

Italian election campaign begins with anti-Berlusconi opposition backing austerity candidate

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President Carlo Azeglio Ciampi officially launched Italy's national election campaign when he dissolved parliament earlier this month. On April 9 and 10, voters will elect a new parliament and determine the country's new government.

Unofficially, the campaign has been raging for several weeks. The level of debate has been so vulgar that even the archconservative Swiss newspaper *Neue Züricher Zeitung* was compelled to observe that “for the sake of (Italy's) political and psychological health, the country is very much in need of a change.”

The incumbent prime minister, Silvio Berlusconi, who owns the nation's three biggest television stations and controls the three state channels, has been making non-stop appearances on all channels, showering his opponents with abuse.

In prime-time television interviews, the sun-tanned government leader typically greets the journalists who are to interview him, accompanies them to their seats, and then spends 90 percent of the air time posing questions to himself and answering them at great length, while the show's host stands in the background with head bowed.

Berlusconi has managed even to offend the Catholic Church. Having compared himself with Napoleon (“Only Napoleon has accomplished more than me, but I'm greater than him”) and Winston Churchill (“I'll fight against the communists just as fiercely as Churchill did against the Nazis”), he finally compared himself to Jesus Christ (“I am the Jesus Christ of politics. Long suffering, I take everything upon my own shoulders. I sacrifice myself for everybody”). This was considered by some bishops to have overstepped the mark.

It can be argued that, with the possible exception of George W. Bush, no other contemporary political leader embodies the social, political and cultural decline of bourgeois democracy more patently than Berlusconi. One is inevitably reminded of Marx's description of Louis Bonaparte, the nephew of the first Napoleon, who instigated a coup d'état in 1851 and went on to rule France as Napoleon III. Marx wrote that Louis Bonaparte based himself on the “scum, offal, refuse of all classes” and conceived “the historical life of the nations...as a masquerade in which the grand costumes, words, and postures merely serve to

mask the pettiest knavery.”

Berlusconi's tenure has been full of such “petty knavery.” Although corruption is a universal phenomenon, it would be difficult to find another government that exploits executive power to its own advantage so shamelessly and unscrupulously.

Berlusconi has changed the law several times in order to free himself and his business empire from the restraint of the judiciary. (At one point, a judge found him guilty of bribing judges, other forms of corruption, and contact with the Mafia.)

Other legal amendments have guaranteed him a monopoly of the media, in the process boosting his companies' profit margins. According to *Forbes* magazine, Berlusconi's private fortune has grown by more than \$4 billion during his term of office.

Berlusconi has initiated changes in voting rights and in the constitution so as to improve his reelection prospects. He has repeatedly attacked the independence of the judiciary and denounced judges and public prosecutors as “red gowns” and “communists.”

The coalition of parties upon which Berlusconi rests has its roots in a murky world of right-wing politics with which no respectable bourgeois politician in Europe two decades ago would have involved himself.

Berlusconi's own party, Forza Italia, is little more than the long arm of his business empire. Forza Italia's leading representatives are Berlusconi's intimate associates, who accompanied him in his rise from stage performer and vacuum cleaner salesman to become the richest man in Italy. They themselves are in continual conflict with the law.

The National Alliance is the successor organisation of Mussolini's fascists. The Northern League is infamous for its xenophobic campaigns. The United Christian Democrats are the rump of the Christian Democrats, which disappeared in a storm of corruption at the beginning of the 1990s.

Against this background, the question must be posed: How was it possible for Berlusconi to hold onto power for five years as prime minister—a historical first in Italian politics—and put himself up for election once again? Although current surveys place the governing coalition about 5 percent behind its

opponents, a further term in office for Berlusconi is not excluded.

Reference to Berlusconi's power over the media provides only a partial answer to this question. The possibility of manipulating and influencing public opinion plays an important role in modern life. However, it has definite limits. In spite of his media empire, millions of Italians have at various times mobilised to oppose his policies.

