

Italy: Twenty anti-globalization activists arrested in police sweeps

Charged under Mussolini-era subversion laws

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Less than a week after one of the biggest anti-war demonstrations in Europe since the end of World War II, the Italian judiciary and police have conducted a large-scale operation against anti-globalisation protesters.

In the early hours of November 15, police stormed houses and apartments in a number of cities in southern Italy and arrested 20 representatives of anti-globalisation protest movements. A total of 41 persons are subjects of investigations throughout Italy. They are suspected of various offences, including violating article 270/270b of Italian law, breaches of “democratic order” and conspiracy.

The mass demonstration against US war in Iraq took place on November 12 in the Italian city of Florence. The demonstration, which was peaceful, came at the end of the first meeting of the European Social Forum, a week of discussions and debates on the social consequences of globalisation. Many of those arrested last week participated in and helped organise the activities of the Forum and the mass demonstration.

Among those arrested are the two leading representatives of the southern Italian “no global” network, Francesco Caruso and Giuseppe Fonzino. Thirteen of the arrested were immediately held in custody in the high security Trani prison; the remaining seven are under house arrest. Houses were also searched in a number of Italian cities.

The timing of the arrests, directly after the Forum and demonstration, make clear that the Italian state is moving rapidly to suppress the mass movement emerging against war, as well as seeking to neutralise critics of global capitalism and the government of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi.

According to newspaper reports, the state prosecutor’s office in Cosenza had conducted a one-and-a-half-year investigation leading to the arrests. This probe produced a 360-page file on the activities of the anti-globalisation protesters and included detailed surveys of 60,000 emails, the systematic surveillance of Internet sites, the shadowing of suspects, film recordings and wiretaps.

Prosecutors are attempting to prove links between the “no-global” movement and other anarchist movements that have been active in the so-called “Black Blocs,” which were a source of provocations and violence in recent demonstrations at the Global Forum in Naples and the 2001 G-8 summit in Genoa. In fact, recent investigations by independent legal organisations and filmmakers have made it clear that police provocateurs and intelligence agents were heavily active in infiltrating the Black Blocs.

The arrests sparked off immediate protests throughout the country. Several thousands joined spontaneous street demonstrations last Friday in Rome and Milan calling for the immediate release of those arrested. Further mass protests are planned this week in southern Italy and the city of Naples where many of the arrests took place.

Last Friday also saw demonstrations and blockades by striking Fiat car workers organised by the Italian trade union FIOM in collaboration with the “no global” network. According to some newspaper commentaries, the arrests were also aimed at ensuring that protests and disruptions by striking workers did not spill over into a more general movement directed against the Italian government.

A lawyer representing Caruso, one of the accused,

commented in a newspaper interview: “The government is seeking to criminalise the movement precisely at a time when its policies and forms of action are finding more and more support amongst ordinary people and in the trade unions.”

The majority of charges levelled against the accused are based on article 270/270b of Italian law, which was introduced and extensively used by the fascist regime of Benito Mussolini to silence any opposition, and in particular communist opponents of his rule. Part of the notorious *Leggi di difesa*, article 270 enables prosecution merely on the basis that, according to the prosecutor, the accused were planning or conspiring to conduct activities detrimental to the Italian government. Article 270 explicitly refers to the danger of groups aiming to overthrow the economic order of Italy. Under Mussolini in the 1930s, mere possession of a Communist leaflet was sufficient to ensure arrest, prosecution and imprisonment.

The article stipulates that those found guilty (ringleaders) can be imprisoned for up to 12 years. Supporters of conspiracy can be locked up for three years. After the collapse of Italian fascism at the end of the Second World War, article 270 was kept on the books, even as Italian Communist Party leader Palmiro Togliatti became the first post-war Italian justice minister. The government reworked the law following the terror attacks of September 11 and has invoked it with increasing regularity against its political opponents over the past few years.

The latest arrests are a clear warning of the sharp lurch to the right by the Berlusconi government. At the same time, they expose the claims by leading members of the opposition Olive Tree alliance and Democratic Left who claimed that after his election Berlusconi would be forced to take into account post-war Italy’s democratic traditions and moderate his policies. A number of social democrats and “post-communists” who claimed that Berlusconi could be tamed also applauded the “restraint” of the Italian police and judiciary following the peaceful demonstration of November 10.

Now Berlusconi has given his answer. The latest arrests make clear that his government is prepared to move rapidly and employ the most extreme methods to strangle any potential opposition to his government—including the use of fascist laws.

These latest arrests take place in the context of continuous assaults by the government on democratic rights. Berlusconi has made no secret of his contempt for those aspects of Italian law that he regards as obstacles to his drive for economic and political power. Following the sentencing this week of former Italian prime minister Giulio Andreotti to 24 years imprisonment on charges of abetting the murder of a journalist, Berlusconi once more lashed out at Italian courts and complained that “politically biased judges have attempted to change the course of democratic politics and rewrite Italian history.”



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