

Silvio Berlusconi (1936–2023): The fusion of wealth, criminality and government power

Peter Schwarz**14 June 2023**

Silvio Berlusconi, who died of leukemia in a Milan hospital on Monday at the age of 86, will go down in history as a symbol of the degeneration of bourgeois rule. He embodied the fusion of wealth and power, the criminal underworld and politics, and cultural backwardness within society's elites. Above all, however, he gave the heirs of fascism renewed hope and paved the way for them to return to power.

Berlusconi anticipated similar political careers in other countries, some of which have striking parallels: Donald Trump in the US, Andrej Babiš in the Czech Republic, Petro Poroshenko in Ukraine, to name a few. Comparisons with Rupert Murdoch, who uses his media empire to promote ultra-right-wing politics, are also emerging. Historically, he is reminiscent of Alfred Hugenberg, the German armaments entrepreneur and media tsar, who also went into politics and used his influence over the media to pave the way for Hitler to come to power.

The exuberant praise with which politicians of all shades showered Berlusconi after his death shows that they are grateful to him for the rehabilitation of fascism and are headed in the same direction. Berlusconi's rise to become one of Italy's richest and most powerful men is not an individual phenomenon, but the result of fundamental social tendencies that are not confined to Italy.

Italy's President Sergio Mattarella praised Berlusconi as a "great political leader who has shaped the history of our republic." Opposition leader Elly Schlein called him a "protagonist of the history of our country". European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said that Berlusconi had "led Italy in a time of political upheaval and continued to shape his beloved country ever since." Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said he was "deeply saddened" by "Silvio's" death and called him a "great friend of Israel." Russian President Vladimir Putin called Silvio "a dear person and a true friend" and said his death was an "irreplaceable loss and a deep misfortune."

Silvio Berlusconi was born in Milan in 1936, the son of a salaried employee. He graduated with a law degree in 1961 and worked as a vacuum cleaner salesman as well as a singer and conférencier on cruise ships. How the destitute lawyer then became a billionaire building contractor within 10 years

remains to this day shrouded in secrecy. What is certain is that he was a member of Propaganda Due (P2), a criminal anti-communist network disguised as a Masonic lodge that included hundreds of senior politicians, military and intelligence officials, judges, prosecutors, entrepreneurs and journalists.

P2 was involved in the terrorist attacks that rocked Italy in the 1960s and 1970s. It maintained ties to organized crime and the NATO underground army Gladio, which specialized in acts of sabotage. It was involved in numerous financial scandals, sometimes fatal to the protagonists. Their connections to the highest levels of the state and the judiciary ensured that the masterminds remained untouched.

There is much to suggest that the huge sums used by Berlusconi to build thousands of apartments in Milan in the 1960s came from the dubious sources of P2. There are even suspicions that Berlusconi was initially only a straw man for P2.

Berlusconi also owed the licenses for his residential projects, that enabled him to create an Italian media empire from a small local station, to a prominent member of P2: Bettino Craxi, the head of the Socialist Party, who was Italian Prime Minister from 1983 and 1987. Craxi's party also dominated Milan's local politics, which was invaluable to Berlusconi's construction projects.

Berlusconi used his media power as a political weapon. In a country where one struggles to take a step without encountering evidence of millennia of high culture, he reduced the level of television entertainment to the lowest possible trash. He unscrupulously used his control over the country's three largest private broadcasters—and as prime minister also over the public broadcasters—for political purposes.

For his political work, Berlusconi used his company empire, which now included Italy's largest publishing house Mondadori, a bank and the top football club AC Milan. Two months before his election success in March 1994, he founded the Forza Italia party, named after the battle cry of football fans. It was an extended arm of his business.

Berlusconi's economic and media power alone, however, cannot explain why he rose to the top of the government and led it for a total of nine years—longer than any other Italian politician since World War II. Much more important for his

success was the political bankruptcy of the so-called “left”—the influential Communist Party (Partito Comunista Italiano, PCI) and its successor organizations as well as their pseudo-left hangers-on. They paved the way for Berlusconi’s rise to power through their right-wing policies; crippled resistance, which involved millions at times, to his regime; and provided him and his fascist allies with the conditions for a comeback through their anti-worker policies when they were in government.

