

Rome: Thousands demonstrate against US war policy and the Prodi government

Rifondazione Comunista boycotts protest

A WSWS reporting team
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An estimated 30,000 people marched through the centre of Rome March 17 to protest against the Iraq war and the policies of Italy's government. On the fourth anniversary of the US invasion of Iraq, demonstrations also took place in Madrid, Prague, Copenhagen, Athens, Istanbul and other European cities.

The demonstration in Rome had been called by the trade union Cobas, the daily paper *Il Manifesto* and a number of other smaller organisations. The principal demands raised by protesters were the withdrawal of all Italian troops from all theatres of war, the closure of US military bases on Italian soil and the reduction of the country's military budget.

In previous years, the organisation Communist Refoundation (Rifondazione Comunista—PRC) had played an active role in such demonstrations. This year, it made no appeal for its supporters to attend the demonstration, nor did it take part. In April 2006, Communist Refoundation, the successor organisation to the Italian Communist Party, joined the coalition led by Romano Prodi and has been politically responsible for militarist policies of the government.

At the end of February, together with a number of other parties, PRC bowed to an ultimatum issued by Prodi demanding that his coalition partners support Italy's ongoing deployment in Afghanistan and the extension of US bases in the country. The agreement also awarded Prodi extraordinary powers as head of the government.

On March 8, the Italian Lower House voted in favour of the Afghanistan mission, with 524 deputies voting for it, just 3 against and 19 abstentions. All but 2 PRC deputies backed the military mission. A total of 1,900 Italian soldiers are currently stationed in Afghanistan and active in the NATO spring offensive "Operation Achilles."

The political crisis over the Afghan involvement intensified after the kidnapping in Afghanistan of an Italian journalist, Daniele Mastrogiacomo, from the *La Repubblica* newspaper. The Taliban are reportedly holding

Mastrogiacomo and demanding the withdrawal of Italian troops in exchange for his release. It is alleged his driver has already been executed after being accused of being a spy. Prodi rejected the demand for the withdrawal of troops, declaring, "We have made decisions, which we will keep to and there is nothing at present that could induce us to change."

Prodi's war policy—and the support he has received from Communist Refoundation—was a central topic at the Rome demonstration. "The Berlusconi government was a government of capitalists, fascists and racists—the Prodi government is a government of big business, war and fraud," one of the Cobas leaders declared to applause. "No more votes for war" was the text on many placards.

Banners carried slogans such as "Out of Afghanistan, down with the US bases"; "No to this government of war, for a left, which does not betray"; "Immediate withdrawal from Afghanistan and Lebanon"; and "Freedom for the Afghan people—freedom for Mastrogiacomo." And repeatedly, "No to the war" and "Disarm Now!"

One banner read, "War is the mother, terrorism the son, big business the grandfather." Another large banner from Naples featured a copy of the anti-war painting "Guernica" by Pablo Picasso.

Those speakers who directly condemned the betrayal of Communist Refoundation were applauded at the beginning and end of the demonstration. Other speakers, such as Salvatore Cannavò from the parliamentary group Left Criticism (*Sinistra Critica*), which works inside PRC, were booed and greeted with calls of "Resign from the government!"

Under conditions in which all of the parties active in the Prodi *Unione* coalition, including Communist Refoundation, the Italian Communist Party and the Greens, boycotted the demonstration, a number of other left organisations sought to pose as a political alternative. In terms of programme, however, they differed little from the sort of limited national

social reformist policies advocated by PRC, apart from their claim that “they would not betray.”

Typical in this respect was Marco Ferrando, who has worked inside PRC for a number of years as leader of a pseudo-Trotskyist grouping known as Progetto Comunista. At the final rally at the Piazza, Navona Ferrando said of the Prodi government, “It is a government of big business and the Vatican. The so-called left, which voted for this government, stand on the other side of the barricades. They only remain in government to defend their fat posts, their ministers, secretaries and chamber presidents.” This was a direct allusion the former chairman of the party, Fausto Bertinotti, who is the current speaker of the chamber of deputies.

Ferrando continued: “The Italian people hate war. It needs a new left in this country, and we must develop it—a left that does not lie and does not betray.” He refrained, however, from making the slightest attempt to explain why his alleged “Trotskyist” tendency had worked for years within Communist Refoundation and consistently provided the latter with a “left” political cover.

Speakers and representatives from numerous “left alternatives” spoke in a similar vein. They repeatedly called for the building of a “national net of all opposition groups” to provide resistance and ensure that “the movement continues to grow.” At the same time, they avoided addressing the question of why former protests and social movements had landed in a dead end, and what political lessons should be drawn. Four years earlier, on February 15, 2003, three million had taken to the streets of Rome to protest the outbreak of the Iraq war.

A team from the *World Socialist Web Site* distributed copies of the statement “Stop the US war drive against Iran!” and met many participants who were keenly interested in political discussion. Several participants already knew the WSWS and applauded the site for its political analyses. There was support for both the international orientation of the site and its political independence from all established political parties.

Michele from Rome told the WSWS, “No one expects anything more from Rifondazione Comunista since they joined the government. They are still part of the Prodi government, which is waging war and has carried out dramatic attacks on social rights.”

Lino, who works in Bologna because of the difficulties of finding work in Naples, said, “I was a member of Rifondazione Comunista for a time and still voted for the organisation last April. But after a few months, I became really angry about its policies. I resigned and am now working with a few friends in Bologna to develop a new group.

“The war is the central question. That is why we are here. Italian soldiers are fighting in Afghanistan, and we are absolutely against it. Many other questions are bound up with it. So the US army wants to build a new troop base in Vicenza, and we demonstrated just a month ago.

“Alongside the issue of the war, the social question is especially important at the moment—both the introduction of a minimum wage and the pension question. In a few weeks, a new pension system is to be decided upon, which will lead to the introduction of pension funds for privately employed workers in Italy. There are a series of meetings and protests taking place over the issue at the moment.

“It is clear that things cannot continue as they are, but we do not want to back to past conditions, as in former times—they were also by no means ideal. One must go forward. You say one must abolish capitalism, and I agree.”

Linda and Samuele from Rome also voted for the PRC in the past. As Linda explained: “I supported the organisation because they promised to unconditionally oppose war. Today, the Rifondazione Comunista deputies are themselves voting yes, even if the issue is war.”

Enrico is also a former PRC member but resigned three years ago. He approached our reporters and related that he had been reading the *World Socialist Web Site* for some time. He finds the reports about American political developments to be particularly interesting. He also concurred with the WSWS analysis of the recent cabinet crisis following Prodi’s threat to resign and the role of Communist Refoundation. He took copies of the WSWS leaflet to distribute amongst his acquaintances.

Enrico said: “Recent development show the complete capitulation of Rifondazione Comunista to Prodi. They are not in government to give a voice to worker’s struggles, but have instead made government politics the central point of their activity.

“Today, I belong to no particular tendency, but I am on the lookout, because I think one must build an international workers’ movement that includes Italy.”



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