

Italy: The Monti government and the crisis of the Northern League

By Marianne Arens
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Italian prime minister Mario Monti's labour market reform, involving savage attacks on social rights and living conditions, has unleashed mounting opposition from workers.

On April 6, tens of thousands of mostly older workers again demonstrated in Rome against government policies that are denying them early retirement compensations, despite their having no entitlement to pensions or unemployment benefits. The government of bankers and economists, led by former European Union commissioner Monti, intends to enforce savings of at least €24 billion (US\$31 billion) alone via the planned pension cuts. Already this year, retirement age has been raised to 66 for men in public service, and the same will apply to all employees by 2018.

Trade unions are finding it extremely difficult to keep the growing opposition in check. They organise short-term, limited protests to disguise the fact that they support the government's anti-social austerity programme and are cooperating in its implementation.

Apart from the Northern League, all the political parties either directly or indirectly support Monti's governing team of technocrats who were installed, not democratically by the people but directly by the EU. Monti derives support particularly from Pierluigi Bersani's Democratic Party (PD), a grouping that formerly split from the Italian Communist Party (PCI). The PD had posed as a pole of opposition to Monti's predecessor, Silvio Berlusconi. President Giorgio Napolitano, also a former member of the PCI, has postponed elections until 2013 in order to provide Monti with the opportunity to implement his radical austerity programme.

The so-called "leftist groupings"—Communist Refoundation's rump party led by Paolo Ferrero, Nichi Vendola of the SEL (left, ecology, freedom) Party, and the Italian Communists (PdCI)—are now tentatively probing a new alliance in an attempt to revive the appearance of opposition. In doing so, however, they retain hopes of working with the PD.

Faced with these conditions of extreme hardship and political instability, the population is succumbing to mounting despair. In late March and early April, someone committed suicide almost every day to protest against the political impasse and the financial plight facing wide layers of the population.

On March 27, a 44-year-old house painter threw himself from

a balcony in the southern Italian seaport town of Trani because he was no longer able to provide his family with a means of subsistence. On March 28, a 58-year-old building contractor doused himself with petrol and set himself on fire in front of the Bologna tax office. In a farewell letter, he said he could no longer bear the financial pressure placed on him by the tax authorities.

On March 29, a young Moroccan construction worker tried to burn himself to death in front of the city council building in Verona. He had not been paid his wages for four months. He was rescued just in time and taken to hospital with third-degree burns.

Two days later, a 78-year-old widow plunged onto the street from a fourth-floor terrace in the Caltanissetta, Sicily, having learned that her pension had been reduced from €800 to €600 a month. She was no longer willing to make herself a burden to her family. In a suicide note to his wife on April 2, a 56-year-old carpenter wrote that he had hanged himself in his picture frame repair shop in Rome because of "insurmountable financial difficulties".

The increasing number of suicides and suicide attempts is not just an indictment of the Monti government's tabling of one austerity programme after another and forcing them through parliament. It also serves to discredit the unions and their political allies who refuse to mount a serious struggle against the government and the EU.

Under these conditions, the Northern League is attempting to direct social protest along racial lines. In parliament, it tries to give the impression of being completely opposed to the government. It protests against attempts to curtail tax benefits, combining this with a populist censure of the pension reform. On a number of occasions in the Senate, Northern League senators have shouted Monti down and held up signs, stating: "Hands off the pensions" and "Too many taxes".

As if on command, the past week delivered a corruption scandal that rocked the Northern League. First, party treasurer Francesco Belsito resigned after the financial police raided the party headquarters and the Milan public prosecutor opened investigations against him. Then, on Thursday, party boss Umberto Bossi unexpectedly resigned, followed on Easter Monday by his son Renzo Bossi, a Lombard regional deputy.

The latter, like Bossi's other sons and closest associates, is said to have received more than €1 million from party funds for personal use. It is believed that more funds were illegally transferred to the yellow (unaffiliated, company) union SinPa (Sindacato Padano), a creation of the Northern League. Belsito, the party's treasurer, is accused of illegal party financing, fraudulent acquisition of public funds for the Bossi family, and money laundering on behalf of the N'drangheta Mafia organisation.

An extraordinary meeting of the Northern League's party executive ruled that the party leadership was to be transformed immediately into a triumvirate, consisting of former ministers Roberto Maroni and Roberto Calderoli as well as regional representative Manuela Dal Lago. Municipal elections will be held in several northern Italian cities in May, and the Northern League is expected to incur heavy losses.

The issue is dominating the headlines of all major newspapers. Numerous pages carry reports of the Northern League's crisis, describing it as a "Gotterdammerung" (fall of the gods). The party emerged from the Mani Pulite (Clean Hands) campaign as a separatist protest party at a time (1989) when the Christian Democrats and Socialists were becoming increasingly mired in the "Tangentopoli" ("bribesville") corruption scandal. It ruthlessly exploited right-wing populism in an effort to mobilise the most backward layers in support of its campaigns against nepotism in "Rome and Brussels" and for its own hysterical law-and-order and xenophobic policies. It thus served for more than 10 years as a provider of majority support for Silvio Berlusconi.

The crisis of the Northern League has been well received by the mainstream media, but it has also suppressed the reporting of the much more perplexing issues previously filling the headlines: increasing social strife and polarisation.

On April 1, a study by the Italian central bank, Banca d'Italia, showed that the social divide was continuing to deepen: Italy's 10 richest citizens possess combined assets amounting to more than €50 billion. Among them are the Ferrero confectionery manufacturer, the owner of the Luxottica optical glasses corporation, the fashion gurus Giorgio Armani and Miuccia Prada, the Benetton brothers, and media tycoon and former prime minister Silvio Berlusconi.

Of course, Mario Monti has no intention of troubling these layers with the costs of the crisis. When members of the government were forced to publish the extent and value of their own property, it was eventually revealed that Monti, a multimillionaire property owner, was one of Italy's richest men.

The Italian central bank study also shows that wealth increasingly depends more on assets and less on income, and that the young in particular are getting poorer. A third of those under the age of 24 are now officially unemployed. According to an article in the French newspaper *Le Monde*, child labour is again evident in and around Naples. Thousands of children are

forced to quit school in order to work and support their families.

Italian readers of the *World Socialist Web Site* have written in describing the dramatic situation in Naples. One of them writes: "People are starving again even in the most prosperous regions of the country. No help is coming from the state agencies, the church or any of the aid organisations. The situation is heartbreaking, but the trade union bureaucracy is cooperating closely with the government and doing nothing more than organising paltry, four-hour strikes. What a pathetic spectacle!"

Another reader comments on the Northern League's involvement with the Mafia, saying: "There's nothing new in dirty, corrupt Italian politics! This is all taking place in the midst of the total capitulation of the trade unions and the parties of the so-called left. Gains acquired by the working class at the cost of blood, sweat and tears are being completely destroyed. And as if that were not enough, it's now having to pay with a series of suicides and nearly 500,000 layoffs of workers who won't be able to find any more jobs."

These comments, together with the desperate acts of recent days, highlight the urgent need to build a new proletarian leadership. This can only be achieved through the establishment of an Italian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International. This reactionary politics and bankrupt nationalism of the old leadership can only be overcome through the struggle of the international working class and the implementation of a genuinely socialist programme.

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