

New Italian security law legalises vigilante patrols

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8 July 2009

From July 8 to 10, Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi will host this year's G8 summit in L'Aquila, the central Italian city recently hit by an earthquake.

Only days before the summit of the major powers (Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United States and Russia) is set to convene, a new, extremely authoritarian security law will come into effect in Italy, directed primarily against undocumented immigrants.

The security law was passed in May by the Chamber of Deputies, and also agreed to by the Senate last Thursday, with 157 senators voting in favour and 124 against. It therefore now has the power of law.

The law makes "illegal immigration" a criminal offence, punishable by fines of between €5,000 and €10,000. Immigrants without valid papers can be held for up to six months in deportation camps. Under the previous law, the maximum period of detention was two months. In future, a residency permit will cost two and a half times as much as the former fee—i.e., €200, instead of €80.

The law allows municipalities to maintain their own private, nighttime vigilante patrols. It also mandates teachers and health personnel to denounce undocumented immigrants to the authorities. Landlords, who rent lodgings to immigrants without valid documents, risk prison terms of up to three years.

The European Commission has indicated that it intends to examine the new Italian law to ascertain its compatibility with European legal standards. European Union (EU) law commissioner Jacques Barrot said on Thursday in Brussels that rules for "automatic deportation" for entire "categories of persons" were unacceptable. However, there should be no illusions

that the EU will seriously oppose the reactionary Italian measure. After all, numerous EU member states are currently intensifying measures to prevent refugees and immigrants from entering their respective countries.

In Italy, Berlusconi can rely on the tacit support of the parliamentary opposition, including the centre-left. It voted against the new legislation, but the opposition's arguments against the bill were tactical and threadbare. Only one politician, Rocco Buttiglione, a Catholic conservative, argued against the content of the security law.

Other speakers for the opposition preferred to stress Berlusconi's sex affairs, which have increasingly taken centre stage in the Italian media. While efforts are being organised to weaken or even get rid of Berlusconi, his opponents essentially promise to continue his policies. The current concentration on the sex affairs of the head of government only serves to divert attention from the acute economic problems and social conflicts plaguing the country.

In fact, those municipalities where the parties of the centre-left opposition hold power have been among the first to undertake measures such as the setting up of racist vigilante patrols. The newspaper *Corriere della Sera* has listed hundred of cities with centre-left administrations that have already introduced such private militias.

Such patrols, which Berlusconi legalised in February by decree, are already commonplace in a number of eastern European countries, notably Hungary. The most backward social elements are given uniforms and weapons, and sent onto the streets in order to "preserve law and order."

In Italy, the patrols are currently allowed to wear uniforms, but not to carry weapons. Leaders of the Democratic Party (which emerged from the Italian

Communist Party) try to present the new measure as entirely harmless. They maintain that the so-called *Ronde*—the volunteer patrols in the city’s suburbs—have the task primarily of prettifying cities by removing graffiti or clearing up garbage in the parks.

However, Sergio Cofferati, the former chairman of the CGIL trade union, long dominated by the Italian Stalinists, is less reticent in his description of the patrols. As mayor of Bologna, Cofferati introduced citizen patrols in February, and defended his initiative with the words: “Citizens can make a contribution to the protection of their territory, so long as these initiatives are not politically or ideologically motivated.”

Milan’s city administration, run by the right, freed up €250 million for the volunteer patrols. The city has thus gone further than the national government, which has not envisaged official financial sponsorship for the patrols. Their financing was made possible by arguing that since the vigilantism involved volunteer activity, it could be promoted by the municipality.

Letizia Moratti, a member of Berlusconi’s Forza Italia, heads Milan’s city council. Moratti is a prominent businesswoman and married to an oil magnate. One of the city’s deputies, Matteo Salvini of the right-wing Northern League, went so far as to demand that cars in the city’s underground be labelled “only for citizens of Milan.”

According to a report in the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, the Milan transport system recently refused to employ a young Moroccan, although it was hiring train operators. The rejection of the young man was justified by appealing to a law on “public security” first passed in 1931, during the fascist dictatorship of Benito Mussolini.

The German newspaper reports that city’s trade unions refused to defend the Moroccan. It quotes a union representative: “The Milan Transport Company should pay proper wages, then Italians would also apply for jobs.”

The attacks on basic democratic rights go hand in hand with the assault on the living standards of the entire working class. Social polarisation is particularly pronounced in Italy. The country has the fourth-highest number of millionaires in the world, while poverty is increasing rapidly. Wages and salaries have been stagnating for years and are amongst the lowest in

western Europe; the cost of living—gasoline prices, food, rents—is increasing dramatically.

Many elderly Italians subsist on a minimum pension of €500 (US\$697) a month, with millions of young people living hand to mouth for years, vainly seeking work. According to a report produced by the Italian Statistical Office, seven and a half million Italians officially lived in poverty in 2008—i.e., 13 percent of the population. This figure appeared before the worldwide financial crisis, and current poverty levels are undoubtedly significantly higher.



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