

Italy: Berlusconi sets up a new right-wing party

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At the end of March, the Italian prime minister Silvio Berlusconi founded a new right-wing party in Rome. He merged his own party, Forza Italia, which he first set up in 1994, with the neo-fascist National Alliance (Alleanza Nazionale) led by Gianfranco Fini to create the right-wing party People of Freedom (Popolo della Libertà, PdL).

The two right-wing parties of Berlusconi and Fini, which have worked together for the past 15 years, have already used the same name—People of Freedom—in joint election campaigns and as coalition partners in government. Alongside Forza Italia and the National Alliance, several small parties also belong to the new formation, including the extreme right-wing Azione Sociale led by Alessandra Mussolini, the granddaughter of the fascist dictator Benito Mussolini.

The founding of the party took place in a huge hall in Rome usually reserved for pop concerts. Berlusconi was “elected” sole leader of the new party by around 6,000 jubilant delegates. There were no rival candidates. The so-called “congress” was a media event tailored entirely to the figure of Berlusconi. The crowd repeatedly cried out “Silvio, Silvio” and waved white Forza Italia flags and the Italian tricolor, while loudspeakers roared out the melody that Forza had already used in the election campaign as a hymn to Silvio. It has the refrain: “President, we are with you—what luck there is a Silvio.”

The pageant cost €3 million, was followed by 750 journalists and was transmitted across the country by no fewer than three national television stations.

The internal structure of the new party is entirely subordinate to the “presidente”—the name preferred by the new party leader. The new party lacks any sort of democratic structure. “Il presidente” appoints the members of the presidency and the executive committee, as well as the three party coordinators, and has the final word when it comes to the selection of party candidates for the European, national and regional elections.

In his speech to the congress, Berlusconi demanded a “liberal, civil and popular revolution.” He then explained what he meant, referring to the need for “better governance of Italy” and “more power for the Prime Minister.” In future, he wants as head of government to be able to arbitrarily appoint and dismiss ministers and have the right to dissolve parliament. Both of these latter powers fall currently within the authority of the president.

Berlusconi’s contempt for conventional parliamentary customs and rules was already clear before the congress when he proposed that only parliamentary fraction heads should be present during votes in parliament and that they vote on behalf of their entire parliamentary group.

The only person to criticise Berlusconi’s onslaught on democratic procedure was Gianfranco Fini, the head for many years of the National Alliance and the current parliamentary president. In his speech to the congress, Fini reminded delegates that the government had to respect the opposition and the rights of the foreigners: “We should have no fear of foreigners, we ourselves are the children of a people of emigrants,” Fini said.

Fini’s comments are not motivated by any concerns for the future of democracy in Italy but rather reflect a struggle for power taking place within the leadership of the new party. Fini is not only Berlusconi’s long-standing political ally, but also his main rival. Fini sees himself as the political heir of the party leader, who is 15 years his senior, but he is worried that Berlusconi’s autocratic tendencies could spoil his chances.

Fini’s National Alliance emerged in 1994 from the Movimento Sociale Italiano, which had its roots in the fascist movement of Mussolini. During a lengthy process, which culminated in his visit to the Holocaust memorial shrine of Yat Vashem in Israel in 2003, Fini has sought to distance himself from the most extreme fascist elements in his party and make the NA more acceptable to Italy’s bourgeois political establishment. Shortly after his trip to Israel, he was appointed foreign minister by Berlusconi.

Today, Fini can once again extend his hand to fascist hard-liners. As is shown in the case of Alessandra Mussolini, such elements are welcome in the new party.

Other NA members to speak at the Rome congress were Gianni Alemanno, the former fascist rabble-rouser and current mayor of the Italian capital, and Defense Secretary Ignazio La Russa. Alemanno boasted that he held control over Rome for the first time after 50 years of governance by leftist governments. La Russa used his speech to announce a doubling of the number of troops to be used for internal security operations in the coming months. La Russa was appointed a coordinator in the PdL executive committee, a rank that is second to Berlusconi’s.

Some weeks ago, La Russa and Berlusconi issued a decree authorising private citizens to conduct night-time patrols, thereby virtually legalising the violent activities of right-wing racist gangs against immigrants. The government is deliberately using refugees lacking permit papers as scapegoats to divert attention away from the country’s social crisis, while at the same time deploying the military for domestic purposes.

Social tensions

With his new party, Berlusconi has obtained a level of personal authority, which flagrantly violates the most elementary democratic standards and embodies distinct Bonapartist tendencies. He is one of the country's richest men, possesses an enormous media empire, and controls the six largest private and national television stations. At the same time, he is head of government and controls the country's biggest and currently most influential party.

