

Berlusconi's scandals and the proposed "left"-right coalition in Italy

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26 January 2011

Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi is once again at the center of scandals involving prostitution and corruption. This time, Milan's prosecutors have issued a 384-page subpoena alleging the premier's criminal involvement.

The evidence shows that sex parties were organized at Berlusconi's opulent Arcore residence near Milan by some of his closest collaborators, such as news director Emilio Fede, the openly pro-fascist talent agent Lele Mora and Lombardy regional councilor Nicole Minetti. The involvement of a minor, 17-year-old Moroccan Karima El-Mahroug, known as Ruby, in the so-called "bunga-bunga" parties, has become the center of media attention.

As usual, Berlusconi is defying the authorities in the manner of a tin-pot dictator. He has defied the district attorney's order to appear for questioning. He declared that he wants "to appear before the judges but [he] won't do it because this case is not in the DA's jurisdiction." He claimed that his lawyers "have been engaged in 2,560 court hearings, with more than 1,000 judges, for a cost of more than €300 million in lawyers' fees."

The evidence in the current case reveals a degree of depravity that has provoked widespread disgust. However, the scandal is being used to divert attention from the grave crisis engulfing Italy and to resolve conflicts inside the ruling elite over how to best push through so-called "reforms," which amount to massive attacks on workers' conditions.

The most recent such attack is the Fiat Mirafiori contract (see "The Fiat vote in Turin: Unions push through historic attack on Italian workers"), a historic setback that destroys important gains won by workers through bitter struggles. But it also exacerbates socially explosive conditions, common around the world, as recent revolutionary events in neighboring Tunisia demonstrate. In the minds of many powerful Italians, further attacks against the working class

require the replacement of the unpopular Berlusconi.

One of the earliest proponents of the prime minister's resignation has been his erstwhile main political ally, neo-fascist Gianfranco Fini, who split off to form a new party (Futuro e Libertà [FLI]—Future and Freedom) and a new alliance, the Third Pole, with political chameleon Francesco Rutelli and Christian Democrat Pier Ferdinando Casini. After failing to secure a no-confidence vote in parliament December 14, Fini virtually retired from the public scene until prosecutors issued the subpoena.

Now the Third Pole is making a new attempt to oust Berlusconi, Fini's political partner of 16 years, calling for the prime minister's immediate resignation. In a statement which amounts to a self-indictment, Fini pointed to the "patrimonial and para-feudal conception of politics" adopted by the party he and Berlusconi led before the recent rift.

This operation against Berlusconi has the support of wide layers within the industrial bourgeoisie. Emma Marcegaglia, president of Confindustria (Confederation of Industrialists), complained that "In the last six months the government's actions have been insufficient. The country needs to know if the government is capable of implementing the reforms or another choice is necessary. We need stability, not as an end to itself, but to promote reforms."

This statement helps reveal what actually lies behind the eruption of the so-called Ruby scandal. The "reforms" Marcegaglia refers to are in line with the recent Fiat contract. "Stability" means preparing for and carrying out austerity measures and repression, under conditions in which the current government is discredited and incapable of controlling and suppressing popular discontent.

A candidate for the leadership of a new government has been proposed by both Marcegaglia and Fini's new FLI: the current minister of economy and finance, Giulio Tremonti, a

member of Berlusconi's Popolo della Libertà (PdL) with strong sympathies for the xenophobic Northern League.

Whether Tremonti is ultimately chosen as prime minister or not, the political logic is clear. What is envisioned is a coalition between the right and the so-called left; the right and the neo-fascists, on the one hand, and the ex-Stalinists and social democrats, on the other. Italo Bocchino, spokesman for Fini's FLI, commenting on the Tremonti proposal, stated: "We are going for a German-style solution [referring to the grand coalition between the Social Democrats and the right-wing Christian Democrats]. Who better than Tremonti to lead a government of grand coalition?"

Tremonti's political career explains a good deal. Throughout the 1980s he was an active member and congressional candidate of the Italian Socialist Party. After the collapse of the USSR and in the aftermath of the "Mani Pulite" scandals, he pledged his allegiance to Berlusconi.

The prospect of such a coalition requires examining the rotten role of the "left" in not only facilitating, but in fact leading the effort.

Initial signals of support for the Third Pole were given by the Democratic Party (PD), the center-left formation which includes sections of the former Stalinist Italian Communist Party (PCI), before the December 14 confidence vote (see "Italy: right-wing underlies latest Berlusconi scandal"). After Berlusconi was confirmed by a narrow majority of three votes, Pier Luigi Bersani, PD's secretary, openly proposed an alliance with the Third Pole and declared that he wanted "to present, by January, a proposal to all forces of opposition of center and center-left that can even have an electoral profile."

As the neo-fascist Fini remained quiet on the question, in recent days Bersani voiced his apprehension and renewed his invitation with urgency, "The Third Pole must decide with whom to team up."

Furthermore, Walter Veltroni, former PD secretary and one-time leading PCI member, who expressed "respect, admiration and gratitude" to the Fiat workers who voted in favor of the Mirafiori contract, extended the proposal to "all political forces. Any solution is better than this one, including elections." The implication is the inclusion in a grand coalition of the racist Northern League, Berlusconi's only standing partner.

Turin's mayor Sergio Chiamparino (PD) spelled it out more clearly: the Northern League must "leave Berlusconi if it wants to bring home federalism." Accentuating his nationalist tones as Italy celebrates its 150th anniversary, Chiamparino even offered his political advice and support to the reactionary Northern League: "Federalism must be the institutional reconstruction of a more advanced level of Italy's Unity." Chiamparino has strong ties with the Northern League's minister of regulatory simplification, Roberto Calderoli, as well as Giulio Tremonti himself.

Moving slightly further to the "left" on the political spectrum, Nichi Vendola, leader of Sinistra Ecologia Libertà (Left Ecology Freedom or SEL), observes that the PD has been turned down by the neo-fascists and invites Bersani to forge a pact with his party as the next best thing. The Third Pole "must be working on another hypothesis," guesses Vendola, who offers a "reforming coalition that puts Italy at the center."

The chain of opportunists is not complete without the "far left" Rifondazione Comunista. In a statement issued last week for upcoming elections in Milan, Rifondazione proposes "a new renaissance—with [Giuliano] Pisapia and a united left we can win."

Pisapia is a lawyer recently elected mayor of Milan after he won the PD coalition's primaries. This type of alliance is precisely what enabled Vendola to become governor of Apulia. While SEL and Rifondazione move to the right by joining the PD in coalition primaries, the population's move to the left finds expression in electoral support for candidates (Vendola, Pisapia) who fraudulently present themselves as "to the left of the establishment."

Rifondazione states that "what's necessary is a democratic alliance of all social and political forces that agree with the urgency of change and that are united on values like the Constitution, work and common good." In other words, this is a party of bourgeois order. Rifondazione's opportunism and class collaborationism turned workers away and cost the party all its seats in parliament in 2008.



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