

Berlusconi government incites racist pogroms

Stefan Steinberg**23 May 2008**

On Wednesday, May 21, at an extraordinary sitting in the city of Naples the recently nominated cabinet of Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi passed harsh new laws directed against immigrants. The new decrees follow several weeks of state organised raids and violence directed against Italy's immigrant community.

The special meeting of the Berlusconi cabinet had been scheduled to take place in the city of Naples in order to deal first and foremost with the city's longstanding rubbish crisis. In the event, Berlusconi designated the garbage dumps in the region as military areas in order to stop residents from protesting against toxic waste. He combined this with playing the racist card, stressing that the "struggle against foreign criminals" was the top priority of his government and used the meeting in Naples to pass a number of extremely repressive laws.

The Berlusconi government consists of rightist and extreme-right parties, including the post-fascist National Alliance and the separatist and openly racist Northern League. In the run-up to the recent Italian federal elections, the multi-millionaire media tycoon deliberately made xenophobia the keystone of his election campaign. One of Berlusconi's main election planks was to identify immigrants, and in particular the Roma community, as a chief source of Italy's economic and social problems.

Immediately after the victory of the Berlusconi alliance in the parliamentary elections the Italian police and paramilitary *carabinieri* began a series of raids against foreigners. At the start of May the police began picking up and arresting foreign workers and their families. Hundreds of migrants from Eastern Europe, Albania, Greece, North Africa and China were detained and charged with a number of offences, including illegal entry into Italy. Fifty-three of those detained in the first weeks of the police crackdown were immediately taken to the border for expulsion in an orchestrated media operation.

Police and security forces also began moves to shut down Roma encampments in a number of locations across Italy. In a well-publicised action a few weeks ago the police launched a raid against a Roma camp located under the Milvio bridge on the banks of the Tiber River, in the Italian capital of Rome. Police have maintained a strong presence in the area since transporting away caravans as police and immigration officials undertake the deportation of those who lack proper residency papers.

The police operation was given a seal of approval by Rome's new mayor, the former fascist Gianni Alemanno. In his own election campaign to become mayor Alemanno had vowed to dismantle the "nomad camps" where the Roma live in "third-world conditions." In a recent visit to such a camp he declared his "horror" at what he had seen and reported: "There are no words to describe what I saw."

In fact, the horrific conditions in such camps are entirely due to the neglect of the Italian authorities. Roma encampments in Italy are regularly deprived of any access to running water or electricity.

The head of the Northern League and Berlusconi's new minister of

institutional reforms and federalism, Umberto Bossi, also weighed in to defend the police raids. "This operation against illegal immigrants is what people want," he said recently. "They ask us for security and we have to give it to them."

The attacks on the Roma community then peaked with a deliberate provocation. On May 14 gangs attacked a Roma camp in the Ponticelli district of Naples and burnt it to the ground. The attack followed sensational reports in the television channels and newspapers belonging to the Berlusconi media empire in which an Italian woman claimed that a 16-year-old Roma girl had tried to abduct her child. In the wake of the often contradictory reports and testimonies over the alleged "abduction," a crowd assembled and began shouting insults and issuing threats against the Roma living in the Ponticelli camp. Its inhabitants were then rapidly shifted out of the camp by police.

An agitated mob then used petrol bombs to burn the camp down. Witnesses reported on the flames bursting out from the buildings and caravans set ablaze. According to a number of press reports, however, the local Naples Mafia—the Camorra—played a leading role in the pogrom.

An eyewitness writes in the *Corriere della Sera*: "A group of youths stands nearby.... The leader is the great-nephew of [Naples suburb] Ponticelli's 'mayor,' Ciro Sarno, the Capo of a Camorra clan that has put down roots here. The youth winks to his group and off they ride on their mopeds. Ten minutes later fresh clouds of smoke rise from the nomad camps."

Both the Berlusconi government and the criminal Camorra gangs stand to benefit from the latest pogroms in Naples. Gerardo Marotta, a lawyer, told the *L'Unita* newspaper this week that the origin of the rubbish crisis in Naples was the use of the region by industries of the north as a cheap way to get rid of toxic waste. "For more than 40 years the industries of the north of Italy have saved the cost of cleaning up their toxic waste by entrusting the job to the Camorra, who disposed of it in illegal dumps in the south," he said.

By instigating racist pogroms in Naples the Camorra gangs have been able to deflect attention away from their own role in the city's rubbish scandal. At the same time the pogroms are welcome fodder for the Berlusconi government in order to divert attention from the intense social crisis in Naples and the country as a whole.

The mob violence in Naples was preceded by a systematic xenophobic campaign led by the government and media outlets and was subsequently applauded by leading members of the Berlusconi government. Prior to the latest pogroms, Northern League leader Umberto Rossi is on record declaring, "It is easier to destroy rats as wipe out the gypsies." Following the burning down of the Roma camp on the outskirts of Naples, Rossi justified the pogrom with the words: "People are going to do what the political class cannot."

