

Berlusconi and the Italian “left”

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Following the resignation of Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, a large number of newspapers, including some which backed him for many years, have published scathing reviews of his years in office. The articles refer to “17 lost years” and the moral, political and economic harm inflicted on the country by the billionaire media mogul.

However, one looks in vain for any explanation of why Berlusconi was able to head no less than three governments and hold power for a total of ten years. Writing in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Stefan Kornelius refers to voters who had fallen for the allure of a clown and evinced “the need for diversion and simplification,” although “politics is arduous and complicated.”

Such a statement is not merely banal, it is driven by political expediency. It is well suited to justify the new “technocratic” government led by economist and former European Union commissioner Mario Monti. This undemocratically imposed government, basing itself on the state apparatus and the established parties, was installed for the sole purpose of carrying out the austerity measures dictated by the financial markets against the opposition of what Kornelius calls a “public intent on distraction.”

Disparaging the electorate cannot explain Berlusconi’s central role in Italian politics for nearly two decades. It evades, first of all, the support he received from Italian business interests and foreign leaders.

Russian leader Vladimir Putin and British Prime Minister Tony Blair numbered among his coterie of allies and friends. Former German Chancellor Helmut Kohl and the current chancellor, Angela Merkel, enabled his Forza Italia to join the European People’s Party. Berlusconi’s own media empire, a generally corrupt political system, and the ex-prime minister’s purported underworld connections were also factors contributing to his political success.

The most important factor in Berlusconi’s rise to prominence, however, was the impotence, cowardice and unending betrayals carried out by the country’s official

“left” opposition. Hardly any other European country has experienced so many political upheavals and mass protests over the past twenty years. But on every occasion, the “left” parties and the trade unions ensured that the situation remained under control, with Berlusconi retaining power.

In 1992, the parties that had ruled Italy for half a century collapsed in a cesspool of corruption. Some 3,000 leading representatives of business and politics were taken into custody. The Christian Democrats broke up. The Socialist Party dissolved and its leader, Bettino Craxi, fled the country.

The Communist Party, the only force not impacted by the scandal, had in 1990 already shifted sharply to the right, renouncing communism and changing its name to the Democratic Left. In 1993, at the height of the country’s political crisis, it participated in government for the first time since World War II, joining a government of experts led by former Italian Central Bank head Carlo Azeglio Ciampi. Other forces involved in the government were the discredited Christian Democrats and Socialists.

The alliance of the former Communist Party with the remnants of Italy’s political establishment set the stage for Berlusconi’s ascent to power. The construction and media entrepreneur, whose fortune was reputedly linked to widespread corruption, emerged as the victor from the biggest corruption scandal in Italian history.

Berlusconi’s Forza Italia party, which is little more than a wing of his media and business empire, won the 1994 general election. Berlusconi then formed his first government with the neo-fascist Movimento Sociale Italiano and the xenophobic Northern League.

Berlusconi had not counted, however, on the Italian working class. When he followed his idol Margaret Thatcher and tried to smash up the Italian social system, millions took to the streets and crippled the country. His coalition broke apart and Berlusconi was forced to resign after just seven months.

Once again, the Left Democrats supported a government of experts, this time under Lamberto Dini, who, like

Ciampi, had headed the central bank for a number of years and then served Berlusconi as finance minister. After new elections in 1996, the Left Democrats became the mainstay of the center-left government led by Romano Prodi, an economics expert and former Christian Democrat. The Prodi government pursued a course of strict budgetary consolidation and introduced the euro.

During this period, an increasingly important role was played by the Communist Refoundation party (PRC). Like the Left Democrats, the PRC had emerged from the Communist Party in 1990, but had retained the term “communist” in its name. It quickly became an oasis for all sorts of petty-bourgeois “left” groupings seeking a home. For a period, the PRC was revered throughout the European pseudo-left as the role model for leftist parties.

The PRC was able to gain influence under conditions of growing social radicalization. In 1996, it won 8 percent of the vote. Its deputies, however, subordinated themselves to the governments of Dini and Prodi and helped secure their majorities in parliament.

The PRC withdrew its support for Prodi only in 1998, fearing it would lose its influence over the growing social opposition. Prodi then resigned and the Left Democrat Massimo D’Alema took over as head of government.

Five years of austerity under Prodi and D’Alema finally paved the way for Berlusconi’s return to power. In 2001 he won the election and was able to complete an entire term of five years for the first time ever. Once again, there were mass protests—including three million who marched in Rome in 2003 against the Iraq war. The PRC and the unions intervened, however, to ensure that the mass movement did not pose a threat to the government.

In 2006, it appeared that Berlusconi was a spent force. He lost the election by a wide margin and Prodi resumed power, heading a government in which the Left Democrats formed the backbone. This time round, the PRC not only voted for Prodi’s policies in parliament, it joined his cabinet, taking over one ministerial post.

The second Prodi government proceeded against the working class with even more venom than the first. It imposed deep cuts in pensions, continued the war in Afghanistan, and expanded an American military base in the face of massive public opposition. After two years in power, Prodi was so unpopular that Berlusconi was able to win a snap election and take power a third time.

Now it seems that history will repeat itself. Berlusconi has been politically discredited and forced to resign by the international financial markets and Italian business associations because they were convinced he would not

implement cuts with sufficient vigor. The Left Democrats, who now call themselves the Democrats, along with the unions and their “left” hangers-on have again resolved to support a government of experts committed to drastically slashing pensions, wages, social benefits and state benefits.

The political bankruptcy of these organizations is so apparent that even their leaders concede this fact. Nichi Vendola, long-time leading member of the PRC and now president of the Apulia region, has declared that the Italian left is in an “obviously hopeless crisis,” which manifests itself in a “lack of ideas, vision and new forms of politics.” The result is “total political paralysis.”

This time, however, the danger is not merely a return of Berlusconi. The scale of the social attacks planned by the Monti government, against the background of the biggest international economic crisis since the 1930s, means major class confrontations are inevitable. The government of Monti, based on the state apparatus and a shaky majority in parliament, is highly unstable. If the working class fails to take the initiative, this “technocratic” government will pave the way for an openly dictatorial regime.

The only path for workers in Italy and Europe to defend their political rights and social interests lies in resolving the crisis of political leadership and building a new party on the basis of an international socialist program. To this end, it is necessary to draw the lessons from the bankruptcy and collapse of the old workers parties and trade unions and the treachery of their pseudo-socialist allies in the middle-class “left.”

The International Committee of the Fourth International and the *World Socialist Web Site* have consistently warned against the role of these organizations. When others praised the PRC as a role model for Europe, we sought to demonstrate its reactionary role. The urgent task is the building of sections of the International Committee in Italy and throughout Europe.

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