In the spring of 2002, 500,000 people demonstrated against infringements on the rule of law; and on another occasion, 2 million marched to protest the dismantling of the welfare state. Thirteen million took part in a national strike to defend job security provisions.

In autumn of the same year, the country was inundated by a wave of strikes, rallies and workplace protests against the destruction of 300,000 jobs. Thirteen million people participated in a further national strike. In the spring of 2003, Italy was the scene of the greatest demonstrations in Europe against the war in Iraq—a war that Berlusconi supports. In Rome alone, 3 million protestors took to the streets.

What has enabled Berlusconi to survive this widespread resistance, above all, is the bankruptcy of the official political opposition, particularly its left wing. All of the opposition parties—from a section of the Christian Democrats on the right to the successor organisations of the Communist Party on the left—have closed ranks behind Romano Prodi, the former president of the European Union Commission.

Prodi's electoral problems are not, as some commentators contend, rooted in his professorial persona and lack of charisma. After five years of Berlusconi, a serious image could be an electoral advantage. The problem is that Prodi so thoroughly embodies the interests of Italian and European capitalism, under which the great majority of the Italian people are suffering ever-worsening economic and social conditions.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Prodi, a professor of economics and former Christian Democrat, headed Italy's largest industrial holding and initiated its privatisation. Leading a left-of-centre coalition, he took over government for the first time in 1996 and prepared the country for the introduction of the euro by implementing a rigid course of cost cutting. Three years later, he moved to the head of the EU Commission, where he was responsible for the policy of eastward expansion and the preparation of the EU constitution, which was later to founder after being defeated in referendums in France and the Netherlands.

Now, he is promising a programme of drastic economic and social measures. A 300-page election programme, signed by all 11 parties of the opposition alliance, was announced by Prodi with the words, "Small corrections are not enough. We need radical reforms."

By "reforms" is meant a policy of rigorous cuts in social welfare, labour benefits and other budgetary expenditures that Berlusconi had promised to carry out but, to the disappointment

of his backers in the business world, was not able to achieve. Prodi intends to regain control of public finances, which went off course under Berlusconi, new indebtedness having shot up well beyond the 3 percent limit allowed by the EU. Prodi is advocating a programme similar to that of the newly installed chancellor of Germany, Angela Merkel.

With all of the opposition parties lining up behind this programme, the working class has absolutely no means via the ballot box to defend itself against the assault on its social rights and conditions.

Thanks to Prodi's right-wing programme, Berlusconi and his partners in the National Alliance can even pose as populist champions of the "man in the street." While Prodi announces tough social welfare and labour market reforms, Berlusconi makes demagogic promises of higher pensions, the creation of a million new jobs and a house or flat for every Italian.

The largest party in Prodi's alliance, the Democratic Left, has been moving steadily to the right ever since it emerged from the Communist Party at the beginning of the 1990s. It has come to regard the Democrats in the US as its model.

It is so enmeshed in the Italian business world that its chairman, Piero Fassino, has been caught up in a scandal even as the election campaign gets underway. Berlusconi's own newspaper *Il Giornale* has published telephone recordings revealing dubious business arrangements between Fassino and the head of the Unipol insurance company. Since then, the Unipol boss has faced investigation by the authorities for large-scale embezzlement. Berlusconi has sought to exploit the affair to present himself as the champion of moral values in politics.

Even more important than the role played by the Democratic Left is that of *Rifondazione Comunista*, (Communist Refoundation), also a successor of the Communist Party. In contrast to the Democratic Left, Rifondazione has always tried to present itself as the socialist alternative. Although it supported Prodi in parliament in the 1990s, it was seen by radical groups throughout Europe as the model for a new party of the left. Most of Italy's radical groupings—including many so-called Trotskyists—dissolved themselves into Rifondazione.

Now, Rifondazione is showing its true colours by supporting Prodi and his anti-working class programme unreservedly and declaring its willingness to assume governmental responsibility in the event of an election victory. As with the PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism) in Germany and the Communist Party in France, this course would make it directly responsible for the attacks on the working class.



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