

Italy: Hostile reception in Rome for a leader of Communist Refoundation

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Four years ago, Fausto Bertinotti was a celebrated speaker on demonstrations opposing the Iraq war. Today, wherever he appears, he is regularly the butt of jeers and booing by opponents of the war. This was the case on March 26 at the University of Rome, when the speaker of the chamber of deputies and former head of Communist Refoundation (RC—Rifondazione Comunista) spoke at the humanities faculty of La Sapienza on the topic “Favelas and poverty in the third world.”

Bertinotti was greeted at the entrance to the faculty with whistles, chants and banners with the text “Bertinotti not in my name.” The protests were directed against the extension of the Italian military deployment in Afghanistan, which the senate decided on the following day—with the votes of Communist Refoundation (RC) deputies.

An initial vote in February had failed to win the necessary majority because of two dissenting senators. The Italian head of government, Romano Prodi, then declared his resignation and made his return to office dependent on agreement of a 12-point ultimatum that demanded support for the Afghanistan deployment, as well as other unpopular decisions such as the development of the US military basis at Vicenza and an extension of the powers of the prime minister. Communist Refoundation accepted the ultimatum.

The decision led to vigorous protests by students in Rome. Alluding to Bertinotti’s first name—Fausto—the students declared the day of the agreement to the Afghanistan deployment as “giorno infausto”—a day of misfortune. Other chants included “From non-violence to the base at Vicenza,” “You harvest corpses and import the heroin—that is your peace in Afghanistan” and “Warmonger, murderer, shame on you, you fool.”

“You are fools yourselves,” was the furious retort

from Bertinotti, who denounced the protesters as “utterly crazy left-wing extremist splitters.” Bertinotti then went on to justify his support for the military deployment in Afghanistan by declaring that politics is not a “walk in the park.”

The subsequent vote in the Senate received the necessary majority, thanks to the RC deputies together with 20 votes from the Christian Democrats of the UDC, which are not part of the government coalition. One hundred eighty senators from the coalition voted in favour, with just two against. In accord with the announcement by the leader of the opposition, Silvio Berlusconi, the right-wing parties Forza Italia, National Alliance and the Northern League abstained, which according to Italian law is rated as dissenting votes, as long as the senators do not leave the hall.

According to the newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, the two dissenting voters from the government camp were Franco Turigliatto, who had already voted no in February and was subsequently expelled from Communist Refoundation, and a deputy of the Greens. Lifetime senators Colombo, Andreotti, Scalfaro, Ciampi, Montalcini and Pininfarina voted in favour of the resolution, as did Franca Rame, the well-known actress and partner of the Nobel Prize winner and dramatist Dario Fo. She sits in the Senate for the anti-corruption party Italia dei Valori and voted, as she said, “with bloody tears.”

After the vote UDC leader Pier Ferdinando Casini, whose party was part of the Berlusconi government up until 2006, denounced his former right-wing coalition partners: “Here it was not an issue of the Prodi government, but the deployment of Italian soldiers to Afghanistan. In all of Europe the centre right does not vote against its soldiers. This only happens in Italy.”

It was the Berlusconi government that had originally

decided on the Afghanistan deployment and the continuation of its policy by the former “left” opposition plays into Berlusconi’s hands. While Prodi and Bertinotti publicly defended the unpopular military deployment, the Berlusconi camp posed as a force of opposition and indulged in thoroughly demagogic attacks on the government.

The Northern League is now demanding the impeachment of Prodi following the murder of the Afghan translator Adjimal Naschkbandi by members of the Taliban—an action which, according to the Northern League, is the direct consequence of the policies of Prodi government.

The translator Naschkbandi had been kidnapped on March 5, together with the Italian journalist Daniele Mastrogiacomo and his driver in the Afghan province of Helmand. The Italian government secured the release of Mastrogiacomo in secret negotiations. In return the Afghan authorities released five captured members of the Taliban on March 19. The exchange of captives was immediately subject to fierce criticism by the US government.

Naschkbandi remained in the hands of the Taliban and has now been murdered together with the group’s driver. According to Mastrogiacomo, the release of Naschkbandi was part of the deal worked out by the Italian government. A Taliban speaker justified the murder by declaring that the Afghan government had not kept to its side of the deal.

Roberto Calderoli from the Northern League declared that the death of the translator resulted from the fact that the Prodi government had conducted negotiations with the Taliban. Anyone taking such action should not then be surprised by the result.

Renato Schifani from Berlusconi’s Forza Italia demanded that the Italian government explain its actions to the Afghan people. Its negotiations had secured the life of Mastrogiacomo but left an innocent Afghan to his fate.

Claudio Scajola (Forza Italia) called the murder of Naschkbandi “a double tragedy, both human and political; people’s lives and the credibility of our country have been destroyed.” The murder shows in a bloody fashion the “government’s dilettantism” and “the flight by the executive from any responsibility,” he said.

Gino Strada, the founder of Emergency, an

organization that played an important role in the negotiations for the release of Mastrogiacomo, attacked Prodi from another angle. According to Strada, Prodi was responsible for the death of Naschkbandi because the government did not use the same degree of pressure to secure his release. For its part, the Karzai regime in Kabul described Strada and his organisation as a “gang of bounty hunters.”

There can be no doubt that the Prodi government—and in its wake, Communist Refoundation—will continue to capitulate to the demagoguery of the right-wing and therefore prepare the way for their return to power.

In the middle of March the government had campaigned for the release of the *Repubblica* reporter Mastrogiacomo and had even accepted international criticism, because Prodi wanted to prevent at all costs any further discussion over the government’s decision to deploy troops in Afghanistan. His plan has backfired and this is exactly the sort of discussion which has broken out following the execution of Naschkbandi.

The consequence is an intensification of the Italian military intervention. On April 2, following the extension of the Afghanistan mandate by the Senate, the supreme defence council, which advises the head of state on military matters, met and decided upon further measures to protect the Italian contingent.

IL manifesto, a newspaper close to Rifondazione, commented on the resolution passed by the supreme defence council: “A commitment is a commitment.” The “preventive measures” decided upon are of an offensive nature and are based on the extended use of such weaponry as combat helicopters, tanks and additional strike forces.



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