His fellow party member and the new Italian Interior Minister Roberto Maroni responded by declaring that the best way to prevent

attacks on foreigners, such as that which took place in Naples, was to increase the powers of the state. This was the aim of the measures passed by the Italian cabinet on Wednesday. Provisions of the new decree stipulate:

1. For the first time unauthorised entry into Italy is designated a crime, making it possible for the authorities to immediately deport or imprison any foreigner lacking the proper residency and status papers. Deportation or imprisonment is also possible on the vaguely defined grounds that a foreign citizen is a “threat to society.”

2. Local authorities are to be empowered to check on the living conditions of citizens from other EU nations before granting them right of residence. In addition to a residency permit, migrants will also be required to produce evidence that they have employment in Italy that guarantees an income sufficient to support themselves and their families.

3. The new bill, which takes immediate effect, also allows the authorities to confiscate any property let out to illegal immigrants.

In order to implement the new measures, Italian Defence Minister Ignazio La Russa has declared he is considering deploying troops to tackle urban crime and the Interior Ministry has announced plans to open up special camps for the incarceration of “criminal foreigners.”

Although the new Italian law is regarded by legal experts as a violation of European Union law on the free movement of citizens across the continent, reaction by EU officials has either been muted or sought to play down the racist violence in Italy.

In the European parliament the Italian the centre-right grouping EPP-ED—European People’s Party (Christian Democrats) and European Democrats—rejected a general debate on the pogroms taking place in Italy. In November last year the chairman of the same group notably came to the defence of Franco Frattini (formerly an EU commission vice president and now foreign minister in Berlusconi’s cabinet) who for years has been urging the EU to seal its external borders against “illegal immigration.”

For his part, the chair of the Socialist Group in the European Parliament, Martin Schultz, reacted to the state-sponsored racist attacks in Italy with a mealy-mouthed statement in which he declared: “The current situation in Italy is difficult. But we don’t want to conceal the fact that the issue of minority protection and integration of Roma in society is not a uniquely Italian problem in Europe.”

The initial government campaign against Italy’s immigrant and Roma community was instigated in 2007 by the previous “centre-left” government headed by Romano Prodi. The latest draconian laws passed by the Berlusconi cabinet also have their origin in legislation passed by the Prodi cabinet last year—with the full support of Communist Refoundation (Rifondazione Comunista—RC), a successor organisation to the Italian Communist Party—which has been presented as a role model by the petty-bourgeois left all over Europe.

Following a brutal attack on an Italian woman allegedly carried out by a Romanian citizen last autumn, the media and right-wing opposition led by Berlusconi and Bossi began a systematic campaign against foreigners in general and the Roma community in particular. At the time the newspaper *Corriere della Sera* ran a headline “The Invasion of Nomads.”

The first to respond to the right-wing campaign was the mayor of Rome and general secretary of the newly founded Democratic Party (DP), Walter Veltroni, who went public with the comment that the Roma were guilty of 75 percent of the city’s petty crime.

At the beginning of November 2007 Veltroni then urged the Prodi government to pass a new decree Nr. 181 (*decreto*

espulsione—deportation decree), which permits the authorities to deport European citizens who represent “a threat to public security.” The decree was directed primarily against Romanian immigrants, mainly Sinti and Roma, and permitted the police to deport entire groups of Romanians “for reasons of public security.”

On November 2, decree Nr. 181 was signed by the Italian president at that time and former leader of the Italian Communist Party, Giorgio Napolitano, and the decree was then supported in public by the minister for social solidarity, Paolo Ferrero, the only member of Communist Refoundation in the Prodi cabinet.

To ensure support for his measure Prodi made the vote on the deportation decree a vote of confidence in his government. At the end of November, Communist Refoundation General Secretary Franco Giordano made an appeal for support for the decree, which was then passed by 160 votes to 158. With just one exception all of the members of RC in the Senate voted in favour of the measure.

In supporting the repressive immigration decree, RC members merely expressed their hope that it would not lead to mass deportations. On November 7, 2007, when the Romanian prime minister Calin Popescu Tariceanu met with Prodi and the Pope in Rome to discuss the repatriation of Romanian citizens, former Communist Refoundation leader Fausto Bertinotti (at the time president of the Chamber of Deputies), declared his satisfaction with the assurance given by Interior Minister Giuliano Amato (DP) that there would be no mass deportations (*La Repubblica*, November 7, 2007).

While Bertinotti was making his comments the police and Italian Interior Ministry were already finalising a list of approximately 5,000 “unwanted immigrants” in Rome, Milan, Naples, Turin and Florence for immediate deportation.

The list, drawn up for use by the Prodi government, has now been taken out of the back drawer for implementation by the new Berlusconi government.

The latest state-initiated racist pogroms in Italy represent a devastating indictment of the policies of Communist Refoundation, who argue that the best way to combat the right wing is to adopt their programme. It is the Prodi government and Communist Refoundation in particular which bear a large measure of responsibility for the recent attacks on Roma and other immigrants.



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