This one-man rule, however, is less an indication of strength than of the deep social and political crisis of the country. The democratic mechanisms used to dampen down class contradictions in the past have been exhausted. The so-called opposition parties, including the so-called "left" Refounded Communism, are thoroughly discredited by their years of collaboration in the government led by Romano Prodi. Berlusconi is balancing like a circus artist over the growing social contradictions and is attempting to maintain control over the situation with a combination of deafening propaganda, a compliant media, racist campaigns and naked police power. It is a policy that will not succeed in the long term.

Italy has a long and unbroken tradition of militant labour disputes and is currently experiencing the deepest economic crisis in its post-war history. Immediately after the outbreak of the global financial crisis, the country slipped into recession. In the first two months of the current year, more than 370,000 jobs have been lost. The OECD predicts that the Italian economy will shrink by 4.3 percent this year.

Even prior to the crisis, Italy's national debt was amongst the highest in Europe and threatened to go out of control. Berlusconi's only contribution towards resolving the crisis is to completely underplay its consequences. At the beginning of March, he announced: "Stop the badmouthing, the situation is serious, but not tragic."

In the meantime, the country's social crisis has worsened dramatically. In the south of the country, every fourth family lives in poverty. As was the case in the 1970s, hundreds of thousands are heading north in the search for work—although unemployment is also rising in the industrial regions of the north.

Fiat, Italy's leading industrial concern, has announced it intends to close a factory. The highly indebted company has already shed several thousand jobs during the past five years through a combination of "restructuring" and "slimming down." At the end of March, workers reacted to the plans to close the works at Pomigliano D'Arco near Naples with a blockade of the highway that was then forcibly broken up by police.

Toothless opposition

Berlusconi's new party appears so strong and powerful only because the official political opposition is so weak and toothless. It has limited its "opposition" to begging Berlusconi to sit down with them in order to find "joint ways" out of the economic crisis.

On April 4, just a week after the setting up of the new Berlusconi party, up to 2.7 million people demonstrated in Rome for one week in opposition to the economic policy of the government. The message given to demonstrators by the head of the trade union CGIL, Guglielmo Epifani, was a pathetic appeal for a "round table to fight against the economic crisis." Berlusconi scorned the demand and joked that the demonstration was as senseless "as a strike against the

rain."

Epifani is a leading member of the Democratic Party, whose chairman Walter Veltroni quit in frustration a month ago following a severe defeat for the party at the polls in Sardinia. Veltroni, a former member of the Communist Party of Italy (PCI) and long-time mayor of Rome, had founded the Democratic Party in 2007 using as his role model the US Democrats led by Barack Obama.

The new party chairman is Dario Franceschini, a Christian Democrat attached to the DP minority fraction Margherita. This means that for the first time, the Democratic Party, which has its roots in the once-powerful PCI, is now led by a Christian Democrat.

Prior to Berlusconi's return to power, the country had been governed for two years by a so-called centre-left coalition led by Romano Prodi. These two years were sufficient to alienate broad layers of the working population who were increasingly disillusioned with the right-wing policies of this coalition, in which the successor parties of the PCI formed the biggest parliamentary group.

A particularly insidious role was played by the organisation Refounded Communism, which assumed a ministerial post in the Prodi government and supported all of the government's shameful activities. In the federal election of April 2008, the party then lost all its seats in parliament. It is its opportunistic politics that are substantially responsible for Berlusconi's rise to prominence. Today, the party is in the process of publicly tearing itself to bits.

The working class has responded militantly to the financial and economic crisis. Class conflicts have reached an unprecedented intensity. The parliamentary forms of rule and the forms of compromise developed in the post-war period to ameliorate social conflict have proved to be increasingly ineffective. The country is on the threshold of major class struggles.

At the same time, there are enormous dangers arising from the decline and betrayal of the old workers' organisations. Berlusconi's new party is characterised by show and bluster and conceals sharp conflicts under the surface impression of harmony. However, the growth in influence of fascist elements, who never won more than 12 percent of the vote in elections and now regard themselves as the heirs to Berlusconi, is an alarm signal. The Italian working class has already suffered at the hands of the fascists because it lacked a clear-sighted and determined leadership.

The task of establishing a Marxist alternative that formulates the needs of the working class independently of all bourgeois interests and defends an international, socialist programme has never been more urgent. To this end, it is necessary to build a section the Fourth International in Italy.

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