mayoral elections on May 27. Mussolini's fascist government carried out this type of "preventive sanction" shortly after coming to power in the 1920s. In response to this, Article 21 of Italy's postwar constitution declares such action a threat to democracy and expressly forbids it.

Communication Authority President Enzo Cheli denied the parliamentary majority's request. Enraged by this turn of events, Berlusconi's Communications Minister Gasparri acerbically referred to Cheli's judgment as a "personal opinion."

While Gasparri was not able to remove the shows, he has carried through a number of other anti-democratic measures. The new president of RAI, Antonio Baldassare, has expressed his desire to Americanize the network, echoing the phraseology of "impartial journalism" and "pure information" to which US audiences are so accustomed. Although he has called himself "a man with no party affiliation," Baldassare was promoted by the neo-fascist Alleanza Nazionale, which actually blocked Berlusconi's favored nominee, the head of Berlusconi's own *Panorama* magazine, Carlo Rosselli.

Former Forza Italia parliamentary deputy Fabrizio Del Noce

heads up RAIUNO. The news division (Tg1) will be run by another *forzista*, Clemente Mimun. Del Noce has not lost a moment in announcing that Enzo Biagi's program will be quickly moved from prime time to late night.

At the helm of RAIDUE is satellite TV developer and Lega Nord member Antonio Marano, while neo-fascist academic Mauro Mazza will run Tg2. Showing his dedication to the dumping down of the Italian people, Marano has announced that Michele Santoro's program will be moved from Friday prime time to Thursday late night, with the vacated prime-time spot filled by a gaudy variety show.

Paolo Ruffini, a member of the centrist Margherita party of Francesco Rutelli, is moving from the leadership role of RADIOUNO to head RAITRE. His director of news programming is another center-left, Antonio Di Bella, who has been running Tg3 for several years. However, the scope of this division has just been cut in half, with the regional news section to be run as a separate division by right-wing Christian Democrat Angela Buttiglione.

There is discussion of an eventual sell-off of the former Communist Party-run station. Minister Gasparri has stated that such action is a long way off, as the station will need to undergo massive cost-cutting before it can be brought to the market, but he has not denied that the likely purchaser would be the prime minister himself.

Faced with this bald-faced attack on a public entity, which has provoked widespread grassroots resistance, one would expect at least a gesture of protest by the left parties. They, however, have barely come up with a response.

The most publicized intervention came from Francesco Rutelli, whose Ulivo coalition was soundly thrashed in the parliamentary race last May. What is Rutelli's answer to the takeover of the media by a right-wing demagogue? The introduction of competition to allow the market to decide. Specifically, he proposes that both RAI and Berlusconi be forced to sell off one station to a third party.

Other notables on the left, such as former Communist Party leader Massimo D'Alema, chimed in to support Rutelli's proposal. Not one political leader of the official left has called for a struggle to defend democratic rights by wresting control of the public media from Berlusconi.



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