

Power struggle in Italy around Berlusconi

Marianne Arens
19 October 2009

While Italy is currently being lashed by heavy autumn gales, the Berlusconi government also faces a political storm. A power struggle has developed within the Italian bourgeoisie in the past few weeks and calls for Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's resignation are becoming increasingly louder.

In the last two weeks, Berlusconi has received two particularly severe setbacks, one of which directly threatens him personally: On October 7, the Constitutional Court in Rome overturned the immunity law, which had been introduced by Berlusconi himself when he took office.

The so-called "Lex Berlusconi" provides immunity to the four highest state representatives during their terms of office. However, it was particularly meant to protect Berlusconi. As a result, several criminal proceedings—including cases of bribery and tax evasion—are no longer being pursued, with the possibility that they may then fall under the statute of limitations. The court has now repealed the immunity law on the grounds it is unconstitutional.

Berlusconi must now anticipate that the legal proceedings against him will be swiftly reinstated. Reacting indignantly to the Constitutional Court decision, he called the verdict a "farce," insulted the court and personally attacked state President Giorgio Napolitano (a former Italian Communist Party member) after Napolitano expressed his respect for the judgement. The president, the judges and the media were all "in the hands of the left," Berlusconi raged. When Napolitano protested, Berlusconi retorted that he was not interested in what the president had to say.

Parliamentary president Gianfranco Fini took the side of Napolitano, dissociating himself from Berlusconi and demanding that all sides seek to create a climate of loyal cooperation in the national interest. Fini is usually considered to be Berlusconi's closest ally. However, he is said to hold ambitions as successor to Berlusconi as head of government and as leader of the *Popolo della Libertà* (PdL, People of Freedom) party. Fini, the former fascist youth leader, had headed the post-fascist *Alleanza Nazionale* (National Alliance), which in March 2009 merged with Berlusconi's PdL.

On October 3, just days before the judgement over the immunity law, a Milan court also ruled that Fininvest, the financial holding company of the Berlusconi clan, had to pay €750 million in compensation to the rival CIR (*Compagnie Industriali Riunite*). This sum is to recompense for damages that had resulted 18 years earlier from a verdict by a corrupt judge.

In a 1991 takeover battle, the judge had awarded control of the media company Mondadori to Berlusconi's Fininvest, while Carlo de Benedetti, the owner of CIR and a Berlusconi competitor for many years, was left empty handed. Berlusconi's daughter

Marina, who replaced her father as president of Fininvest, called the compensation judgement "deeply unfair."

Also on October 3, approximately 100,000 people demonstrated in Rome "for the freedom of the press and against the Berlusconi government." The demonstration had been called by FNSI, the national journalists federation. As part of his media network Mediaset, Berlusconi controls three of Italy's seven private TV broadcasters as well as numerous other media outlets. In addition, he exerts a direct influence on the broadcast content and personnel of the state television channels.

Well-known artists and intellectuals participated on the demonstration, including producer Nanni Moretti and journalist Roberto Saviano, whose book *Gomorra* uncovers the machinations of the Neapolitan Mafia. The demonstration received greetings from throughout Europe from journalists' federations and prominent writers, such as Günter Grass, Doris Lessing and Elfriede Jelinek.

The demonstration was prompted by the legal case instigated by the prime minister against several large daily papers, which had raised unpleasant questions about Berlusconi's private life. Berlusconi is demanding damages of €1 million from *La Repubblica* and €3 million from *L'Unità*. He has also filed legal complaints against newspapers in France (*Nouvel Observateur*), Spain (*El Pais*) and in Britain.

L'Unità, the newspaper that earlier had been the voice of the Italian Communist Party (PCI), now supports the Democratic Party (PD). *La Repubblica*, which is one of the prime minister's harshest critics, belongs to Berlusconi's rival Carlo de Benedetti. For weeks, the paper has listed 10 critical questions to the head of government regarding his affair with the 18-year old Noemi Letizia, other sexual affairs, and parties attended by call girls flown to his mansion in Sardinia by government plane. The newspaper is also critical that young women who address Berlusconi as "Papi" have been provided with political office, while he has at the same time signed harsh anti-prostitution laws.

Even if many of the reproaches raised by the demonstrators on October 3 against Berlusconi are justified, the main axis of the opposition to the prime minister comes from the political right. Sections of the Italian bourgeoisie want to get rid of Berlusconi because they do not think he is capable of implementing the harsh attacks against the working class they consider necessary due to the ailing state of government finances.

