

Italy: parties shift to the right as election campaign begins

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One month before Italy goes to the polls on April 13 and 14, the election campaign is in full swing. Despite the usual demagoguery, it is evident that all of the established political parties have moved closer together and shifted further to the right. There is literally nobody who articulates the concerns and needs of working people, let alone provides a serious answer to them.

According to the latest opinion polls, Silvio Berlusconi, the media baron and Italy's richest man, has a good chance of becoming prime minister for a third time. His right-wing coalition is currently polling 44 percent, seven points more than the Democratic Party of Walter Veltroni (37 percent). The Christian Democrats, who so far have been allied with Berlusconi, have 8 percent, and the "Rainbow Left" (Sinistra Arcobaleno) have 7 percent. The latter consists of Rifondazione Comunista (Communist Refoundation), Partito dei Comunisti Italiani (Italian Communist Party), the Greens and Sinistra Democratica (Left Democrats), which were all part of the outgoing centre-left government of Romano Prodi.

The election is far from being decided, however. One in four voters—in some polls one in two—does not yet know who he or she will vote for in April. Moreover, voters face an extremely complicated electoral system.

Berlusconi heads the slate of the "People of Liberty" (Pdl—Popolo della libertà), an amalgam of his party Forza Italia with the post-fascist Alleanza Nazionale (National Alliance) of Gianfranco Fini. The Pdl has also formed an alliance with the xenophobic Lega Nord (Northern League).

Its list of candidates also includes avowed fascists of the far-right party La Destra, such as Alexandra Mussolini, granddaughter of the fascist dictator, and Giuseppe Ciarrapico, a businessman, newspaper publisher and former president of the AS Roma football club who has a string of previous convictions. The 73-year-old Ciarrapico has openly stated his admiration in newspaper interviews for the leader of Italian fascism. Although the Jewish community and even the post-fascist ally Fini have raised objections to Ciarrapico, Berlusconi is sticking by him, arguing that he owns newspapers, "that are not hostile to us."

At his first election rally in Milan, Berlusconi remained true to his role as a political provocateur. Standing before his jubilant supporters and the television cameras, he demonstratively tore up Veltroni's election manifesto. "The programme of the left is nothing more than garbage," he said.

Berlusconi represents the most ruthless and self-serving section of the Italian bourgeoisie, which merges seamlessly into the criminal milieu. His propaganda appeals to the most backward and basest instincts.

However, the fact that Berlusconi has again succeeded in mobilizing votes is not only because of his control of the country's three largest private television stations, the low cultural level of which defies description. Far more important, is the role of the so-called left, which is even more consistent than Berlusconi in representing the interests of international finance capital, the European Union and the big Italian industrialists.

The Prodi government, which replaced Berlusconi two years ago and was supported by all the left parties including Rifondazione Comunista, balanced Italy's highly indebted state budget at the expense of the working class, privatised state-owned concerns and abandoned the traditional pension system. Against substantial resistance, it implemented the development of a US military base, left the Italian army in Afghanistan and also deployed it in Lebanon. And against all election promises, the Prodi government did not rescind a single one of Berlusconi's "laws of shame."

The right-wing and unpopular policies of the Prodi government have resulted in its collapse after two years, when it lost its majority. It made all sorts of electoral promises, but always left the initiative to the most right-wing forces. It was a right-wing Christian Democratic splinter group that finally brought down the government. Prodi's supporters and his left allies reacted by moving further to the right.

Prodi himself has withdrawn from politics and left the field open for Walter Veltroni. In the past year, following the model of the American primaries, Veltroni, the mayor of Rome and a former functionary of the Communist Party, had let himself be elected leader of the Democratic Party—a party that did not exist one year ago and was only created as a merger of the former Stalinists in the Left Democrats with the bourgeois Catholic Margherita. Everyone was allowed to take part in these primaries, regardless whether they supported the new party or not.

Now Veltroni is seeking to oppose Berlusconi in a sort of "man on man" duel. He has rejected forming a joint slate with the parties that had formed the left-wing of the Prodi coalition; which thereupon merged to form the "Rainbow left." Veltroni presents himself as an Italian Barack Obama, modelling himself on his calls for "change." He has even adopted Obama's election slogan: "Si può fare! (Yes we can!)"

