

Italy: Communist Refoundation gives Prodi a blank check for right-wing policies

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Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi is preparing to resume his duties as head of government following his sudden resignation last week. On Saturday, Italian President Giorgio Napolitano rejected Prodi's resignation and asked him to organise votes of confidence this week in both chambers of parliament. Should he obtain a majority, he is to continue to govern as head of his center-left coalition.

This latest development makes clear that Prodi's resignation was aimed at imposing discipline within his governing coalition of nine parties. Prodi was particularly keen to bring into line his coalition partner Communist Refoundation (Rifondazione Comunista)—the Stalinist successor party to the dissolved Italian Communist Party. Despite the party's participation in the ruling coalition, representatives of Communist Refoundation took part recently in protests against the government.

Just a week ago, more than 100,000 people marched in the northern city of Vicenza to oppose the Prodi government's support for US plans to expand its Ederle military base in the city. The demonstration also denounced the deployment of Italian troops in Afghanistan, the US war in Iraq, and the Italian government's collusion with American militarism. Banners bearing the slogan "Shame On You, Prodi" were prominent on the march, in which some Communist Refoundation functionaries took part.

Four days later, on February 21, Communist Refoundation Senator Franco Turigliatto joined with Fernando Rossi of the Italian Communist-Green Party and a handful of conservative senators-for-life in abstaining in a vote on the foreign policy of the Prodi coalition. The foreign policy motion called for support for the government's plans to increase the deployment of Italian troops in Afghanistan and expand the US base in Vicenza. The latter move is widely regarded as an important element in plans for a US military strike against Iran.

As a result of the abstentions, the motion was defeated. To the surprise of many, Prodi immediately tendered his resignation, but President Napolitano called on him to continue the affairs of state until a solution to the crisis could

be found.

On Thursday night Prodi assembled a number of party chiefs of his Unione coalition for a crisis meeting which lasted into the early morning. At the meeting Prodi presented his coalition partners with an ultimatum. He submitted a 12-point programme and demanded that they accept and unconditionally support it, or he would definitively step down as prime minister and remove himself from political life. All of those present, including Franco Giordano, the head of Communist Refoundation, agreed to Prodi's terms.

A number of leaders of so-called "left" parties in the coalition attempted to justify their capitulation to Prodi by arguing it was the only way to prevent a return to power by the right-wing government of former prime minister Silvio Berlusconi. In fact, by signing on to Prodi's 12-point programme, they pledged their support for policies that could have been dictated by Berlusconi.

The 12 points are directed against the demands being raised by broad sections of the population that have taken to the streets in a series of major demonstrations in recent months. In their totality, the demands represent an open challenge to the working class.

The first point is for a continuation of Italy's current military missions in Afghanistan and Lebanon and the expansion of the US base at Vicenza. "International obligations will be respected," the text declares, and then goes on to specify these obligations: "Stable support for our foreign policy and defence initiatives within the context of the UN and our international obligations arising from the European Union and the Atlantic Alliance—in particular, our current task in the Afghanistan mission." A renewed vote on financing of the Afghanistan mission is to be held within the next three weeks.

Another point affirms plans for Italian ports to acquire technology to process liquefied gas, in order to decrease Italy's dependence on oil and gas supplies from Russia. This represents a repudiation of recent protests by environmental groups opposing such a development.

In other points, Prodi affirms his intention to press ahead

with attacks on the conditions of working people at home, including so-called “liberalisation” in the fields of education, trade, services and pensions. Prodi is insisting on a standardisation of pension schemes.

The background to this project is a debate that took place within the government at the beginning of the year. Communist Refoundation had sought a return to the system that had been abolished by the previous Berlusconi government. The post-war system awarded a full pension from the age of 57 for all workers who had paid pension contributions for at least 35 years. Prodi wants to avoid a return to this system and favours instead an increase in the retirement age together with a turn to private pension schemes.

Point 3 of the programme commits all coalition parties to support large-scale infrastructure projects such as the European high-speed train link (TAV—Treno ad’Alta Velocità) from Lyon to Turin. The construction of the TAV route requires, among other things, the construction of a huge tunnel. This plan has been opposed for months by a local protest movement backed by Communist Refoundation and the Greens.

A section on family policy affirms the traditional conservative form of family life. The so-called “Dico,” which affirmed equal opportunity for both heterosexual and homosexual partnerships, has been struck from the government programme. The Vatican and Christian Democrats had in recent weeks organised a virulent campaign against this measure.

Points 11 and 12 are especially noteworthy. In these, Prodi demands authority to operate without any effective check by his coalition partners.

In future, Prodi alone will have the authority to resolve conflicts within the coalition. Silvio Sircana, the speaker for the prime minister, will speak on behalf of the entire government, and Prodi will be able to take an independent stance on any issues in dispute within the Unione coalition.

The newspaper *Il Manifesto* featured a photo of Prodi on its front page with the headline: “L’Unione sono Io” (“I am the Union”), a reference to the utterance of French King Louis XIV: “I am the state.”

With their acceptance of the 12 points, the nine government parties, including Communist Refoundation, the Left Democrats and the Greens, have given their support to policies that represent a further major turn to the right by the Prodi government. They have given their seal of approval to further social and welfare cuts and Italy’s imperialist foreign policy. In addition, they have agreed to increase Prodi’s authority at the expense of their own political influence.

The capitulation by the government parties is no guarantee against further cabinet crises. Prodi still has a wafer-thin

majority in the Senate and can place no reliance on the lifetime senators. He is therefore continuing to seek out other partners. To this end, Prodi has contacted the Christian Democrat Marco Follini.

Some months ago, Follini broke from the right-wing Casa delle libertà (House of Freedom) and formed a new party called Italia di mezzo (Italy of the Center). Follini, who was formerly the head of the opposition Christian Democrats and for a period vice-premier under Berlusconi, is now ready to support Prodi in the upcoming confidence votes. In a newspaper interview, Follini declared that what was necessary was a stable and effective government based on a new constellation of center-left forces.

This latest cabinet crisis thoroughly exposes the so-called “left” parties, above all, Communist Refoundation. This Stalinist organisation has repeatedly justified its participation in government by declaring it would operate as a “voice of the people” and use the government as a platform to argue for popular interests. In fact, just the opposite has taken place. Communist Refoundation is playing the key role in maintaining a right-wing government that is acting in open defiance of the wishes of the broad majority of working people.

In order to pursue this reactionary policy, the party leadership has initiated a purge of dissident elements. Following Prodi’s resignation, Turigliatto, the Communist Refoundation senator who abstained in last week’s foreign policy vote, was publicly denounced by his own party and threatened with expulsion. He immediately resigned his mandate in the senate.

On Sunday, Communist Refoundation called for demonstrations in support of Prodi to be held across the country.



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