Italy's indebtedness has risen to approximately 125 percent of the country's economic output, while the European Union stability pact stipulates an upper limit of about 60 percent. The 2009 budgetary deficit will amount to well over 5 percent of gross

domestic product, with interest and debt payments swallowing up an increasing proportion of the budget. Since there is no sign of significant economic growth on the horizon, the government can only maintain its political capacity to act if it either increases taxes or cuts expenditures.

Berlusconi has linked his personal interests so closely with those of the government and is so deeply mired in corruption that he hardly pays attention to the broader interests of the Italian economy. His right-wing opponents feel he does not possess the necessary force to implement harsh austerity measures against the working class. Moreover, Berlusconi's furious attacks on the judicial system and the president undermine the authority of the state institutions urgently required by the ruling elite to keep social resistance under control.

The prime minister's personal escapades also undermine Italy's reputation on the European and international stage. He has repeatedly clashed with the European Union in recent times, for example, threatening to boycott the Council of Ministers after an EU spokesman had criticized Italy's refugee policies.

Berlusconi was useful to the Italian bourgeoisie and won their support largely because he succeeded in bringing the most right-wing forces into a government alliance after the collapse of the Christian Democrats at the beginning of the 1990s. Bolstered by his media and financial empire, he first developed the Forza Italia party, which then took over the government for the first time in 1994 in alliance with the heirs to the fascist MSI (Italian Social Movement) and the racist Lega Nord (Northern League).

Berlusconi was able to survive the powerful social movements that arose against his social policies and his support for the Iraq war thanks to the opposition parties and the trade unions, which led these movements into a dead end. In April 2008, he returned to government for a third time after a broad centre-left coalition under Romano Prodi had completely discredited itself in only two years by implementing a drastic austerity programme.

The programme of the Democratic Party (DP), the successor of the PCI and the largest opposition party, no longer differs from any of the other bourgeois parties. The DP is led now by Dario Franceschini, who comes not from the PCI tradition, but from the Catholic Margherita party. The pro-DP *L'Unità* newspaper is presently carrying a discussion about a possible alliance with the conservative party Italia dei Valori (Italy of values). Rifondazione Comunista (Communist Refoundation), another offshoot from the PCI and likewise part of the Prodi government, is no longer represented in parliament.

One wing of the bourgeoisie regards the bankruptcy of the opposition parties as an opportunity to replace Berlusconi without endangering their own rule. The opposition is headed by Berlusconi's business rivals, like Carlo de Benedetti, as well as public prosecutors and judges who lead Italia dei Valori.

Their most prominent member, Antonio di Pietro, appeared on the October 3 demonstration against Berlusconi. Di Pietro's influence has grown thanks particularly to his relations with Marco Travaglio and Beppe Grillo. Travaglio is a right-wing journalist who criticizes Berlusconi from the standpoint of defending the capitalist order; Grillo is a cabaret artist whose theatrical appearances and abusive tirades generate wide public opposition to

corrupt politicians, while not committing himself politically.

Another speaker at the October 3 demonstration was Antonio Sciortino, editor-in-chief of the Catholic daily paper *Famiglia Cristiana*. These forces exploit indignation over Berlusconi's sex scandals in an effort to get rid of him and replace him with a more efficient representative of their interests.

One name that constantly emerges in this connection is Mario Draghi, the boss of the Italian central bank. When Prodi resigned one and a half years ago, Draghi was already talking about the need for a government of "technocrats" or that could form a "bridge," in order to avoid new elections. Draghi has now presented his programme, which among other things proposes a rise in the pension age.

Another name being mentioned in this regard is Gianfranco Fini. According to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, the bourgeois right itself will have to get rid of Berlusconi. It praises Fini as a "sensible, conservative parliamentary president" and comes to the conclusion that "Fini would make a most convincing leader for the time when the patience of the Italians is at an end."

In the early 1990s, Fini, who joined the fascist MSI at the age of 17 and who headed its youth movement, still spoke about the fascist dictator Benito Mussolini as the "greatest statesman of the 20th century." Since then, in the interests of his career he has adopted more moderate tones. Nevertheless, he has paved the way into government for a whole generation of old MSI cadres. Under Berlusconi, his party has been able to implement harsh measures against refugees, stationed soldiers in Italian cities and legitimized night-time "citizens patrols." Eight years ago in 2001, at the G8 summit in Genoa, Fini personally supervised the bloody police operations that culminated in the shooting of the young Carlo Giuliani.

The discussion about Gianfranco Fini as a possible successor to Berlusconi shows the great dangers that confront the working class. Under conditions where workers do not have their own party and are unable to formulate their own interests, considerable risks arise from the struggle for power inside the Italian bourgeoisie. Whoever emerges as victor will do everything to try to solve the crisis on the backs of working people.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact