Italy: right-wing shift underlies latest Berlusconi scandal

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New revelations of Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's involvement in prostitution and corruption signal a new stage of the political crisis engulfing Italy. Neo-fascist politician Gianfranco Fini is emerging as a major challenger to Berlusconi and exploring possible ties with Stalinist politicians.

Karima el-Mahroug, also known as Ruby, is the latest name added to a list of young women involved in the premier's sexual life, from Noemi Letizia to Patrizia D'Addario to Nadia Macrì. In the Ruby case, allegations of police corruption emerged from police reports, according to which Karima had been withheld by Milan prosecutors in an investigation on prostitution.

According to the head of the Milan police department Pietro Ostuni, Berlusconi called him personally to request her release, on the basis of his personal relationship with her and for diplomatic reasons. Berlusconi allegedly made the false claim that Ruby was a close relative of Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak.

While using the sex scandals to distract workers from a grave economic crisis of its own making, the ruling class is wracked by internal conflicts over how to engineer a new shift to the right, to slash workers' living standards. While no final decision has been made on a new head of government, there is broad agreement in the ruling class on the need to ultimately sack Berlusconi. His unpopularity would make new attacks on the working class too politically explosive.

The rise of neo-fascist politicians

The break by Fini, a member of Berlusconi's coalition, from the prime minister's Popolo della Libertà (PdL) is a serious warning to the working class that plans for new cuts and repression are well under way. Fini started distancing himself from the prime minister last summer, forming a new parliamentary faction set to become a political party in January.

At the first national convention of his newly formed Futuro e Libertà per l'Italia (FLI) last weekend, accompanied by the sound of the Italian national anthem, he demanded: "Berlusconi must resign." Though Fini has been one of the government's leading members, he asserted that it "has lost its course, it's just floating."

Significantly, the neo-fascists are appealing to the Stalinist parties. Fini asserted that while he "will not subordinate to the left, however we must stop with this fear of Communists. That world is much more complex."

The political heritage of the FLI group goes back to Benito Mussolini's regime, though it has made systematic attempts to hide its fascist past and assume a "democratic" semblance. This orientation was laid out by Fini's mentor, the fascist Giorgio Almirante—who played an active role in Mussolini's government, especially in support of the anti-Semitic Manifesto of Race in 1938.

In 1980 he was seeking a young successor to lead the neo-fascist party he headed, the Italian Social Movement (Movimento Sociale Italiano, or MSI). In an interview with *Corriere della Sera*, he explained that the survival of a nationalist, state-corporatist party required breaking with the classic icons of fascist nostalgia, without compromising the basic policy of authoritarian bourgeois state control.

Fini inherited this perspective and now represents sections of the bourgeoisie seeking to get rid of Berlusconi. Fini's allegiance to big industry was made clear in a recent statement, in which he supported the perspective advanced by Emma Marcegaglia, president of Confindustria (Confederation of Industrialists).

A week ago, Marcegaglia complained that Italy was "at a loss. It's necessary to find a renewed sense of institutions and dignity," stressing the need for a strong "respect for state and institutions."

More explicitly, she singled out the economic crisis as a political issue. In a message directed to the political establishment, she complained about a "low growth rate" and delays in implementing "those reforms already agreed upon." Such reforms will consist of further attacks on workers' living standards, with social spending cuts and fiscal austerity. That will be the main task of a post-Berlusconi government.

Underlying this process is an economic decline that reflects a broader systemic crisis of the international economy. IMF estimates put Italy's unemployment rate at 10.5 per cent by the end of 2010. The rate for youth between 15 and 24 is far higher: 26.3 percent.

According to a recent report issued by Bank of Italy's Governor Mario Draghi, Gross Domestic Product is down nearly 7 points since the beginning of the 2008 recession. More specifically, the report stresses higher labor costs in Italy compared to the rest of the EU. From 1998 to 2008, Italian unit labor costs increased 24 per cent, while in Germany, the report states, it decreased.

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The report's main purpose is to build a case against the workers: wages are too high, and workers should work longer for less to increase Italian firms' competitiveness. Labor costs must ultimately fall to the level of overexploited workers in China or other developing countries.

