

The resurgence of Italy's imperialist ambitions in Libya

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The Italian warship *Libra* docked at the port of Benghazi, Libya, on March 7. Its presence is the logical consequence of geostrategic calculations by the Italian ruling class to ensure that Italy keep its prominent role in Libya and suffocate mass opposition to free-market policies.

In a matter of days, the Italian government of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi has reneged on its staunch support for Colonel Muammar Gaddafi's regime. Instead, it is preparing for military intervention in an effort to assert its imperialist control under the guise of "humanitarian" support.

In August 2008, after over a half-century of diplomatic tensions between Libya and Italy—the former colonial power in Libya—Berlusconi forged an alliance with Gaddafi based on a Friendship and Cooperation Treaty. This treaty established the terms of a close economic relationship between the two countries and migration control. It also specified that Italy should pay €5 billion as reparations for 32 years during which Libya was subordinated to the brutal colonial domination of Italy, from 1911 to 1943, which decimated the population of the African country.

The treaty was signed in Benghazi, the same city where today the Libyan National Council has established a bourgeois anti-Gaddafi oppositionist body led by former justice minister Mustafa Mohamed Abud Al Jeleil, recognized as a political entity by the Berlusconi government on February 28, 2011.

US diplomacy took careful note of the 2008 treaty. In a June 2009 WikiLeaks cable, it was revealed that, according to the US Embassy in Rome, "Berlusconi has continued Italy's policy of developing an expanded relationship with Libya, largely in order to stem the tide of irregular migration from Libyan shores, but also to gain advantageous access to Libya's oil reserves for Italian firms, mainly ENI." ENI is an Italian multinational oil company.

The cable continues, "As follow-up to the 2008 Libya-Italy Friendship Treaty—which committed Libya to sterner measures to deter irregular migrants from entering Italy from its shores, but also offered 5 billion USD in development assistance—Libyan leader Qadhafi will pay an historic first official visit to Rome June 10-12, just before Berlusconi's Washington visit."

Gaddafi's visit did take place. In June 2009, the Libyan

leader showed up at Ciampino military airport sporting a picture of Omar al-Mukhtar, the leader of Libyan resistance against the Italian colonizers, captured and hanged by Mussolini's Fascists in 1931. This was Gaddafi's first official visit in Italy.

On that occasion, Berlusconi spoke of "a veritable partnership between Italy and Libya with a strong collaboration in many sectors starting from a common position on international affairs and a tight collaboration in the economic field." He told reporters of the last 15 years in which he "met Gaddafi many times and formed a true and profound friendship. I acknowledge in him great wisdom."

In another cable a week later, the US embassy in Tripoli warned that, "Soaring oil prices are allowing Libya to press for more stringent long-term contracts with foreign oil and gas producers. A twenty-five year extension for Italian firm Eni North Africa BV, which entailed a sizeable bonus payment and dramatically reduced the company's production share, was recently ratified after lengthy negotiations. The potential impact of Eni's deal is significant."

Italy views Libya as an important economic partner. Its economy is profoundly dependent on Libya's oil and gas. About 80 percent of its energy is imported, 25 percent of which is supplied by Libya. Besides banking and energy, Libyan oil funds have bailed out Italian textile, automotive, construction, defense and aerospace sectors, as well as soccer clubs.

Now, Gaddafi is facing an opposition that threatens his regime. There are two distinct socio-political forces operating inside the opposition, however. On the one hand, there is popular opposition to the free-market policies of Gaddafi and to his regime's suppression of political freedoms.

On the other hand, there are former top leaders of the Gaddafi regime who jumped ship after mass protests began last month—including Gaddafi's former Justice Minister Mustafa Abdel Jalil, and ex-Interior Minister General Abdul Fattah Younis al Obaidi. These forces are making a bid for power, calling for support, both political and military, from imperialist governments in the US, the UK, France, Germany, and Italy.

Hoping that the colonel would regain control over the country, the Italian government initially took a cautious position. However, once it was clear that the working class was

gaining momentum and oil fields risked falling under workers' control, the Berlusconi government sought to forge new relations with layers of the bourgeoisie that would be able to ensure the continuation of economic relations beneficial to Italian capital.

This is what lies behind Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini's suspension on February 28 of the Friendship Treaty. Italian news agency ANSA reported that Frattini was very specific about the fact that Gaddafi is no longer controlling the oil fields and that "Italy has contacts with the new Libyan National Council."