Like that of the American Democrats, Veltroni's programme is pro-capitalist and right-wing. In economic policy, he represents a neo-liberal position and endorses tax cuts, as well as the lowering of the national debt through the sale of public assets. He demagogically demands the deportation of "criminal foreigners." He favours the appointment of the lawyer Pietro Ichino as employment minister, who argues that more jobs can be created through relaxing employment conditions, demanding the "revision" of the protection against dismissal contained in article 18. Previously, the abolition of employment protection has been Berlusconi's project.

However, imitating Obama has not had the desired effect and Veltroni's poll ratings remain low. Now he is trying to lend himself a more "social" image. "The Democrats are the party of working and producing Italy," he claimed at the end of February, when he presented his party's candidates. Beside young entrepreneurs, the Democrats' slate now includes "exemplary" workers, for example, like the 33-year-old Loredana Iardi from Palermo, who works for €700 a month in a call centre, and steel worker Antonio Boccuzzi from Turin.

Boccuzzi is a survivor of the terrible fire disaster in the Thyssen Krupp

steel plant in Turin, which last December cost seven workers their lives. Industrial safety is one of the hottest topics in Italy. In 2006, some 1,341 people were killed at work in businesses and manufacturing plants, more than three fatalities a day.

Walter Veltroni has no serious intention of reversing the policy of deregulation, which inevitably weakens safety standards at work and has brought about an increase in industrial accidents in all European countries at the present time.

Other candidates on Veltroni's slate are the young entrepreneur Matteo Colaninno, vice-president of the young industrialists in the Confindustria employers' association and co-chief of the Piaggio motor scooter manufacturer, and Luigi De Sena, police chief in Reggio Calabria. Prominent Catholics are also represented, like Senator Paola Binetti of the Teodem Catholic movement or outgoing ministers Rosy Bindi and Arturo Parisi.

Veltroni has promised to create "a business a day." At a meeting of master tradesmen he announced that he would reduce the fiscal and bureaucratic burden placed on small and medium enterprises and the self-employed.

To some media effect, Veltroni announced the introduction of a minimum wage of €1,000 month. According to opinion polls, one in two Italians regards the low level of wages and pensions as Italy's greatest problem. Veltroni also promised that the state would provide every newborn child with the sum of €2,500 and would provide support for the children of poor families to attend nursery. Responding to the cabaret artist Beppe Grillo, who has mocked the high number of elected representatives with criminal records and is therefore more popular than any politician, Veltroni has now promised that no one with a criminal record should become a parliamentary deputy.

Both Berlusconi's pact with the fascists and also Veltroni's efforts to lend his right-wing policies a social "touch" are aimed at bringing the "Rainbow-left" behind Veltroni. The rainbow coalition only came about because the parties it contains were spurned by Veltroni. Now there is a growing chorus calling for open support for Walter Veltroni, for "tactical reasons."

So far, the rainbow alliance has not been able to agree on a uniform programme. Their slogan "Stop Berlusconi winning the election" clearly represents the lowest common denominator.

The leading candidate of the Rainbow-left is Fausto Bertinotti, former leader of Rifondazione and outgoing president of the chamber of deputies. Addressing some friendly criticism to Walter Veltroni, he said, "One cannot place oneself both on the side of the workers and on that of the employers. Either the one or the other." For its part, Rifondazione said goodbye to the working class two years ago when it entered the Prodi government, which Bertinotti's party supported right up to the end.

The current Rifondazione leader Franco Giordano stressed from the outset that the rainbow alliance would not stand in the way of Veltroni's electoral success, and that the duel with it would be "loyal and not destructive." "We must prevent the right wing benefiting in the elections," he said.

The policy of "critical support for Veltroni" is formulated most clearly by Alfonso Pecoraro Scanio, the leader of the Greens and a previous environment minister: "If we march separately, we won't win the game," he said. "I believe we have an obligation to ensure that the two parts of the centre-left bloc, the Democratic Party and the Rainbow-left, come to an understanding in order to defeat the right wing and Berlusconi."

