

Italy's Berlusconi government racked by scandals and growing tensions

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There has been a steady stream of protests in Italy in recent weeks against the so-called *manovra*—the austerity package proposed by the government of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, aimed at saving €25 billion over the next three years. The Italian parliament, in which the Berlusconi coalition parties form the majority, is due to ratify the package in August before the annual summer holidays.

The government plans to slash 60,000 jobs in the public sector alone. All workers currently with temporary contracts will be made redundant. Only one in five new vacancies will be filled. In the health service, 156,000 jobs are at risk and similar waves of redundancies are expected in other areas of private industry and public service.

A series of days of action have followed the one-day general strike on June 25. The trade unions have gone to great lengths to ensure that the protests are limited to individual occupations, thus thwarting the development of a mass movement that could threaten the government. There have been successive, isolated protests by public servants and social workers, teachers, lecturers, students, rail workers, bus drivers, doctors and nurses, farmers and even policemen, judges and public prosecutors.

The protests against the cuts also coincide with broad discontent against another reactionary draft law—the so-called *bavaglio*—Berlusconi's new proposals for surveillance legislation. Amongst those joining a series of rallies, media and Internet protests have been prominent publishers, directors, journalists and artists, such as the dramatist and Nobel Laureate Dario Fo.

The law represents a major assault on free speech and the rights of the press, and forbids journalists and publishers from publishing investigative documents or the recordings of wiretaps. It also limits the powers of judges to order the tapping of telephone calls. This law was due to be passed in the Chamber of Deputies on July 29. Both the *manovra* and the *bavaglio* have already been passed by the Senate.

Conflicts in the government

The decree muzzling freedom of speech has led to an open conflict between Berlusconi and Gianfranco Fini, the president of the chamber of deputies. Fini, for many years the leader of the neo-fascist National Alliance (*Alleanza Nazionale*), is now posing as a defender of the constitution in opposition to Berlusconi and has threatened to boycott the law in parliament.

Berlusconi responded by declaring he would expel Fini from his party and announce new elections. “For me Fini is nonexistent,” Berlusconi stated. The conflict threatens to be the first real test for the People of Freedom alliance (*Il Popolo della Libertà*—PdL) which was first formed in 2009 by a merger of the movements led by Fini and Berlusconi.

It now appears as if Fini has gotten his way. Berlusconi has agreed to a modification of his draft law. On July 20 the decree for the muzzling of free speech was weakened by an auxiliary measure. This will allow investigative documents and wiretaps to be quoted in the case of “important information.” But this still seems to leave the decision of what is “important” or “unimportant” information in the hands of the government.

This latest amendment to the decree met with the approval of Pierluigi Bersani, leader of the parliamentary opposition and head of the Democratic Party—one of the successor organizations to Italy's Communist Party. Bersani told the press he agreed to the change because the new measure “contains the recommendations of the Democrats.”

Danger for the working class

In the event, the draft, even with its revisions, presents a great threat to the working population—not least because the movement around Fini has been strengthened in the course

of the conflict.

The group around Fini, centered in the former *Alleanza Nazionale*, a successor to the postwar fascist MSI, has no interest in defending basic democratic rights. It criticizes the Berlusconi law from the right with the aim of expanding state surveillance and control of citizens. First and foremost, it defends the right of public prosecutors and judges to be able to undertake wiretapping without restrictions.

The judges and public prosecutors insist on the right to wiretap and justify such a policy with their fight against the Mafia. As if to emphasize their position, a series of raids was carried out in recent weeks by police who arrested hundreds of Mafiosi across Italy.

Where does the working class stand in this conflict, however? It cannot possibly support such moves towards a “strong state,” because the same state powers will be used against strikes and militant actions by workers tomorrow. Then state surveillance will be directed against workers and their political leadership.

On July 22 the daily paper *Repubblica*, which is part of the anti-Berlusconi camp, published an interview with the actor and Fini supporter Luca Barbareschi in which he played down the significance of the surveillance law: “I, for example, would have no problem if I were to be wiretapped because I have done nothing wrong.”

In the same interview the actor was withering in his critique of Berlusconi: “He assumes that I and the entire Italian people are idiots.” He has transformed the state into “a brothel.” Fini, on the other hand, was “a true statesman, the only one of any worth.” *Repubblica* published the interview without comment and without a word of criticism.

Berlusconi is a thorn in the side of the right wing and neo-fascists in government to a certain extent because his priority is advancing his own interests. The various scandals and cases of corruption surrounding the Italian prime minister, these rightist elements argue, undermine the authority of the state and antagonize the population. The power of the state is necessary, however, from their point of view, to ensure that the full burden of the country’s economic crisis is shifted onto the shoulders of the working population.

From the start, Berlusconi’s political career was in part a means of protecting his extensive business interests against bankruptcy and judicial investigation. The head of government is the richest man in Italy and owns three television channels, a publishing house, a bank and an insurance agency.

His latest law muzzling free speech is tailored to his own needs. Berlusconi would dearly love to prevent the press from publishing compromising details, not only about his private life, but also his past business relations and his links to the criminal underworld.

The current rash of corruption scandals far exceeds those involved in the so-called Tangentopoli swamp of 1991—with Berlusconi deeply involved. A succession of ministers and state secretaries have already resigned. Industry Minister Claudio Scajola was forced to quit his post in May over a real estate scandal. Two under-secretaries of state, Nicola Cosentino and Giacomo Caliendo, as well as a coordinator of the Berlusconi party PdL, Denis Verdini, are involved in the building of a new, criminal organization (“Loge P3”), which has the aim of influencing legal and economic decisions.

Berlusconi appointed Aldo Brancher, a manager in his own Fininvest company, as federalism minister solely to protect Brancher from legal prosecution for fraud. A motion of no confidence brought by the opposition and supported by the Northern League led to Brancher’s resignation two weeks after his appointment.

A few weeks ago Berlusconi’s trusted associate of many years, Senator Marcello Dell’Utri, was sentenced to seven years in jail for involvement with the Mafia. At the start of the 1990s Dell’Utri and Berlusconi set up the latter’s first political vehicle, *Forza Italia*, at a time when the Socialists and Christian Democrats were thoroughly discredited in the *Mani pulite* affair (“Clean hands”—a judicial investigation into political corruption). At the time Dell’Utri sought to develop connections with influential big business figures and even the Cosa Nostra to convince them that Berlusconi was “their man” who they should support with money and votes.

Following his latest reversal at Fini’s hands, Berlusconi’s future hangs in the balance. Should Berlusconi quit, then Fini would be his probable successor. The parliamentary opposition consisting of the Democratic Party, Italy of Values and the remnants of Refounded Communism are so politically discredited and divided that they represent no alternative to the ultra-right.

This so-called “centre left” camp supports and defends the state, accepts the necessity of austerity measures and disarms the workers by token protest actions. The official left is even prepared to take sides with Fini against Berlusconi, thereby spreading confusion about the decisive political questions.

The recent developments surrounding the surveillance law represent a further, dangerous turn to the right in Italian politics. The working class faces the challenge of breaking free from the chains of the trade unions and so-called “left” parties and taking up its own independent struggle.



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