In the Italian election campaign, the establishment parties and media pave the way for the fascists

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The Italian election campaign suggests only one thing: the country's leading politicians and media are determined to pave the way for fascist Giorgia Meloni to enter Palazzo Chigi, the official residence of Italy's prime minister.

For weeks, opinion polls have been predicting a September 25 election victory for Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy) and the right-wing alliance it heads. But no one is expressing alarm at the prospect of Benito Mussolini's heirs returning to power in Italy a hundred years after he took power in October 1922. On the contrary, Meloni and her party are embraced and praised, and dangers of fascists in power downplayed.

Commenting on the complaint by the Fratelli d'Italia that its leader is "demonized by the left," the Süddeutsche Zeitung's correspondent in Rome writes, "It is rather the other way around: no one demonizes Giorgia Meloni in Italy, not even the press. She is sailing to her election victory, at least that is how it appears."

The only condition Meloni had to fulfil to be recognized as a possible head of government was a commitment to the continuation of Mario Draghi's austerity policies, to the European Union, to NATO and to the war against Russia. She promptly fulfilled this condition.

Italy is "a full part of Europe, the Atlantic Alliance and the West," reads the first of 15 points in the election program Meloni agreed with her alliance partners Matteo Salvini (Lega) and Silvio Berlusconi (Forza Italia). She was "very prudent" and would "not ruin" the state finances, she gave her "full approval to the process of European integration," she had never proposed an exit from the euro and would stay in line with the EU and NATO in the Ukraine war, Meloni stresses at every available opportunity. She has even released a trilingual video to reassure Italy's NATO allies and international financial markets.

By contrast, Meloni's fascist past, her admiration for "il Duce" Mussolini, the numerous neo-fascists and violent neo-Nazis in and around her party, and her connections to right-wing networks in the state apparatus are all benignly ignored—even secretly welcomed, since the representatives of the ruling class apparently believe they will be needed in future confrontations with the working class.

The only face-to-face debate that has taken place between the two most likely candidates for head of government is symptomatic of Meloni's treatment. The newspaper Corriere della Sera invited Meloni and Enrico Letta, head of the social-democratic Partito Democratico, to a televised duel, which it broadcast live on its website.

Privately, the two like each other and are on first name terms. Letta refrained from making any sharp attacks and said not a word about the fascist past of Meloni and her party. While Meloni invoked the fascist slogan "God, Fatherland and Family," Letta accused her of not backing the EU clearly enough and of disregarding gay rights. That was as far as his accusations went.

Meloni also received the indirect blessing of Mario Draghi, who continued as acting head of government following his resignation on July 21. "I am convinced that the next government, of whatever political hue it may be, will overcome the challenges of today, even though they seem insurmountable," he said in a speech—which the Fratelli d'Italia celebrated as a political endorsement.

Not even on an electoral level are the so-called centre-left parties trying to prevent a Meloni victory. Although their programs differ only in nuances, they are running separately in the election. In addition to Letta's Democrats, who have allied themselves with the pseudo-left Sinistra Italiana, the Greens and a European party, a "Third Pole" led by ex-government leader Matteo Renzi and ex-industry minister Carlo Calenda, as well as ex-government leader Giuseppe Conte's Five Stars, are running for election.

Since Italian electoral law favours large parties and electoral alliances, this gives the three allied right-wing parties a major advantage. It is considered possible that with just half the votes, they could win two-thirds of the parliamentary seats and then be able to change the constitution.

Support for Meloni is not limited to Italy. Manfred Weber, the German chairman of the European People's Party (EPP, an alliance of Christian-democratic, conservative, and liberal-conservative member parties at EU level) is campaigning in Italy for Silvio Berlusconi and thus indirectly for Meloni. Like the German Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU), the party of the 85-year-old media tycoon and ex-head of government, against whom three dozen cases of corruption, abuse of office, tax evasion and promotion of prostitution are pending, is a member of the EPP.

The effort to portray Meloni as a reformed politician who would pursue a moderate, conservative course and embody a triumph of women's emancipation as the first female to head the Italian government stands in stark contrast to reality.

Meloni joined the youth movement of the Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI), which had emerged directly from Mussolini's Fascist Party, in 1992 as a 15-year-old. The MSI was a rallying point for fascists who remained loyal to the dictator. It had close ties to far-right networks in the state security apparatus, which repeatedly attempted to create the conditions for a coup d'état through mounting terrorist

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attacks.

The MSI had influence at local level, but cooperation with it at the national level was considered a taboo. That changed in 1994, when Silvio Berlusconi brought the party into his first government. At age 31, Meloni later became Italy's youth and sports minister under Berlusconi.

In 2009, the Alleanza Nazionale, as the MSI had come to call itself, merged with Berlusconi's party. Three years later, Meloni founded the Fratelli d'Italia to continue the MSI's fascist traditions.

