

Government crisis in Italy: Democrat leader supports the post-fascist Fini

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The leaders of the Italian Democratic Party (PD) and Refounded Communism (*Rifondazione Comunista*, PRC) have sworn their support for the post-fascist Gianfranco Fini in his dispute with the head of the Italian government, Silvio Berlusconi. Both the Democratic Party and Refounded Communism ultimately have their roots in the post-war Italian Communist Party, led by Palmiro Togliatti and Enrico Berlinguer.

The most open declaration of support came from Piero Fassino, the former head of the Left Democrats, a forerunner of the Democratic Party. When asked if the Democrats really supported Gianfranco Fini, Fassino answered on 12 August in the newspaper *Espresso*, “Exceptional times demand an exceptional alliance. Nobody is so stupid as to believe Fini is a leftist, but if the only way to get rid Berlusconi is via Fini then, excuse me, what is the problem?”

With respect to an interim government, “a ‘Finian’ regrouping is certainly a partner to talk with” along with the opposition parties and the moderate Christian Democrats, Fassino explained.

The same line of argument has been coming for days from leading figures in the PD and PRC. On behalf of the national interest they are both calling for a broad alliance that goes “beyond the centre-left camp” and that could include Fini.

Who is Fini?

He is the current President of the Italian Chamber of Deputies and former head of the post-fascist National Alliance. Fini was the first leading post-fascist to take up a post as minister in the Italian government in 1994. In the same year, Fini praised former fascist dictator Benito Mussolini as “the greatest statesman of the 20th Century”.

In the course of the 1990s, Fini increasingly dissociated himself from such public displays of support for fascism and converted the fascist MSI into the National Alliance (AN). The AN remained an authoritarian state party, whose members did all they could to rehabilitate and popularize fascism. One year ago, Fini merged his AN with Berlusconi’s Forza Italia to form the party People of Freedom (PdL).

At the end of July, Fini was expelled from the party by Berlusconi, who accused his erstwhile ally of “destructive criticism”. Fini responded by forming the new party, Future and Freedom (FLi), together with 34 deputies and 10 senators, thereby depriving Berlusconi of his majority in parliament.

The open break between the two partners emerged over the issue of the censorship (*bavaglio*) law and further judicial reforms promoted by Berlusconi (see article: Tensions in Berlusconi’s government). In addition, Fini refused to defend a number of Berlusconi’s ministers and secretaries of state facing trials for corruption. Fini declared he did not regard himself as the employee of a private business.

Why is Fini now opposing Berlusconi? Fini is no democrat and certainly no friend of the working class. The background to the dispute between the two men is the economic crisis and the drive by the Italian state to impose drastic economic measures on the population. Berlusconi’s series of scandals, his links to the Mafia, and his overt corruption are seen as a threat to the authority of the state and government.

Berlusconi has regarded political power first and foremost as a means of rescuing his own business empire from bankruptcy and keeping himself out of prison. He is the richest man in Italy, possesses three television channels, a publishing house, a bank and an insurance company, but he is unable to fulfil the needs of the bourgeoisie in the crisis.

A number of major employer federations have expressed their dissatisfaction with Berlusconi. The president of the employer’s association Confindustria, Emma Marcegaglia, demanded “clear reforms” and told *Il Sole 24 Ore* that he saw broad “rage, bitterness and a lack of understanding over what has taken place—all feelings which I share.... It is depressing to see how our elected government descends into brawls, which will make us all red with shame in the future”.

The president of Fiat, Luca Cordero di Montezemolo, made known via the foundation Italia Futura that he held Berlusconi responsible for the bankruptcy of the Second Republic: “This legislature ends with an unparalleled state crisis and in the midst of a mudslinging battle”.

Criticism of the Berlusconi government has spread across Europe. Germany’s leading bourgeois newspaper *FAZ* writes, “Italy is tearing itself apart at a time when it requires a stable government able to implement austerity policies”.

Fini embodies the tradition of a state apparatus that is prepared and capable of using brutal means against its opponents. A number of the “strong men” in the government have their roots in the AN. Such figures prominently include Defence Secretary Ignazio La Russa, who has deployed soldiers inside the country and mobilised private militias inside Italy, together with the navy in the Mediterranean to combat immigrants.

So far, the duel between Fini and Berlusconi remains undecided. The prime minister still has the backing of the racist Northern League, headed by Umberto Bossi. The government’s victory in regional elections last March was largely due to the alliance between Bossi and Berlusconi. This is why Bossi is now demanding rapid new elections, in the hope of strengthening his own power base and introducing measures towards the federalist break-up of the country.

Berlusconi has gone on holiday, promising to prepare a new government program aimed at reforming the taxation and judicial system while allowing more federalism and a development program for southern Italy. In September he plans to put his new program to a vote of confidence in parliament.