This approach is not specific to Italy. In the US, President Barack Obama has overseen a massive attack on wages and living standards, especially as evinced by the cuts imposed on Chrysler and General Motors. In France, the recent pension law passed by the Sarkozy government marks a new stage of IMF-backed austerity measures against the elderly. In Greece the center-left government of George Papandreou has spearheaded ruthless wage cuts of up to 30 per cent.

The bankruptcy of the so-called "left"

The reemergence of neo-fascist tendencies, especially in a country that was devastated by two decades of brutal fascist dictatorship in the twentieth century, demands explanation. How can the political situation shift to the right, while workers are visibly moving to the left, as shown by the recent rise in strike and industrial action?

The reason must be sought in the vacuum created by the utter bankruptcy of what passes for "left" parties—in particular, the various splinters of Rifondazione Comunista. The role of the so-called "left" is to preserve the bourgeois state at all costs. This can take the form of collaboration even with the neo-fascists, or—more traditionally—of participating in a center-left government making massive social attacks on the working class.

The government of Romano Prodi in 2006-2008 included a coalition of various center-left groups, as well as parties associated with the Italian Stalinist tradition, such as Rifondazione. The collapse of the Prodi government in 2008 was the direct result of its own reactionary policies, which were supported by Rifondazione.

The Prodi government was responsible for a decline in wages, as well as a pension "reform" that inflicted a major defeat on workers' right to a dignified retirement. In foreign policy, Prodi's government was essentially aligned with US imperialism. He endorsed the bogus "war on terror" as a legitimate argument to justify criminal wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and dispatched troops to southern Lebanon.

The election that followed was a clear repudiation of such policies. Rifondazione lost all its parliamentary seats as a consequence of its betrayals (see: "The collapse of Rifondazione Comunista in Italy").

Rifondazione's collapse produced a number of right-wing splinters. Paolo Ferrero, former member of the last Prodi government, remained secretary of Rifondazione. He is the most striking example of political opportunism: as a minister in the last Prodi government, he served as a "left" fig leaf, while right-wing policies were implemented against the workers.

Significantly, he recently sent a message of approval to Fini, saying: "Fini is correct when he says the Berlusconi government cannot continue in its insane action." If Fini's words are honest, then "he should present a no-confidence vote." There are clear signs of preparations for the support of a neo-fascist takeover in the name of "getting rid of" Berlusconi.

This is the typical position of professional opportunists: when it comes to the most crucial question of political power, Rifondazione prefers a neo-fascist government rather than the task of leading the working class to the formation of a genuine workers' state. All other parties on the "left" share this fundamental position as well.

Sinistra Critica, the Pabloite group that exited Rifondazione while in the Prodi government, is calling for a broad coalition of the "left," excluding Prodi's Democratic Party. This is a signal that it is ready to join forces with its former accomplices in Rifondazione and the reformist FIOM trade union.

Another Pabloite, Marco Ferrando, also the former leader of Rifondazione until the Prodi government, echoes Sinistra Critica's positions by proposing "the political independence of the antagonist left from the Democratic Party." The combative left to which he refers is, however, a figment of Ferrando's imagination. Former Rifondazione politicians are apparently debating whether to return to their anti-working-class alliance with the Democrats, or seize on their budding ties with the neo-fascists.

Former Rifondazione leader and governor of the Apulia region Nicky Vendola (Sinistra, Ecologia e Libertà, SEL or Left, Ecology and Freedom) is even blunter. His shift to the right is expressed by an open agreement to a more formal collaboration with the Democratic Party.

As governor of the southern Apulia region he has proven himself as a reliable agent of capital. In a recent interview during his regional campaign he boasted about developing "a new jaunty, non-claustrophobic idea of international competition." The *Financial Times* reports that investors have named Apulia the most attractive region in southern Italy under Vendola's leadership.

Democratic Party secretary Pier Luigi Bersani, an ex-Stalinist from the Italian Communist Party (PCI), stated that Fini's words "are right," but that now "facts must be as right." This is effectively an offer of collaboration in the near future for the formation of a technical government, on the way to new elections.

Bersani's role can be best understood in the context of the center-left governments of Prodi, D'Alema and Amato from 1996 to 2001 and Prodi from 2006 to 2008 in which he occupied ministerial positions. What these governments had in common was a policy of privatization resulting in the dismantling and destruction of an entire social infrastructure that was the result of major gains made by the working class in bitter struggles, especially in the postwar period.

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