

Italy: 100,000 demonstrate against expansion of US base in Vicenza

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On February 17, some 100,000 protesters marched in the north Italian city of Vicenza against the planned expansion of the US Ederle military base. The six-kilometre-long march was also directed against the US war in Iraq and the foreign policy of the centre-left Italian government of Prime Minister Romano Prodi.

“Prodi Vergogna” (“Shame on You, Prodi”) could be read on many banners. Protesters, who came from all parts of Italy, carried hundreds of banners, pennants and hand-painted posters criticising the Iraq war.

The demonstration remained completely peaceful, although the government and media had sought to stoke up fears of possible acts of terrorism. Sewer covers had been welded shut in the city centre of Vicenza, thousands of police and Carabinieri were mobilised, and police helicopters circled continuously overhead.

The main demand of demonstrators was an immediate end to military interventions by Italian forces. “It is not just about the American base,” one participant told the Reuters news service “It is about the fact that bomber aircraft fly directly from this base to intervene in countries where war is raging.”

At the end of the protest, the well-known playwright and Nobel laureate Dario Fo performed a short piece with his wife Franca Rame and others. Fo explained to the press that he was opposed to any such military base, whether it be Italian or American. He warned that the presence of the US base could make Vicenza a possible target in any military conflict.

The expansion of the US military presence in Vicenza has the support of the Prodi government. Prime Minister Prodi explicitly confirmed the decision made by his predecessor, Silvio Berlusconi, at the beginning of the year and gave official approval for the expansion of the base.

The development of the Ederle barracks and the Dal

Molin military airport in Vicenza is of great importance for the US military. More US soldiers are currently active on Italian soil than at any other time since the end of the Second World War and the Cold War. The Pentagon is realigning its troop levels in Europe in line with a future attack on Iran, in which Italy, for geographical reasons, would play an important role.

Vicenza is to be expanded by the year 2010 to become the most important European base for US deployments in Europe, the Middle East and Africa. The base is to house the entire 173rd US Air Brigade, whose units are currently divided between the German bases of Bamberg and Schweinfurt. The 173rd Brigade participated in the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and is active in Afghanistan.

Italy houses other important bases for the US military, including Camp Darby near Pisa and Sigonella in the Sicilian Islands. The US Navy also has bases at Gaeta, Taranto and Naples.

The US Air Force base at Aviano is located at the foot of the Dolomites, just a hundred kilometres from Vicenza and, according to the newspaper *Il manifesto*, is where the US has stockpiled at least fifty tactical nuclear bombs.

Italy has been a reliable member of NATO since the Second World War. Since last year’s election defeat of Berlusconi, the Bush administration has been able to rely on the continuing support of the Italian government led by Prodi. The prime minister does not want to endanger the traditionally close military and intelligence links between Italy and the US, and has refrained from any criticism of the Washington’s belligerent foreign policy.

Predictably, Prodi has also refused to cooperate with the attempt by public prosecutor Armando Spataro to bring charges against CIA agents who collaborated

with the Italian military secret service SISMI in the illegal “rendition” in 2003 of Abu Omar, who possesses an Italian passport. The main obstacle to any successful trial of the CIA agents is the stance taken by Prodi, who has declared that important information relating to the cooperation between the CIA and the Italian military secret service constitutes a state secret.

The Rifondazione Comunista (Communist Refoundation) has played a particularly devious and cynical role in covering for the foreign policy of the Prodi government. Rifondazione has been part of the Prodi coalition since May 17, 2006, and has one cabinet minister (Paolo Ferrero), one deputy minister and six state undersecretaries in the government.

Despite the fact that Rifondazione declares its opposition to militarism, and some prominent Rifondazione politicians took part in the demonstration in Vicenza, the organisation has continued to back the government. Following an appeal by Prodi for members of his cabinet to boycott the demonstration, arguing that “the government cannot demonstrate against itself,” Rifondazione leaders responded by staying away from the protest—sending other Rifondazione representatives in their place to Vicenza.

In the words of the secretary of the CGIL trade union, Oscar Mancini, “Our aim is not to bring down the Prodi government, but to force it to reverse a false decision.” For his part, Giovanni Russo Spina, the Senate parliamentary leader of Rifondazione, declared that the protest was directed against “the decision to double the US base” and warned the government that its stubborn stance on the issue could cost it one-and-a-half million votes.

In reality, the demands of the demonstration were palpably and clearly directed against the government. The clear and overwhelming demand was for an end to all further preparations for war and the withdrawal of all troops—whether Italian or American—from Afghanistan, Iraq and Lebanon.

In the aftermath of the demonstration, a number of Rifondazione deputies in the Senate either abstained or voted against a motion calling for support for the government’s foreign policy. The vote is seen, in particular, as an obstacle to the government’s plans to increase the number of Italian troops in Afghanistan.

At the moment, Italy has 1,900 soldiers active in Afghanistan as part of the NATO operation in the

country. The vote on Wednesday means Italy may not comply with NATO requests for an increase in troop numbers, under conditions where fighting and hostilities are intensifying, in particular in the south of Afghanistan.

For its part, Rifondazione has already made clear it is not opposed in principle to military operations by the Italian army. Just six months ago the organisation gave its seal of approval to the dispatch of Italian troops to the coast of Lebanon as part of the UNIFIL mission in the region, and it continues to support this deployment.



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