Two important events preceded Berlusconi’s political rise: the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the collapse of the traditional Italian ruling parties, especially the Christian Democrats and the socialists, in the gigantic “Tangentopoli” corruption scandal. While well-known politicians were arrested and imprisoned as part of Operation Mani pulite, the PCI abandoned all left-wing symbols and turned into a right-wing bourgeois party modeled on the US Democrats.

The PCI, which had considerable influence in the working class because of its role in the Resistance, the armed resistance against Mussolini, had always served as a party of the state since the end of the Second World War. Their policies, apart from the rhetoric, hardly differed from those of the German SPD or the French socialists. But because of its ties to Moscow, the PCI was prevented from joining the government of a NATO country, especially due to pressure from the US.

Now that this obstacle had disappeared and the working class was pushing for a left-wing response to “Tangentopoli,” the successors to the PCI stabbed the workers in the back. They campaigned for a responsible fiscal policy and advocated harsh austerity measures. Berlusconi, supported by the old elites, used his populist demagogic to occupy the resulting political vacuum. It was precisely a man from the centre of the corruption swamp who benefited from its draining.

Forza Italia won the election in 1994, but was far from having a majority of its own with 21 percent of the vote. In addition to the Lega Nord, Berlusconi brought Mussolini’s heirs from the National Alliance/Social Movement of Italy (MSI) into his government for the first time. Until then, an alliance with the neo-fascists had been considered absolutely taboo.

The Workers League, the predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party in the US, commented on this in the *International Workers Bulletin* (IWB) of 11 April 1994: “The Italian bourgeoisie sees the rehabilitation of fascism as a necessary step in solving the long-running crisis of the entire political and economic system. Corruption scandals that have virtually wiped out the former ruling parties—the Christian Democrats and Social Democrats—have been used to shake the political structures that have sustained the vast welfare state of Italy and its vast nationalized industrial sector. Now the ruling class is bringing forces forward to finish the job.”

The resurgence of fascism is “an organic expression of the disease of capitalist society,” warned the IWB. “Once again, as in the 1930s, democratic institutions are breaking apart under the pressure of class antagonisms and international tensions.

The gap between rich and poor has become so deep that it can no longer be bridged by the play of parliamentary forces.”

“If the working class does not find a way to advance its independent political mobilization against the capitalist system, it will once again face a fascist catastrophe,” it concluded.

This warning has since been confirmed. It would be too ambitious within the framework of this obituary to follow all the twists and turns of Italian politics of the last 30 years, in which Berlusconi played an important role. However, one thing must be stressed. Rifondazione Comunista and other pseudo-left organizations, which posed as an alternative to the Democrats, played a decisive role in bringing him back to power again and again.

Whenever a Democrat-led or backed government came into conflict with the working class, Rifondazione jumped aside. In 2006, the party even joined the government of former EU Commission President Romano Prodi, which proved politically fatal. As a result, Berlusconi returned to the head of the government for a fourth time between 2008 and 2011.

The bankruptcy of the so-called left eventually created the conditions for the meteoric rise of comedian Beppe Grillo’s Five Star Movement (M5S), which won the election in 2018. It immediately showed its real character by forming a governing coalition with the ultra-right Lega led by Matteo Salvini.

The Five Star Movement subsequently switched coalition partners and allied with the Democrats, who paved the way for Berlusconi’s Forza Italia to return to power once again in 2022. This time, however, Berlusconi’s party, which has shrunk to 8 percent, is not heading the government. It supports the neo-fascist Giorgia Meloni as a junior partner.

Berlusconi had already promoted Meloni in 2008 by appointing the 31-year-old as Youth and Sports Minister in his government. Later, Meloni broke with her old party, the Alleanza Nazionale, because she did not want to distance herself from Mussolini. Nevertheless, the neo-fascist is being courted by all Western governments and welcomed with open arms.

Berlusconi’s project to rehabilitate the fascists has proven successful. The ruling elite needs the far-right to impose its rearment and war policies against the resistance of the working class and youth and to suppress social protest.

This danger can only be overcome by building an independent, socialist movement in the working class that combines the struggle against fascism, war and social degradation with the elimination of its cause, capitalism.



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