

Italian right wing mobilizes against Prodi government

Marianne Arens
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Eight months after losing the April parliamentary elections the Italian right are continuing to contest their defeat.

Last week, under pressure from the right-wing opposition, the Electoral Oversight Committee of the Senate, the second chamber of parliament, decided to permit the examination of 700,000 blank and invalid ballot papers in seven regions. If irregularities are found the checks will be extended into other regions and any valid ballots will be included in a recount. Since the election result was extremely close it cannot be excluded that this process could result in a change of government.

Silvio Berlusconi, the loser in the election, has already raised the issue of electoral fraud, continually designating the centre-left government of Romano Prodi as “illegitimate.” Now he is crowing over the decision to examine the ballot result.

There are clear indications, however, that it was not the Prodi camp that falsified the election result, but rather those supporting Berlusconi. Enrico Deaglio, editor-in-chief of the magazine *Diario*, recently presented a documentary accusing the right wing of manipulating a computer system to falsify the results in their favour.

In contrast to the right wing, which exhibits brazen audacity when making its accusations, the defence mounted by the government camp is limp and weak, seeking appeasement and conciliation. In the Senate the government parties even voted to support the examination of ballot papers. They justified their capitulation to Berlusconi’s pressure with the argument that this could “detoxify” the political climate and make political debate more objective. Accordingly, Berlusconi would then have no grounds for calling the government illegitimate—as if this right-wing demagogue has ever worried about the truth of his accusations!

Berlusconi is not limiting his efforts to bring down the Prodi government to merely contesting the election result. He is mobilizing dissatisfied middle-class layers and lumpen social elements, urging them to take to the streets. And he is quite prepared to engage in an open pact with fascist elements.

On Saturday, December 2, a large right-wing demonstration cheered Berlusconi when he appeared in the Piazza San Giovanni in Rome. Estimates of the number of participants stretch from “tens of thousands” to over 700,000 (according to

the police), up to an improbable “2 million”—which is the figure boasted by Berlusconi’s Forza Italia.

But even if it were “only” a hundred thousand, such a mass demonstration by the opposition, with right-wing populists and neo-fascist demagogues at its head, is a serious warning to the Italian working class. The betrayal of the old workers’ parties, which reached its zenith when Rifondazione Comunista (Communist Refoundation) entered the Prodi government and supported the 2007 budget, provides the reactionary forces around Berlusconi with an opportunity to gain a mass public hearing.

On an enormous stage, with several giant video screens, the media mogul Berlusconi stood alongside Gianfranco Fini, the head of the neo-fascist Alleanza Nazionale (National Alliance) and Umberto Bossi, chairman of the separatist Lega Nord (Northern League). Beside them stood Alessandra Mussolini, the granddaughter of *Il Duce*, who now leads her own neo-fascist party named Alternativa Sociale (Social Alternative). Over their heads, a banner read: “Against the government—for freedom.”

Berlusconi is presently facing court cases for fraud, tax evasion and false accounting. Although his own term in office as prime minister was devoted to ensuring that the wealthy were able to massively increase their fortunes, he has now accused his replacement Romano of governing “against the people,” against the interests of families, schools, pensioners, entrepreneurs and big business. His speech contained no programmatic statements of his own, but was replete with demagogic allegations against Prodi, whom he accused of resting on “communist barbarism.”

The demonstration deliberately sought to encourage nationalist sentiments. It was accompanied by the playing of the national anthem and the waving of the Italian national colours. In his speech, Berlusconi appealed to the Italian fatherland and traditions, and concluded with the cry: “Long live Italy, long live liberty!” standing for several minutes with his right arm raised, in the manner of Mussolini, basking in the glory of crowd’s shouts of “Viva!”

Openly fascist groups marched on the demonstration, screaming “Duce, Duce,” behaving raucously and giving the fascist salute; shouting slogans against Muslims, blacks and

homosexuals. However, this represented a minority of the demonstration.

The majority were angry small businessmen and women, traders, the self employed, etc. Groups of disoriented workers and young people also participated shouting slogans including, “Fewer taxes—more freedom.” Prodi’s tax policy was said to have “stripped people bare.” On banners, the prime minister was depicted as Pinocchio, with an enormous nose, or as a vampire called “Vamprodi” who “sucks our blood and then devours us.”

The background and impetus for the demonstration were the austerity measures contained in the budget proposed by Finance Minister Tommaso Padoa Schioppa, which parliament only recently passed after Prodi had linked it to a vote of confidence. The budget contains tax increases for small business, which were drafted by the Minister for Social Affairs Paolo Ferrero (Rifondazione Comunista). The budget foresees taxes rising for those with a yearly income above €40,000 (\$53,000). The highest tax rate will in future begin at €75,000 (\$99,000) rather than €100,000 (\$132,000). In addition, the government wants to intensify the fight against tax evasion.

Despite the additional receipts this will provide, the 2007 budget will slash over €33 billion (\$43.5 billion), above all through cuts in social spending. This is how the Prodi government intends to balance the budget and bring Italy’s deficit below the European Union maximum of 3 percent of gross domestic product.

The tax increases for small business will not benefit the economically worse-off, but are designed to make Italy fit for a capitalist offensive on the European and global markets. Prodi is under pressure to do this from the banks and the employers association Confindustria, whose boss Luca Cordero di Montezemolo has for years been demanding the government take “courageous steps against waste.”

Working people, whom Prodi can thank for his election victory in the spring, are increasingly turning away from his government. A few weeks earlier, Rome saw two protests by tens of thousands of workers, public servants, the unemployed and those in precarious employment demonstrating against the new budget. According to one opinion poll, the government no longer has the support of a majority of the population.

But the anger and combativity of the working class finds no political expression within the established parties. Rifondazione Comunista, which for a long time presented itself as left-wing alternative, has been a part of the Prodi government since May and shares responsibility for its policies of cuts and attacks on social programmes.

Social Affairs Minister Paolo Ferrero (Rifondazione Comunista) has supported the attacks on the health service, on pensions, education and public transport. Claiming that “the rich are also crying,” he says that the wealthy must also make some sacrifices. Rifondazione has thus abandoned any opposition to the austerity measures contained in the budget,

leaving this to the right wing.

Whether Prodi’s budget will find support in the Senate is not certain, since the government only has a paper-thin majority in the upper chamber. Prodi is trying to expand his basis of support by seeking a rapprochement with the Catholic Christian Democrats of the UDC. In the past, the UDC was a coalition partner of Berlusconi, but more recently it distanced itself from the December 2 demonstration in Rome, organising its own protest meeting in Palermo. “He is even trying to legitimize tax evasion,” UDC leader Pierferdinando Casini was quoted saying about his former ally Berlusconi.

An alliance with the UDC would mean a further move to the right by the Prodi government, which could thereby reduce its dependence on Rifondazione and raise the pace of economic liberalisation.

This development shows the real significance of the political perspective of Rifondazione Comunista. One-and-a-half years ago, Fausto Bertinotti, then the party’s general secretary who today is president of the chamber of deputies, justified supporting the Prodi camp with the argument that this was necessary to throw Berlusconi out of office. It was only in this way that a “new epoch of social reforms” would be possible, he claimed at the time: “Those who are not able to contribute to the implementation of this goal will disappear from the political scene and lose their support among the masses.”

Today, it is clear that Rifondazione’s subordination to the bourgeois Prodi government has enabled it to make even harsher attacks on the working class. Rifondazione supports these attacks and has abandoned the masses to the demagogy of the right wing. Nothing could more clearly illustrate the urgent task of building a new, independent party for working people in Italy.



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