

Italy's Berlusconi indicted on prostitution, abuse-of-power charges

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On February 15, Judge Cristina Di Censo indicted Italian Prime Minister Berlusconi on charges of paying for sex with an underage prostitute and abuse of office.

Prosecutors said that they had evidence of Berlusconi's relations with a "significant" number of prostitutes. The judge agreed to proceed with a trial without holding a preliminary hearing. The trial will begin on April 6, before a collegium of three judges, all women—Carmen D'Elia, Orsola De Cristofaro and Giulia Turri.

Media attention has focused on the case of Karima El Mahroug, a Moroccan dancer who was 17 when she attended parties hosted by Berlusconi. She and Berlusconi both deny they had sex. Berlusconi also claims he truly believed that she was the niece of now-deposed Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak—the reason he gave last October for pressing a Milan police chief to release El Mahroug after her arrest on theft charges.

El Mahroug was one of a series of young women who attended parties at Berlusconi's home—a fact that came to light in April 2009, when reports emerged that Berlusconi had attended the 18th birthday of a model, Noemi Letizia.

Hundreds of thousands of women protested throughout Italy last weekend against Berlusconi's statements about his relations with the young women, and against his continuation in office. Berlusconi further angered protestors by claiming that his treatment of young women reflected his respect for them, saying, "I have always made it so that every woman feels, how should I say, special."

Berlusconi's indictment marks a shift in the political climate in Italy, reflecting growing social tensions bound up with the global economic crisis and now the revolutionary wave of working class struggles engulfing the Middle East. Berlusconi's popularity has

plunged to record lows, with two-thirds of Italians supporting his removal from office.

However, the indictment also reflects changing orientations in the bourgeoisie. Sections of the ruling class, both in Italy and internationally, have long been dissatisfied with Berlusconi, and now are particularly unhappy with the policies he has pursued in response to the global economic crisis. His social attacks on the working class have not been as large as those pursued by social democratic Greek Prime Minister George Papandreou—whose cuts have reduced working class living standards by 30 percent, according to press estimates.

The challenge facing the working class is not simply to remove Berlusconi. Rather, it is to build a mass movement and a new revolutionary party in the working class to overthrow the political and economic system, which has failed.

The bourgeois "left"—by encouraging a single-minded focus on removing Berlusconi—is trying to hide their plans for a new offensive against the working class. They hope that the trial will help serve these ends.

The main goal driving sections of the financial aristocracy hostile to Berlusconi is finding a new public face for renewed social attacks on the working class. The financial press is demanding more aggressive cuts, noting that Italy's sovereign debt is roughly €1.8 trillion, or roughly 120 percent of Italy's gross domestic product. The *Financial Times* worried that a Berlusconi trial could "lead to prolonged political stalemate," thus preventing the state from slashing social spending.

The main problem for these forces is that Berlusconi's People of Liberty (PdL) party still has significant support in the Italian political establishment. It leads in opinion polls over the opposition Democratic

Party (PD), which now includes sections of the former Socialist Party and of the ex-Stalinist Communist Party. Berlusconi defeated a parliamentary attempt to bring down his government in December.

Berlusconi has stayed in office due to the unpopularity and political bankruptcy of Italy's bourgeois "left" parties. The "left" parties have not recovered politically from the experience of the 2006-2008 "l'Unione" government of Prime Minister Romano Prodi, which included the PD and the ex-Stalinist Rifondazione Comunista. In defiance of the will of its electorate, it carried out pension cuts and continued Italy's participation in the Afghanistan war and the UN peacekeeping force in Lebanon.

As a result, attempts to form an alternative political alliance to Berlusconi involve unstable groupings spanning the entire spectrum of official politics, exposing "left" politicians who now are seeking alliances with various right-wing parties.

Some on the bourgeois "left" are pushing for an alliance with the new Third Pole alliance formed by neo-fascist Gianfranco Fini—the former leader of the National Alliance (AN), once a component of Berlusconi's coalition.

To this end Nichi Vendola, a prominent ex-Stalinist and the leader of the bourgeois "left" Left Ecology Freedom (SEL) party, recently praised Fini: "From the viewpoint of democratic rules and secularism, Fini's right is certainly more modern and European than Berlusconi's. In fact, on social and economic policies it's even more liberal than Berlusconi's. I inevitably respect Fini and his party, which is an alternative to mine."

However, Fini's attempt to build the Freedom and Liberty for Italy (FLI) party as the centerpiece of the Third Pole alliance recently faced a major setback. Only a few days after the February 13 founding conference of the FLI, Senator Giuseppe Menardi left the party, criticizing Fini and FLI Vice President Italo Bocchini. This threatens to undermine the FLI's standing in the Senate, by bringing it under the 10-man limit required for a party to form an official Senate delegation.

Other forces on the bourgeois "left"—notably Pier Luigi Bersani, leader of the PD—have called for an alliance with the right-wing separatist Northern League. Bersani recently said, "I have always believed that

despite diverse and sometimes alternative positions, there were two true forces for autonomy in the country: the PD and the League. We identify with and want to cultivate and renovate this great tradition of ours."

In a sign of the right-wing impact the bourgeoisie hopes to see resulting from the Berlusconi trial, the press is now speculating that the person who will benefit from it is Giulio Tremonti, the current finance minister and a member of Berlusconi's PdL. The *Financial Times* praised him as an "exception that stands apart," and a man who would fight "to keep public debts and deficit under control."

A former writer for the petty-bourgeois "left" newspaper *Manifesto* and a former member of the Socialist Party, close to corrupt premier Bettino Craxi, Tremonti migrated into the official political right after the collapse of the USSR. The ruling class undoubtedly value Tremonti's financial credentials. Just as important, however, they are counting on his ability to maneuver between the right and the establishment "left" in cobbling together the type of reactionary government with which they hope to replace Berlusconi.



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