A section of the media would gladly see Veltroni as the leader of a new bourgeois government of the centre, without committing itself to him, however. On February 10, the daily paper *La Repubblica* published a comment by its 84-year-old founder, Eugenio Scalfari, with the headline "The democratic pact between workers and bourgeoisie."

In his contribution Scalfari endorsed a two-party system, considering the

political influence of the smaller parties to be devastating. These should be eliminated through electoral reforms establishing that parties must gain a high percentage vote before they can enter parliament. Scalfari also endorsed the legal introduction of "primaries" as in the US.

He sees a major task of a new government being the reform of the economic system, which should be developed through a commission of experts, and which would continue within the framework already laid out by Prodi: Liberalisation in the form of privatisation and increasing job market flexibility, tax reductions, the "re-financing of wages", i.e., the state assumes certain ancillary labour costs and thus discharges some of the burden on business, the opening up of the job market for highly qualified specialists from abroad.

In order to carry this out, Scalfari is demanding the "cooperation of government, the trade unions, business, commerce, agriculture and the banks"—what he calls "democratic capitalism with a new social pact."

Scalfari also considers the close cooperation of the two large parties to be necessary. "In important questions of public political interest, both camps [must] cooperate closely," he says. This includes electoral and judicial reform, and the establishment of a senate based on federal representation. The bourgeois character of Veltroni's Democrats is beyond doubt in his mind: "The Democratic Party—it seems to me—is today defying a demagogic right wing and is concentrating around itself what little exists of an authentic productive bourgeoisie"

Scalfari does not favour a grand coalition, which he regards "rather as an obstacle than as an advantage." Although from the other side, such a possibility is quite openly brought into consideration. Even Silvio Berlusconi does not exclude the possibility of cooperation with Walter Veltroni. The two had obviously been involved in discussions with each other months ago.

On February 22, Berlusconi said on television, "If there were a similar election result to that of two years ago, we would offer the left the possibility of solving the problems of the country together." Two years ago, Prodi had a clear majority in the Lower House, but in the Senate his majority was extremely limited, so that he constantly struggled to get his legislation passed. Berlusconi is obviously preparing for a kind of grand coalition, or to establish an interim government if he were to face a similar situation again after the elections.

Repubblica quotes him with the words, "If the majority in the Senate is not large, I wouldn't do things like Prodi did." Under no circumstances does he want to be roasted like Prodi "on a small flame in the Senate," and be consumed in a constant struggle against the "absentees," the "traitors" or the senators for life. "Without a strong coalition one cannot do anything in Italy. Against the left, against the trade unions, one cannot achieve anything," he states. Under discussion is therefore a so-called *governo delle "larghe intese"*—a government of broad alliances.

According to *Repubblica*, Berlusconi is also considering the possibility of a "technical" interim government, supported through the consent of both camps. A few weeks ago, he had still vehemently rejected such a suggestion and insisted on fresh elections. Now he has named central bank chief Mario Draghi as a possible leader of an interim government. He is "the right man, to bring order to the public purse."

Draghi is a business partner in the investment bank Goldman Sachs, and is a former finance minister and World Bank associate. As president of Italy's privatisation committee, Draghi was considerably involved in the sell-off of Italian state enterprises, e.g., the IRI corporation or the energy giant ENEL. He introduced the law that made it easier for Goldman Sachs to take over ENI, Italy's largest oil and energy company.

According to media reports, Berlusconi had already held secret talks with Veltroni last November, preceded by a shared meal in the back room of a Rome hotel. Berlusconi promised the Veltroni camp the post of one of the two highest constitutional judges and guaranteed that under a government led by him, the Democrats could expect to nominate the

president of one of the two chambers of parliament. For example, Massimo D'Alema, the outgoing foreign minister and Left Democrat, could take over the office of the president of the chamber of deputies.

Similarly two years ago, Prodi had integrated Rifondazione Comunista into his government by making the former Rifondazione leader Fausto Bertinotti president of the chamber of deputies.

These machinations and cosy deals behind the scenes, which stand in sharp contrast to the clamour of the public election campaign, are a clear warning to the working class: For working people in Italy it makes no difference which of the two large political camps wins the elections in April. There is no avoiding the necessity of building an independent workers' party that fights together with the international working class for the abolition of capitalism and for a socialist programme.



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