

Rome: Mass demonstration to defend pensions

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An estimated 1 million people took part in a national demonstration in Rome last Saturday under the slogan “Defend your Future.” Demonstrators travelled from across the country in 3,000 buses and specially organised trains, and included workers, public employees and pensioners. Also in attendance were large numbers of young people, unemployed, workers in short-term jobs, and leading cultural figures such as dramatist Dario Fo and writer Antonio Tabucchi.

The demonstration, which had been called by the three main Italian trade unions (CGIL, CISL and UIL), consisted of three separate marches that set off from the city’s main square and the railway stations of Ostien and Tiburtin to converge on the Piazza San Giovanni. The protest was directed against plans by the right-wing government of Silvio Berlusconi to reform the Italian pension scheme in line with its budget proposals.

The government’s pension reform requires that beginning in 2008, workers must have paid at least 40 years of contributions or have reached the minimum age of 65 (women 60) to qualify for a full pension. The existing regulation calls for 35 years of payments and a minimum age of 57. Recent governments have questioned the feasibility of the existing model, which was first introduced in the 1960s, although high levels of unemployment and the subsequent difficulty in acquiring sufficient contribution years mean that fewer and fewer workers have been able to take advantage of the retirement provisions.

During his first period in office in 1994, Berlusconi unleashed a storm of protest with similar plans to attack the pension scheme. His government eventually fell because of massive opposition. The centre-left government that succeeded him nevertheless went ahead with similar plans in line with requirements to trim the Italian budget deficit and qualify for the European Currency Union. Popular hostility to the centre-left Olive Tree coalition government enabled Italy’s richest man and media tycoon to return to power in May 2001.

Since taking power, the coalition government, led by Berlusconi’s own Forza Italia and consisting of the racist Northern League and the neo-fascist Alleanza Nazionale, has not only imposed a ruthless neo-liberal economic and social programme. It has also trampled on fundamental democratic rights, allowing Berlusconi to centralise the most important state and cultural institutions and media under his control. In

the process, Italy increasingly resembles the so-called “guided democracy” of Russian president Vladimir Putin.

When Berlusconi was forced to appear in court on charges of corruption, he used his parliamentary majority to reintroduce legal immunity for heads of state and leading politicians. Such immunity had been done away with just a few years before. Just last week, he was able to organise another coup. The Italian parliament passed a media law that is tailor-made to conform to the requirements of Berlusconi’s own media empire and makes a mockery of all the principles of a democratically controlled press and broadcast media.

The new law envisages the privatisation of the state-owned channel RAI and allows the amalgamation of different media—print, radio, music, Internet, film and publishing—in the form of a huge consortium. Through such measures, Berlusconi, who already has a monopoly of Italian television (he owns the three biggest private channels and as head of state also controls the state-owned channel) can now expand his control over the print media.

Growing opposition to Berlusconi

Since taking power for a second time two-and-a-half years ago, the Berlusconi government has been confronted with a continuous stream of demonstrations, strikes and protests. Repeatedly, hundreds of thousands have taken to the streets—protesting against the G8 summit in Genoa in the summer of 2001, and then against the dismantling of the welfare state. Additional large protests have been directed against attacks on democratic rights and freedom of speech, against the abolition of protection against redundancy (Paragraph 18), and against redundancies and plant closures by the Fiat car company, all culminating in mass demonstrations opposing the war on Iraq.

Since 3 million took to the streets of Rome and Florence and throughout Northern Italy on February 15, discontent with the government has continued to grow. A number of mass protests have occurred over the past few weeks: 10 million took part in

a general strike on October 24, and demonstrations and strikes continued on October 30 and November 7, 15 and 29, aimed mainly against the government pension reform. In addition, firemen carried out a national strike, and finally on December 1, public transport workers struck in Milan, Rome and Naples.

During this period, opinion polls show that public support for the government has plummeted. The government is also wracked by grave internal differences and has been weakened by continual conflicts between the Alleanza Nazionale and Northern League. The head of the Northern League, Umberto Bossi, has threatened to leave the coalition on a number of occasions—a step that would leave Berlusconi with just a tiny parliamentary majority.

The national demonstration of December 6 made clear the level of popular hatred for the government. Numerous banners and hand-painted placards were directed against Berlusconi personally. Many compared the media tycoon to Mussolini, and one showed Berlusconi sporting the typical black headgear favoured by Il Duce. In the manner of Mussolini, Berlusconi is depicted standing on a balcony and the text reads “Let’s throw him under!”

Despite massive public opposition, Berlusconi has been able to stay in power and continue unhindered with his reactionary proposals for legal reform. The reason is the political bankruptcy of the trade unions and the official opposition that extends from a wing of the former Christian Democrats on the right to the Greens, left-wing democrats (former Communist Party) and Rifondazione Comunista (PRC) on the left.

Although they are partly responsible for organising the protest and have taken part, neither the trade unions nor the opposition parties are prepared to call for the bringing down of the government and taking over power themselves, under conditions where they would be then confronted with popular demands for guarantees of social security and fairness.

Instead, the trade union leaders regard the protests as a means of forcing the government to include them in negotiations. At Saturday’s protest, Savino Pezzotta, secretary of the Catholic trade union organisation CISL, pleaded: “We are not here to overthrow the government, but to insist on a change of course.”

And Guglielmo Epifani, general secretary of the biggest trade union federation, the CGIL, limited his demands to the call for the government to change its policies: “This is the message of the trade unions: either the government changes its policies, or the protests will grow.” Epifani emphasised the importance of uniting with the UIL and the Catholic CISL, although both trade unions had last year renewed a so-called “Pact for Italy” that agreed with Berlusconi and aimed at negotiating increased flexibility in labour law.

Fausto Bertinotti, the chairman of Rifondazione Comunista, agrees with the trade union leaders on the issue of the government. In an internal party discussion over the issue of whether one should call for the bringing down of Berlusconi, Bertinotti argued that the time was not ripe. The main aim of

the mass movement must be carrying on with the mobilisation. “The aim of the movement is the growth of the movement itself,” he said, according to a member of the party’s executive committee and the party fraction “Falce Martello.”

The parliamentary opposition is fearful of taking over power as the result of a mass mobilisation. In fact, it has nothing different to offer in the way of political and economic alternatives to the current government.

It speaks volumes that Romano Prodi is being touted as the leading candidate of the opposition for the next parliamentary elections. Prodi is the founder of the so-called Olive Tree alliance and is currently president of the European Commission with the job of insisting on the budget restrictions flowing from the Maastricht Treaty. As is shown by the experiences of countries across the European Union, the cuts demanded by Brussels are simply incompatible with the defence of social gains and rights.

Despite the occasional outburst of harsh language, the Berlusconi government is well aware that in the final analysis the trade unions function as a safety valve for social discontent and have already indicated their willingness to enter talks.

Before this latest mass demonstration, Berlusconi’s deputy, Gianfranco Fini, had indicated that the government would not give way to “pressure from the streets.” But on Sunday, the government’s minister for social and labour affairs, Roberto Maroni, published an article in *La Repubblica* declaring that the government was “prepared to talk.” He proposed a meeting with all three trade unions on December 11. He was “satisfied with the demonstration, is not prepared to argue about numbers, everything went off OK and that’s good.”



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