

Berlusconi's party splits in Italy

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A split took place over the weekend within Silvio Berlusconi's party People of Freedom (PDL). The media billionaire and his supporters are going into opposition, while a minority led by Angelino Alfano, formerly Berlusconi's handpicked successor, intends to keep the government of Prime Minister Enrico Letta (Democratic Party, PD) in power until elections due in 2015.

At the same time as Berlusconi announced that his party would adopt its former name Forza Italia at a meeting on Saturday in the congress palace of the Roman district of EUR, Alfano declared the founding of a new party, New Centre-Right, at a press conference.

Three quarters of the party followed Berlusconi, and the remainder went with Alfano. Alfano, the current deputy prime minister, took 27 deputies, 30 senators and all five PDL ministers in the government. This is sufficient to secure Letta a parliamentary majority.

Berlusconi had been threatening for months to bring down the government if the Senate revoked his parliamentary immunity due to his conviction for tax evasion. At the beginning of October, he announced the withdrawal of the PDL from the government. Letta won a vote of confidence after Alfano's supporters backed the government, abandoning Berlusconi at the last minute.

With the rehabilitation of Forza Italia, with which he began his political career in 1994, Berlusconi was seeking to strengthen his control over the party. He has been unsuccessful, however. On November 27, the date at which the Senate is set to vote on Berlusconi's immunity, he will not control enough votes to force new elections.

Both Berlusconi and Alfano have attempted to avoid severing all relations, in order to leave open the possibility of future cooperation.

Alfano insisted he had only reached his decision

“with bitterness and out of love for the fatherland.” He was indebted to Berlusconi for everything, who would remain the undisputed leader of the centre-right camp. Alfano promised that his deputies would vote decisively against Berlusconi's expulsion from the Senate.

For his part, Berlusconi declared in an hour-long, emotional speech that Alfano was “like a son” to him, and there would be cooperation with his party in the future. He fainted on stage and required medical treatment. Later, he asserted that the defectors were not “traitors” but part of a big family.

At the same time, he announced his party's exit from the government. It was difficult to imagine how a party could cooperate in a cabinet with a prime minister who was seeking the political death of its leader, Berlusconi stated.

The split was welcomed in the Italian and international press. The feeling was that Letta now had a year to implement social spending cuts against the workers, without the constant threat that his government would collapse over the trials against Berlusconi.

Alfano reassured the press that the country would now be stable for a year. He suggested to Letta that he take twelve months “to lead the country out of the crisis.”

Guglielmo Ipifani, General Secretary of the PD, was also happy and relieved about the split. The long-time chairman of the CGIL trade union confederation said on television on Saturday that the government could now work more effectively.

“All of this creates clarity, clarity for the country, clarity for the government. It has the conditions to work better and more effectively,” he stated.

After it survived the vote of confidence, the Letta government presented the 2014 budget to parliament and referred it for review to the European Union (EU).

Although it proposes spending cuts of €12 billion in 2014, EU Commissioner for Economic and Monetary Affairs Olli Rehn criticised it sharply last week. The budget was insufficient to eliminate Italy's high state debt, he said.

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Although Letta rejected the criticism on Italian television, stating that cuts alone would mean death, he has promised to redraft the budget together with his Economic and Finance Minister Fabrizio Saccomanni. Saccomanni was previously chair of the Italian central bank, and is a non-party minister.

The current draft already proposes measures which will lead to widespread social misery. In the public sector, wages will be frozen and vacant jobs will go unfilled. The increase in VAT, rubbish collection charges and other indirect taxes will hit working people particularly hard. The government intends to raise €20 billion by privatising public companies, including ENI, Alitalia, and the postal service. This threatens the loss of thousands of jobs. .

Currently 6 million people in Italy are without a job, a record high. The sustained recession over recent years has been especially catastrophic for the youth. Youth unemployment officially surpassed 40 percent in September.

Poverty is also rampant among pensioners. Last year's pension reform by the Monti government robbed an entire generation of workers who retired early of an income.

Last week, there were demonstrations, strikes and protests across Italy against the austerity policies of the government. In Rome, thousands of students demonstrated for the right to education. Another large demonstration took place in Naples, in opposition to the deadly consequences of the scandal over garbage collection, which implicates not only the local administration, but all of the governing parties.

By contrast, relatively few responded to calls to protest against the "stability pact" (budget 2014) by the country's main trade union organisations, the CGIL, CISL and UIL. They were mainly older trade unionists, who have been in the organisations for many years. It is well known that the trade unions work closely with Letta's PD, ultimately support its economic course and have called protests only to let off steam. In order to

prevent damage to the economy, they limited a general strike by transport workers on Friday to just four hours.

The trade unions and pseudo-left organisations, which act as cheerleaders for the bureaucracy, are all fully behind the EU and want to avoid the toppling of Letta's government. In a joint document, the three trade union confederations criticised the current budget draft for not carrying out changes in economic policy necessary for the country to return to growth. Those are the same terms employed by the government and business on a daily basis.



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