

200,000 protest in Rome vs Berlusconi's legal “reforms”

Chris Marsden
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An estimated 200,000 protesters gathered in the square in front of Rome's San Giovanni basilica on September 16 to oppose legal reforms planned by the right-wing government of Silvio Berlusconi. The legislation is designed to scupper the prime minister's upcoming corruption trial.

The crowd held banners that read “We are outraged,” “Justice for all” and “No Democracy without Justice”, as they listened to the protest's organiser, liberal filmmaker Nanni Moretti.

Moretti, who won the Palme d'Or at Cannes two years ago for his film *The Son's Room*, told the crowd that the protest was conceived following the Senate's adoption of a draft law on “legitimate suspicion”, which allows a suspect in a criminal trial to have the case moved to another court if he can claim the judge is biased.

The bill is set to be adopted at the end of this month by the lower house Chamber of Deputies, where Berlusconi also holds a comfortable majority.

Berlusconi himself and Cesare Previti, a former defence minister, are due to go on trial in Milan later this year on charges of bribing judges in the mid-1980s to win control of SME, a food company. Berlusconi has repeatedly claimed that he is the subject of a political vendetta by left-leaning “red judges” based in Milan and that moving the venue to a more politically friendly location would enable him to indefinitely delay any upcoming trial.

In addition to this bill Berlusconi, who heads Italy's biggest media empire, has angered many by his attacks on workers' welfare rights while he enacts measures to help his business interests. Last year, for example, both inheritance and capital transfer taxes were abolished by the government. It has been estimated that Berlusconi, a media tycoon, would now save at least £210 million if

he were to give his empire, valued conservatively at £4 billion, to his children.

Moretti said, “We have been branded extremists, but that's not the case.... It's just that we like our constitution and we were at first perplexed, then astonished and finally completely pissed off with what is going on in this country.”

“The Italians who voted for Berlusconi were following a dream—and they woke up in a nightmare,” he added.

A major factor in the genesis of Moretti's protest movement—which the film director had described as an extra-parliamentary opposition—is the growing frustration felt by many Italians at the refusal of the Centre Left in parliament to challenge Berlusconi. Some leaders of the Centre-Left “Olive Tree” opposition, including former Rome mayor Francesco Rutelli, attended the demonstration but were not invited to speak.

Since Berlusconi came to power, the social democrats and the Stalinists, in alliance with the trade union bureaucracy, have done their best to prevent opposition to Berlusconi from getting out of control.

At the end of March, two to three million people protested against Berlusconi in the biggest demonstration in the history of post-war Italy. The rally was called by the CGIL trade union movement (Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro), which was formerly associated with the Italian Communist Party (ICP) and encompasses 4.5 million workers.

An eight-hour general strike followed on April 16, when 13 million workers heeded a call by the three main union federations to honour what was the first such national stoppage in 20 years. But soon after, the two smaller unions, the CISL (Confederazione Italiana Sindacati Lavoratori) and the UIL (Unione Italiana del

Lavoro), signed a labour reform pact with the government.

The movement led by Moretti gives limited expression to the popular disaffection with the old workers parties and the trade unions, but no more than this. Moretti limits his criticism of the opposition to complaints of internal bickering, preventing united action. He said he hoped the size of Saturday's rally would galvanise the Centre-Left, pleading, "Please, don't fight among yourselves any more about nothing. Stop squabbling like children. Talk about politics, public education, war and peace, but stop talking about nothing."

Olive Tree's impotence, however, is in truth due to their essential agreement with Berlusconi's pro-business agenda. For example, it was they who in the run-up to the general election, exempted the first £100,000 pounds of any inheritance from inheritance tax. They pointedly failed to pass conflict-of-interest legislation during the five years in office that ended in May 2001.

Following the September 16 protest, the CGIL has called a general strike for October 18 to protest against Berlusconi's economic policies and labour reform.



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