

Former Italian Prime Minister Berlusconi praises Mussolini

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Italy's former prime minister, Silvio Berlusconi, used the occasion of Holocaust Remembrance Day, January 27, to praise the fascist "Duce" Benito Mussolini. Mussolini had "done a great deal of good", notwithstanding the racial laws that were "his worst mistake", Berlusconi said.

Italian responsibility for the Shoah was "not comparable to that of Germany", Berlusconi continued. It had been "difficult" for Mussolini, who acted under pressure from Hitler. Italians had merely tolerated Nazi racial policy and were "not really aware of it at the beginning", he said.

Italy's political leaders immediately sought to play down the significance of Berlusconi's statements, describing the provocations of the 76-year-old multi-billionaire as a "minor offense".

Mario Monti, the outgoing prime minister, remarked tersely that Berlusconi had used an "unfortunate phrase on the wrong day and in the wrong place". Just prior to his comments, the Ansa news agency reported that Monti did not rule out collaboration with Berlusconi's party, PdL (People of Freedom), following parliamentary elections on February 24, on condition that Berlusconi did not take up a leading post in the new administration.

The Christian Democrat Pierferdinando Casini (UDC) declared that Berlusconi had "spoken nonsense". Politicians aligned with the country's so-called "left" also made just brief comments on the incident and were quick to move on.

Pier Luigi Bersani, the leader of the Democrats and leading candidate for the post of prime minister, complained that Berlusconi had made the "Day of Remembrance" a "day of election campaign maneuver". The regional president of Puglia, Nichi Vendola (Left, Ecology and Freedom, SEL), described

Berlusconi as a "falsifier, who would be advised to keep silent".

Berlusconi expressed his comments on fascism during the official inauguration ceremony of a Holocaust memorial on "Platform 21" of the Milan Central Station. The memorial has been erected around the hidden railway tunnel originally used by the fascists to conduct deportations.

From 1943 to 1945, thousands of Italian Jews were deported from this point to extermination camps such as Auschwitz-Birkenau and Bergen-Belsen, and the Italian camps of Bolzano and Fossoli. A total of around 8,600 Jews were deported from Italy to the death camps.

Contrary to Berlusconi's remarks, anti-Semitism was not merely imposed on Italian fascism externally by Hitler and Nazi Germany—the persecution of the Jews was entirely in line with Italian fascism and Mussolini's own racist ideology. Jews were socially isolated and dispossessed; they were banned from attending state schools in Italy, heading a business, carrying out an official function, and could not marry Italians.

In order to create a new "Roman Empire" around the Mediterranean Sea the Italian fascists occupied North Africa and parts of Yugoslavia, classifying Africans, Slavs and Jews as "subhuman" and discriminating against them. The defense of a "pure Italian race" was used, especially in Abyssinia and Libya, to justify massacres and genocide.

As historian Carlo Moos demonstrates, racial laws against the Jews were first introduced in Italy in 1938 in accordance with the racial policies of the Third Reich. At the same time they corresponded to "a long-existing, general-fascist racial concept" (Moos, Carlo: *Late Italian Fascism and the Jews*, 2008).

Berlusconi, who is facing a series of criminal charges for business and sex crimes, is deliberately turning towards the extreme right in his election campaign.

One of his candidates for the Senate is Mussolini's granddaughter, Alessandra Mussolini. Berlusconi's party, the PdL, has not only allied itself with its long-time former partner, the racist Northern League, but also with ultra-right-wing parties such as the neo-fascist La Destra, led by Francesco Storace. The ranks of La Destra include Giuliana De Medici, stepdaughter of the fascist leader and founder of the neo-fascist Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI), Giorgio Almirante (1914-1988).

Berlusconi has continually relied on the fascists in the course of his political career. In 1994 he drew the MSI into government for the first time since the overthrow of the fascist dictatorship. The MSI at that time openly professed its adherence to Mussolini. The party later changed its name to National Alliance (NA) and joined Berlusconi's supporters to form the PdL. Former MSI leader Gianfranco Fini is currently backing the electoral list headed by Mario Monti.

Berlusconi has always been able to count on the fact that he would receive no serious opposition from the successor organizations of the Communist Party (PCI). It was the PCI after World War II that prevented workers from overthrowing Italian capitalism, which had been thoroughly discredited after more than two decades of Mussolini's dictatorship. To this end the PCI joined the bourgeois post-war government with party leader Palmiro Togliatti assuming the post of justice minister. In 1946 he issued a general amnesty for political crimes. Italy was therefore the first country to summarily abandon any legal investigation or punishment for the crimes of fascism.

Following Berlusconi's resignation in November 2011 as head of government, his PdL party fully backed the austerity measures of the Monti government for a year in parliament. Berlusconi is now trying to divert increasing social anger into right-wing channels. While all other parties, including alleged "leftist" organizations, advocate the continuation of Monti's austerity measures and support for the European Union, Berlusconi is conducting a populist nationalist campaign, blaming the European Union and the German government for the social decline of Italy.

A few days ago Berlusconi promised to abolish the estate tax for first-time homebuyers (IMU), which his

own government had introduced in March 2011. Following his own assumption of power, Mario Monti significantly toughened and extended Berlusconi's decree in December 2011 as part of his "Salva Italia" program. Berlusconi has also announced his intention to refund all the IMU tax revenues collected under Monti within a month should he be elected.

The fact that no parties, including the successor organizations to the Communist Party, raise any serious objections to Berlusconi's praise for Mussolini is rooted in their own policies. They are actively working to destroy all of the post-war gains of the working population and support the re-colonization of Africa that began with the wars in Libya and Mali.

In this context Berlusconi's allegation that Mussolini had done "much good" assumes menacing dimensions. Mussolini smashed the organized labor movement, destroyed its social gains and democratic rights, and went on to conduct brutal colonial wars in Libya and Abyssinia.

Today Italian politics is moving in a similar direction. For the time being, the Monti government still relies on the successor organizations of the Communist Party and the trade unions. But these will not be able to permanently hold back the working class. The social counterrevolution can ultimately only be carried out with authoritarian methods.

Across Europe bourgeois politicians are forming alliances with racist, ultra-nationalist and fascist parties. Such parties have been playing an important role for some time in political life in Hungary, Greece, France and Austria. Against a background of increasing social tensions they are needed by the ruling class as a battering ram against the working class.



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