There are direct military implications to this decision. The 2008 treaty established a non-aggression agreement between the two countries. Now Italy is unilaterally pulling out knowing that, given Italy's strategic location in the heart of the Mediterranean Sea and just north of Libya, international action against Libya would require Italian involvement.

Italy is preparing to play a prominent role in Libya and in the region, to counter its deep economic crisis and the threat that popular protests could spread from North Africa to Italy and Europe.

On Saturday, the Berlusconi government announced that it would comply with an EU decision to freeze Libyan assets in Italy. However, given the role of these assets in Italian finance, the Italian government is proceeding with caution. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, the decision will not concern "assets of the Libyan Central Bank and the Libyan Investment Authority [LIA], which is the country's sovereign wealth fund, which both own stakes in several key Italian companies."

The LIA controls 7.5 percent of Italian bank UniCredit and 2 percent of defense and aerospace giant Finmeccanica, substantial shares in Fiat, ENI, as well as soccer club Juventus. Its capital infusion in the Italian bank system avoided a financial disaster in the aftermath of the Lehman Brothers collapse of September 2008.

But financial troubles are far from over. The *Financial Times* reports that Bank of Italy governor Mario Draghi is urging "Italian banks to shore up their balance sheets before European stress tests are run this summer." Banks like UniCredit, Intesa and MPS are among Europe's most under-capitalized and will need to raise additional funds to conform to Basel III banking rules.

Moreover, at the recent European People's Party (EPP) conference in Helsinki, Berlusconi was very explicit when he spoke of a change "like the ones in Tunisia and Egypt toward a democracy that will allow the maintenance of a relationship of prominence by our economy." More specifically, he launched the idea of a new Marshall Plan worth €10 billion "for all the countries that are implementing this change."

Layers of the Italian ruling class, like their American and European counterparts, view the military option with caution. They are not opposed to it in principle, however they fear repercussions in international relations, given the increased

degree of rivalry in a crisis-ridden world economy. Moreover, a military intervention could unleash the full potential of a revolt by the Arabic working masses against a centuries-old history of imperialist subjugation.

Terms like "humanitarian" efforts are now making a comeback, as imperialist politicians try to hypocritically mask the class character of the intervention they are planning.

The Italian bourgeois "left," which is supporting plans for intervention, is perfectly fluent in this type of language. Former Prime Minister Massimo D'Alema, leading figure of the Democratic Party and former leader in the Stalinist Communist Party, declared his unconditional support to the imperialist ambitions of the Berlusconi government: "In times like these an opposition force must identify the objectives and push the government to act."

In 1999, covering the post of prime minister, he authorized NATO to use Italian air space against Serbia during the Kosovo War. It was the second time since World War II (the first one was the 1991 Gulf War) that Italy participated in a military offensive. This, too, was considered a "humanitarian" effort.

According to Nichi Vendola, leader of Sinistra Ecologia Libertà, the final goal is the ousting of Gaddafi. He is "grateful to [state] president Napolitano for having told another story, enemy of Gaddafi and friend of the Libyan people." Vendola is prepared to legitimize the Libyan National Council, a heterogeneous group of reshuffled Gaddafi ministers and functionaries, so long as Gaddafi is ousted.

The day after the Italian warship entered the port of Benghazi, Rifondazione Comunista's publication *Liberazione* called for "Diplomacy, not bombs." According to the "official" opposition, "What's needed is a strong initiative by the UN, supported by the entire international community for a negotiated solution that would defuse civil war and start the country's democratization."

Behind the empty antiwar and "anti-capitalist" rhetoric, Rifondazione gives its blatant support to diplomacy as the ultimate tool of imperialism. In Lenin's words, bodies like the UN are nothing but a "Thieves' Kitchen." The history of imperialism of the last decade in Iraq and Afghanistan, after hundreds of thousands of victims, is sufficient to understand the role of the UN as the international facilitator of imperialist interests. Not to mention the decade of the 90s, with Rwanda, Iraq, Serbia, Kosovo, Sudan, to name a few.

What all the "left" groups share is a rejection for the independent mobilization of the working class in a struggle for workers' power in Libya, as a starting point of the struggle for the United Socialist States of the Middle East and Maghreb.



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