

Hundreds of thousands demonstrate in Rome against Berlusconi government

By Andy Niklaus and Peter Schwarz
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On Saturday, March 2, hundreds of thousands of people gathered in Rome for a mass demonstration against the government of Silvio Berlusconi. The rally was called by the centre-left parliamentary opposition, headed by the Left Democrats.

Nine months after media magnate Berlusconi took office in an alliance with neo-fascists and separatists, all signs indicate that stormy confrontations are in the offing.

Demonstrators travelled from throughout Italy on special trains and more than a thousand buses. The organisers of the demonstration claimed an attendance of 800,000, while the Interior Ministry put the figure at 130,000.

Demonstrators protested vociferously against the “lying and dangerous government” which was abusing Italy for its own ends. One of the speakers at the rally proclaimed: “We are conducting a peaceful demonstration against a man who thinks he owns Italy and operates accordingly.” Participants at the demonstration made their views clear with colourful handouts—banknotes featuring the face of Berlusconi with the slogan “Banana Republic Italy”—and puppets of Berlusconi with a Pinocchio nose or striking a Napoleon pose.

Protesters denounced in particular a “conflict of interests” law passed last Thursday in the Italian parliament, which is tailored to suit Berlusconi’s interests. Prior to his election last May Berlusconi had promised within 100 days to resolve the conflict arising from his dual posts as head of government and the country’s biggest media businessman. The new law allows things to remain as they are. Berlusconi can retain his business empire without any limitations. He must simply appoint others to nominally head his interests—something he has already carried out by assigning his adult children and closest friends to leading posts in his media empire.

Berlusconi’s media concern *Mediaset* controls the three biggest private television stations (with a combined audience share of 45 percent), which he uses in an unscrupulous manner to manipulate the news and conduct political propaganda. A law requires stations to report on all political parties according to their importance, i.e., equal coverage must be given to the government and the opposition. However, over the past seven months news coverage by *Mediaset* stations has been 17 to 1 in favour of Berlusconi. The media chief received 11 hours of coverage, compared to 39 minutes for the head of the opposition, Francesco Rutelli.

As head of government, Berlusconi has also taken over control of the state-run television station RAI, which has three channels.

With *Mediaset*, the present head of government exerts a degree of media control that is generally associated with a totalitarian state. Eastern European countries with such arrangements would be automatically excluded from entry into the European Union.

Several of the speakers at the Rome demonstration accused the government of putting pressure on the judiciary to delay legal actions pending against Berlusconi, who is the subject of a number of court cases and faces charges of bribery and illegal party financing practices. Last weekend his attorney applied in Milan for a transfer of the outstanding court actions to other cities. Berlusconi accused the Milan attorney Saverio Borelli of seeking to become the “future leader of a radical opposition” because he protested against pressure being exerted on him by the government.

Slogans attacking the opposition parties in the Olive Tree alliance for their prostration to Berlusconi played a prominent role in the Rome demonstration. The Olive Tree alliance (Ulivo) is led by the Left Democrats—the main successor party to Italy’s now-defunct Communist Party.

Protesters carried banners reading, “Get off the talk-shows and onto the streets!” and “Enough with your personal vanities!” At the same time, there were repeated calls for “unity”.

The two leading figures in the Olive Tree alliance, leader of the opposition Francesco Rutelli and the chairman of the Left Democrats Piero Fassino, insisted they understood the message. “Today we have heard the alarm,” Rutelli declared, promising to mount a decisive opposition to Berlusconi and unify the ranks of the divided Olive Tree alliance.

At the same time, both Rutelli and Fassino made it clear they would continue to play the role of the loyal opposition. While Berlusconi brings the media ever more firmly under his control, escalates his campaign to subvert the judiciary and steps up his attacks on workers’ social conditions, the leaders of the opposition make a point of emphasising that “nobody” is seeking to reverse the decision made by the voters last May.

Their efforts are aimed at directing the growing mass movement against the government into harmless channels. Rutelli attempted to pacify the demonstrators by declaring that the next challenge would be forthcoming local elections in May.

The government camp has reacted to the mounting protests with frenzied denunciations. Berlusconi described the Rome demonstrators as people driven by “Jacobin hatred” and united by

the desire to bring down his government. According to Berlusconi, the demonstrators are being supported by judges and attorneys who manipulate legal processes for political motives. Last week a mysterious bomb attack was carried out in front of the Italian Interior Ministry, and the justice minister immediately claimed protests against the government were to blame.

