

# The Italian ‘left’ and Libya

By Marc Wells  
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As European and US bombs fall on Libya, the so-called “left” in Italy is serving as nothing more than an agent for Western imperialism, as it seeks to keep full geopolitical and economic control of North Africa and the Middle East and repress the revolutionary struggles of the working class.

Italy’s Defense Minister Ignazio La Russa has announced an initial deployment of four Tornado bombers and four F-16s in coordination with the UN coalition led by France, the UK and US. In addition, Italian military bases and naval forces are being kept in full readiness as central operational points in the war on Libya and the regime of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi.

Coinciding with the commemoration of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Italian unity, this aggressive war also marks precisely the hundredth anniversary since Italy’s attack and colonization of Libya in 1911. This crime of Italian imperialism saw the first use of aerial bombs in history, against the Libyan people.

So powerful is the rivalry over control of oil-rich Libya and North Africa that the Western coalition has already split, competition over leadership of military operations briefly causing a diplomatic rift between Italy and France. Italy accused France of assuming leadership instead of subordinating itself to a concerted NATO effort. It threatened to withdraw the authorization to use its military bases it extended to its allies, while France is asserting its strict observance of UN resolution 1973.

Although NATO has since formally taken over, the friction between Italy and France exposes the fraudulent character of the so-called “humanitarian efforts.” Protecting the safety of the Libyan masses was never the goal of this military initiative. On the contrary, in the midst of a severe world economic crisis each country is seeking to reposition itself in a post-Gaddafi settlement and is ready to fight for it.

Without the support of the Italian bourgeois “left” in suppressing popular opposition to war, the government of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi could not participate in this aggressive colonialist war. (See “The resurgence of Italy’s imperialist ambitions in Libya”) This is not an exclusively Italian phenomenon. In Europe, so-called “leftist” or “anti-capitalist” parties are playing a vital role in defending the class interests of their respective national bourgeoisies. (See “German Left Party leader votes in favour of military intervention in Libya”)

European governments of various political colorations are

claiming that the Transitional National Council of Libya (TNC) is fighting for democracy and freedom. On February 28, Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini declared Italy to be the first country to have contact with the TNC. Frattini described his main liaison, TNC leader and ex-Minister of Justice Mustafa Abdul Jalil, as a man “at the service of the Libyan people, not the regime,” ignoring Jalil’s past role under Gaddafi.

This presentation of the TNC is cynical and false. The TNC is a complex group of ex-Gaddafi regime officials, Islamist parties such as the Oumma party and the Islamic Combat Group, and middle-class legal or human-rights groups. However, it has nothing to do with democracy. Its role is to drive workers and youth opposing Gaddafi into the trap of an imperialist-led military confrontation with the regime.

On its web site, the TNC applauds the imperialist aggression in Libya: it “welcomes the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973 (2011), as well as the outcome of the Paris meeting held on 19th of March 2011, and commends all efforts exerted to expedite the implementation of the resolution, especially with regards to the imposition of the No-Flight Zone and the aerial attacks against Qadhafi’s brigades.”

By backing the TNC and the UN resolution legitimizing the aggressive war with Libya, the Italian bourgeois “left” is demonstrating its reactionary and pro-imperialist character. This can be understood only as the product of the decades-long adoption of nationalist and pro-capitalist policies by the Stalinists and Pabloites.

The largest bourgeois “left” party in Italy is the Democratic Party (PD), largely populated by ex-Stalinist bureaucrats. Its secretary, Pier Luigi Bersani, best represents this tradition. In recent months, he has shown his readiness to create alliances with any political party, from Gianfranco Fini’s neo-fascists to the racist and secessionist Northern League, and even to Berlusconi himself.

He exposed the chauvinistic character of his party in his recent statement on the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary: “We are a party of patriots, autonomists and reformers. The word ‘patriot’ has always been tied to a democratic idea of change and never to one of conservatism.”