It is entirely possible that he will fail to achieve the necessary majority. Then the alternative is an interim, or so-called “government of experts” or early new elections. In this situation the so-called “left” opposition parties are ready to forge an alliance with the post-fascist Fini.

New government alliance

Following his expulsion from the government party, the PdL, Gianfranco Fini united with the Christian Democrat Pierferdinando Casini (UDC) and with Francesco Rutelli to form a new political organisation.

Casini had formerly supported Berlusconi but had not joined his party, People of Freedom. Until 2009 Rutelli was with the Democrats and had opposed Gianfranco Fini, e.g., in 1993 in the race for the post of mayor of Rome. Today he heads his own party called Alleanza per l'Italia (ApI), praising Fini as a man "who has earned our respect".

The media has estimated that the new grouping of Fini and Casini supporters could win up to 13 percent of the vote. With the support of the "centre-left" camp, it could prove to be a viable competitor for Berlusconi. According to the Spincon opinion poll, the Democrats can count on 25.4 percent of the vote, against Berlusconi's PdL at 30 percent—a fall of seven percent compared to the last parliamentary elections in April 2008.

However, a new dispute emerged in the Italian parliament shortly before the summer recess. State Secretary Giacomo Caliendo was accused, along with other politicians close to Berlusconi, of having set up a secret society named P3. The opposition lodged a motion of no confidence against Caliendo, which took place on 4 August. Berlusconi supporters jeered out "Judas, Judas" to Fini during the vote. For his part Fini spared Caliendo and withheld his vote, thereby securing the political survival of Berlusconi for the time being.

This restraint enraged Pierluigi Bersani, the head of the official opposition and general secretary of the Democratic Party, who accused Fini of buying time for Berlusconi.

Appeals by Bersani and Ferrero

On 10 August, Bersani published an appeal for a "common front of all oppositions in the event of early new elections". In the appeal, Bersani expressed his preference for an interim government with the sole aim of changing "the infamous voting law". However, Bersani wrote, "Should elections prove 'inevitable,' we will turn to all the forces of the centre and the left and any opposition forces on the basis of a common strategy".

In the middle of June, Bersani had already made clear he was prepared to support Fini. When asked on radio if he ruled out an alliance with Fini, Bersani responded, "Confronted with a problem of constitutional order, with a decision between a populist and a representative model...I will cooperate with anyone". Bersani gave the same response to another newspaper, stressing, "We need a broad pact in parliament".

On another occasion Bersani presented Fini as a "refined politician". He told the Internet site *libero news.it* that although Fini had supported all of the decisions struck by the right-wing government, "[T]oday he represents with integrity another platform: in economic policy...and over the issue of the unity of the country".

Bersani's appeal of 10 August was taken up on the same day by the parties, Italy of Values, the Greens and also Refounded Communism. The head of the PRC, Paolo Ferrero, immediately issued an open letter to all party secretaries of the opposition parties. Since its humiliating defeat at the polls two years ago, the PRC has constantly lost members and has been reduced to a toothless supporter of the PD.

In his open letter, Paolo Ferrero described the situation as "Weimar in

slow motion" and declared that the crisis would end "either by the re-establishment of democracy or by its final and anti-democratic degeneration". The situation is serious, he continued, calling for the setting up of a National Liberation Committee (CLN) based on the constitution, which would restore democracy and proportional representation while introducing a new social redistribution.

With his call for a National Liberation Committee, Ferrero drew on the parallels with the partisan movement against fascism in the Second World War. The CLN was created in 1943 and led the fight against the fascists and German Nazi troops. The leaders of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) worked together with Christian Democrats in this committee. It is on this basis that Ferrero pleads for a government of national unity, while opening up his party for collaboration with Christian-Democratic politicians.

During the last regional elections in March, the PRC had co-operated closely not only with the Democrats, but also with the Christian Democrats of the UDC in four regions. At that time Ferrero had already raised the issue of the National Liberation Committee and declared, "Naturally we are not particularly fond of the UDC, just as the partisans did not particularly like the monarchists, whom they worked together with anyway on the basis of the anti-fascist struggle".

The reference to the CLN is revealing. The wartime National Liberation Committee, like the post-war government of anti-fascist unity, was a product of the Stalinist popular front policy. In both cases it led to the subordination of workers to the interests of the bourgeoisie and enabled the reconstruction of the capitalist state. PCI leader Palmiro Togliatti recognized the Catholic Church and, in his role as justice minister, issued a general amnesty for fascist criminals.

The Stalinist camp repeatedly played a crucial role whenever Italian capitalism has foundered. During the violent social conflicts of the 1960s and 1970s, Enrico Berlinguer proposed a "historic compromise" between the PCI and the Christian Democrats.

Today, they are prepared to accept a "government of experts" under Casini or even Fini—a regime that would lack any democratic legitimacy. In the current economic crisis, this would represent nothing less than *carte blanche* for the banks and employers to set up their own government, aimed at the speediest implementation of drastic austerity measures.



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