The party initially led a fringe existence. In 2013 it received two percent of the electoral vote and in 2017 just over four percent. Its growth began after virtually all parties joined forces last spring to form a government of national unity under former European Central Bank chief Mario Draghi. Meanwhile, the Fratelli stand at 25 percent in the polls.

The party is teeming with convinced, violent fascists. For example, Francesco Lollobrigida, the Fratelli's faction leader in the Chamber of Deputies (lower house of parliament) and Meloni's brother-in-law, championed the construction of a mausoleum for Rodolfo Graziani, which was erected in 2012. Graziani, as Mussolini's field marshal and minister of war, was responsible for the use of poison gas and mass executions in the colonies, and the construction of concentration camps in North Africa that killed at least 50,000 prisoners.

Three years ago, Meloni's fellow party members in the Marche region celebrated Mussolini's march on Rome with a commemorative dinner. One of the participants, Francesco Acquaroli, is now prime minister of the region. In Verona, the party's youth organization commemorated Nazi collaborator and SS Standartenführer (Standard Leader) Léon Degrelle. Elsewhere, too, the "Roman salute" of the fascists is often seen at commemorative events of the Fratelli.

The party maintains close ties with militant neo-Nazi groups such as CasaPound, whose members describe themselves as "fascists of the Third Millennium." In one of the organization's properties, police found a shrine honouring Nazi war criminals Heinrich Himmler, a main architect of the Holocaust, and Erich Priebke, responsible for the Ardeatine massacre in Rome in 1944 in which 335 Italian civilians were killed in retaliation for a partisan attack that killed 33 men of the German SS Police Regiment.

Activists and journalists who have exposed the right-wing machinations of the Fratelli must fear for their lives. For example, Paolo Berizzi, a journalist for the newspaper La Repubblica and author of several books on the extreme right, is under the kind of constant personal protection usually only required by prosecutors investigating the Mafia. He receives dozens of death threats every day and is even threatened on banners at soccer stadiums, where the Ultras are one of the main recruiting grounds for neo-Nazis.

To this can be added Meloni's connections to far-right parties in other countries. For example, she regularly appears at events organized by Spain's Vox, a rallying point for supporters of former dictator Franco. She is also close to Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and Donald Trump's supporters in the United States.

Meloni's takeover of the Italian government is a serious threat to the working class. It will strengthen the far-right forces in the state apparatus and in society that are already terrorizing workers, left-wing activists, and immigrants.

Her allies—the Lega and Forza Italia—stand no less to the right. Lega leader Salvini, as Italy's interior minister, has incited the most right-wing elements through unrestrained refugee-baiting and massively increasing the powers of the state apparatus. He was supported by the same neo-Nazis who have now turned to Meloni. Silvio Berlusconi began his economic and political career in Licio Gelli's "Propaganda Due" (Propaganda Two, or P2) Masonic lodge, long the hub of the far-right conspiracy involving the police, military, business, politics, Mafia, and secret services.

The support for Meloni and downplaying of the dangers by all the bourgeois parties and media cannot, therefore, be dismissed as just misunderstandings or "mistakes." They show that the ruling class as a whole is moving to the right and preparing for the violent suppression of social and political resistance. For this, it needs the fascists.

In the past 30 years, the so-called centre-left parties have conducted massive attacks on the working class. While Berlusconi and his allies looted the state treasury for their own enrichment, it fell to the centre-left and technocrat governments, which the centre-left supported, to replenish state coffers at the expense of the working class. In the process, pseudo-left parties, such as Rifondazione Comunista, have covered for them from the left and supported them against the working class.

The consequences are a hopeless crisis of bourgeois politics and, as far as workers' interests are concerned, a complete political vacuum. All the establishment parties, and the trade unions, have conspired against the working class. Spending on education, health, and culture has been cut to the bone, those on lower incomes and pensions have seen them massively decline, and unemployment and youth unemployment are among the highest in Europe. The national debt is 150 percent of GDP and is to be reduced by imposing further austerity measures dictated by the EU.

In addition, there are the catastrophic consequences of the pandemic, the climate catastrophe, and the war against Russia. With 177,000 coronavirus deaths, Italy has recorded the second highest number of COVID victims in Europe after Britain. Two-thirds of the population, 40 million people, live in dangerous regions threatened by disasters (fire, flood, earthquake).

NATO's war against Russia, which Italy fully supports, threatens to turn into a nuclear catastrophe and is driving up prices. Inflation is at 8.4 percent—and rising. Countless families will no longer be able to heat their homes in winter or afford enough to eat.

Resistance to this is growing. A huge class confrontation is brewing, for which the ruling class is preparing by arming the state apparatus, strengthening the fascists, and turning to authoritarian forms of rule. Italy is no exception. Similar developments are taking place in every capitalist country.

The working class must prepare for this confrontation by uniting on an international basis in the struggle against inflation and social cuts combining this with the struggle against militarism, fascism and their cause, capitalism. This requires the building in Italy of a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world party of socialist revolution.

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