In fact, as Bersani’s statements make clear, the promotion of patriotism is tied to support for the ruling class in war. Bersani presented the imperialists’ support for the TNC as a humanitarian operation: “In Libya we must avoid the

continuation of civilian massacres and the suffocation of a democratic movement. Within the limits of the UN resolution, we are ready to support Italy's active role."

The humanitarian pose of Bersani's argument is hypocritical and false. Italian intervention is to be accomplished by the use of Tornados and F-16s, as part of an imperialist operation to destroy large portions of the Libyan army and install a pliant, pro-Western regime in Tripoli. Such a regime, led by right-wing forces entirely dependent on Western military power, would hand Libya's oil to Western oil firms and hand over its territory as a base for imperialist intrigues against the revolutionary struggles breaking out in North Africa.

The position of Nichi Vendola, leader of Sinistra Ecologia Libertà, does not differ substantially from that of the PD. He supports the UN resolution legitimizing military operations, although he complains about the risk that "the military option might transform itself into something unpredictable."

An editorial on his party's web site is penned by reporter Giuliana Sgrena. She was wounded in a shooting in Iraq that resulted in the killing of an Italian agent, Nicola Calipari, and contributed to the withdrawal of Italian troops from Iraq. (See "Did the US military target Italian journalist Giuliana Sgrena in Iraq?")

Despite Sgrena's experience with imperialist war crimes, she and the SEL editorial board declare their backing for the UN resolution: "Now there is a resolution from the Security Council that implements a series of measures, some of which (economic and diplomatic, the cease-fire and the pursuit of mediation) must be pursued with conviction."

The position of Rifondazione Comunista is soaked in hypocrisy. It has already proven itself to be an agent of Italian imperialist policy abroad and at home. It was a leading member of the 2006-2008 l'Unione coalition government with the PD. Under Prime Minister Romano Prodi, it backed Italy's participation in military operations in South Lebanon and Afghanistan, the expansion of the Aviano base, and attacks on pensions and welfare programs at home.

In an interview Party secretary Paolo Ferrero said, "We want the Italian government to seriously make itself heard against the Libyan government—because until now, it has been [Gaddafi's] ally. And then we demand that Italy and Europe immediately intervene and I propose a program of economic cooperation with countries in North Africa."

Ferrero discreetly fell silent on what "economic cooperation" Berlusconi, Ferrero, or other Italian bourgeois politicians would impose on Libya, after having intervened to help destroy its government and armed forces. However, to be blunt, this is a program for Italian imperialism—which gets one quarter of its oil from Libya—to plunder its former colony after having bombed it.

Elsewhere, nonetheless, Ferrero has hypocritically claimed that he believes that "the Libyan revolt is an internal Libyan affair."

The Pabloite group Sinistra Critica, which broke away from Rifondazione in December 2007 after backing the Prodi government's right-wing policies, similarly works as a pseudo-left fig leaf for imperialist policy in the Middle East.

In their statement, after a perfunctory "anti-imperialist" appeal, they "demand the end of repression and of Tripoli's army. Gaddafi must go and the people must decide freely about their future, like in Egypt and in Tunisia."

This statement is itself a whitewash of imperialist policy in North Africa. The US-backed Egyptian military junta that replaced President Hosni Mubarak and the bourgeois reshuffle that replaced President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia do not allow people to "decide freely about their future." They are trying to illegalize strikes and protests, and to re-impose capitalist order on masses of workers who have revolted against dictatorships backed by Western imperialism.

This is also the basic class character of the right-wing Libyan TNC, which, if it came to power, would now do so on the basis of political and military dependence on the Western countries. Nonetheless, Sinistra Critica writes as though simply the "end" of Tripoli's army—that is, the realization of the war aims of Western imperialism—would allow the Libyan people to "decide freely" on their future.

Thus, as Sinistra Critica aligns itself on the war policies of the PD and Rifondazione, it echoes official war propaganda, according to which the war of aggression against Libya is dictated by the desire to bring democracy and human rights to that country.

This underscores how completely the entire Italian bourgeois "left" has broken with working class politics and moved into the camp of imperialist reaction.

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