The Rome demonstration was the largest protest to date, following a series of meetings and demonstrations over the past several weeks, called for the most part by prominent representatives from the fields of science and culture acting independently of party hierarchies. On February 23 the culture magazine *Micromega* held a rally in Milan under the slogan “Day of Legality”. The event was called to protest the undermining of Italy’s constitutional state and the country’s slide into “organised illegality”—as the organisers explained. The main speaker was Antonio di Pietro, the former attorney who 10 years ago set in motion the so-called “clean hands” (*Mani pulite*) campaign with the arrest of a Milan businessman—a campaign that led eventually to the collapse of Italy’s established parties.

The organisers anticipated some 4,000 participants. In fact, 40,000 attended the rally. Speakers denounced the government, describing it as a “government of organised crime” and also criticised the parliamentary opposition, which they accused of incompetence and prostration.

A number of prominent personalities attended the rally, including film directors Roberto Benigni and Nanni Moretti, and writers Antonio Tabucchi and Dacia Maraini. Actor, theatre director and Nobel laureate Dario Fo won enthusiastic applause with his parodies of Berlusconi’s megalomania.

Notable for their absence were representatives of the Olive Tree alliance. Even the thoroughly conservative Swiss newspaper *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* concluded: “The absence of the political establishment underlined the gulf between the Ulivo hierarchy and the party base since Berlusconi’s election victory in May of last year.”

The protest movement against the Berlusconi government began in January with a demonstration in Florence called by a handful of intellectuals and attended by several thousand. Since then the movement has spread across the country. Committees have been established, which have organised their own demonstrations and public meetings. They are united by the common aim of opposing the high-handedness of the Berlusconi government, its gagging of the judiciary and its monopoly of television and the media in general.

The spokesmen for the protest movement are two professors from Florence: the architect Francesco Pardi, who in his youth was a member of a Maoist group and has been politically inactive for the past 30 years, and the English-born historian Paul Ginsborg, author of a standard work on the history of post-war Italy. From the very beginning both men directed their fire against the Left Democrats, whom they accused of passivity and outright collaboration and intrigue with Berlusconi.

The movement received a powerful boost when in mid-February film director Nanni Moretti spoke at a large gathering of the Left Democrats in Rome and denounced the leadership in a short and fiery speech. His contribution climaxed with the comment,

referring to those surrounding him on the podium, “With such people leading us, we can never win.”

At a meeting of students in Florence on February 25, where Pardi and Ginsborg appeared together with the leader of the Left Democrats, former head of government Massimo D’Alema, Pardi and Ginsborg were greeted jubilantly while D’Alema was booed.

It must be said, however, that the intellectuals leading the new protest movement have no worked-out conception of how to stop Berlusconi. They call for an end to any form of collaboration and a deliberate policy of obstruction. They also call for civil disobedience. But it is evident they are hoping that popular pressure will effect a change of heart on the part of the Olive Tree alliance.

Ginsborg concluded his February 23 speech in Milan by calling three times for the unity of the left: “Unitá, unitá, unitá”—which, not coincidentally, is the name of the official newspaper of the Left Democrats. He issued a call for the March 2 demonstration in Rome, which was officially sponsored by the Left Democrats.

There are clear signs that a movement involving broad sections of workers is emerging. In recent weeks, workers and civil servants have demonstrated growing discontent with the policies of the Berlusconi government in a host of small meetings, demonstrations and strikes. At a demonstration on February 15 called—reluctantly and under intense pressure from the party ranks—by the Left Democrat leadership, 150,000 workers, students and teachers came to Rome to protest mass layoffs. Also in attendance were employees of ministries in Rome opposing official plans to rationalise public administration. Numerous slogans were directed against the raising of the retirement age and cuts planned by the education ministry. The day before, bus drivers struck for four hours in many Italian cities. Railway workers went on strike for six hours.

The trade unions plan to organise another demonstration in Rome on March 23 and the CGIL union federation has called for a general strike on April 4 against plans to “reform” Italy’s labour law.

In past years the CGIL has worked with both left- and right-wing parties to dismantle social gains. It would be a fatal mistake for workers to expect either the trade unions or the organisations with which they have close links—the Left Democrats and Olive Tree alliance—to pursue policies in the interests of the working class.

A political orientation based on the Olive Tree alliance can only lead the opposition movement against Berlusconi into a dead end, strangled by the very parties whose right-wing policies during their five-year term of office opened the way for Berlusconi to take power.

The success of a coming social movement will depend on its ability to free itself from these organisations and develop an independent, genuinely socialist orientation.

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