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Italy

Bye Bye Berluska; Ciao Super Mario, the banker's friend...

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Irony of ironies... Berlusconi came to power at the head of a new sort of political party cloned on his Mediaset corporation. He was forced out by the very markets he championed when he came onto the political scene. In 1994 he wanted to sweep away the archaic structures of Italian institutional politics with his new party of business managers who would streamline economic policy and create a million jobs. He never did produce those jobs and In the end Italian bonds at 7% did for him. Although he did not fall as a result of mass action most Italians celebrated and many took to the streets to express their joy.

Incidentally, recent articles in the British media such as pieces by Tobias Jones (Guardian, 11.11.11) or Maria Rodota (Observer 13.11.11) really do not understand the Berlusconi phenomenon. Instead of understanding how Berlusconi's rise was facilitated by the crisis of bourgeois representation in the implosion of the Christian Democrats and Craxi's Socialist Party and the subsequent support from key, dynamic sectors of Italian capital, they reduce his success to the so-called national characteristics of Italians who see themselves in his shoes or who like the 'lovable' rogue. At the same time, like most international commentators, they ignore Monti's history of active support for the neo-liberal policies which produced the mess in the first place. Jones even lists the possible benefits of tough austerity for strengthening the Italian family and introducing a good dose of meritocracy. Nowhere can you find any analysis of the degradation of social fabric that has already occurred or any acknowledgement of the other Italy 'of the ordinary citizens, young people and trade unionists who successfully defeated the government on the privatisation of water without any real assistance from main opposition party.

Paradoxically the way in which Berlusconi had degraded Italian politics with his corruption, buffoonery and womanising provides the ruling class with the opportunity to present a workable ideological narrative. Cheered on by the media and foreign commentators, 'Super' Mario Monti, ex-EC commissioner with his discreet, catholic persona, is the man to clean up Italian politics and save the nation. People are so angry at the political class and relieved to see the end of Berlusconi that many have illusions in the second technocratic government to be formed in Europe after the Greek one. ISTAT, a respected polling agency, estimated a real unemployment figure of 5 million. Young people are increasingly forced to live off their parents or move abroad. The very depth of the crisis makes people inclined to believe things may change with a 'non-political' new broom. It is conveniently ignored that Monti is one of the same economic masters who led Europe into the crisis in the first place!

The media on its own cannot manufacture this public opinion, the role of ex-Communist and king maker president Napolitano has been crucial. He represents a link to the partisans of 43, to a certain communist morality and is seen as a neutral above the political parties. More importantly the main opposition party, the PD (Democratic party) mainly formed out of the majority faction of the old Italian Communist Party, has been an enthusiastic supporter of the 'Full' Monti solution. Earlier this year the PD had allowed the most vicious austerity programme to go through the Italian parliament without opposition, so this is no surprise. Crucially the PD still wields important influence over the main trade union confederation, the CGIL which had called national one day strikes under pressure against the former government. Even forces to the left of the PD have wavered, Nikki Vendola the governor of Puglia, and leader of Sinistra Ecologia and Libertà (SEL – Left, Ecology and Liberty) issued an early statement where he implied acceptance of a temporary government solution if a degree of progressive demands were included. Under a howl of protest from his members he tacked back rapidly. The pressure to accept the national emergency rhetoric even forced the Italian Values party leader, Di Pietro (former hero of the Clean Hands anti-political corruption campaign) to flip from opposition to support. For him it was a more moderate membership who jammed the telephones and went online.

Other forces to the left of the PD such as Paulo Ferrero's Refoundation rump, Marco Ferrando's PCL and Sinistra

Critica, have called for elections, mobilisations and opposition to the bankers government. These forces played a real role in the recent successful mobilisations on water or nuclear power. However the division of a weakened radical left and the lack of an anti-capitalist party does not help the building an alternative. The electoral massacre of Refoundation at the last elections mean none of these forces have parliamentary representation and hence little access to the media.

On the right Berlusconi's party is overall in support of the new government but there are serious differences which, with the decline in the leader's credibility and authority, will only increase. Exactly what Berlusconi will do is still unclear. While unlikely to lead a new coalition his wealth (9 billion euros) and media empire means he is still a potential player. Indeed Berlusconi played a harder game in opposition to Prodi's left of centre government than Bersani and his PD colleagues ever did in the last few years against his own government. His former ally, the separatist Northern League, under Umberto Bossi, has decided to go into opposition. Bossi is happy to have time to deal with internal opposition and thinks he will regain votes if not a passenger on the pro-European austerity steamroller. He has already re-called his parliament of Padania (the illusory northern nation he espouses).

Monti's government is committed to implementing an austerity package that is on top of cuts announced earlier this year. Public sector pay will be frozen for even longer until 2014. Infrastructure will continue to deteriorate with literally mortal effects as we saw with the loss of life in recent storms. VAT will increase to 21%. Pension rights and payments will be further attacked. Public property and services will be privatised. Trade union and workers rights will be directly attacked as bosses want to sack people more easily. Make no mistake about it Monti is no friend of working people. Balancing the budget will be written into the constitution while laws protecting workers will be written out. Monti wrote an article in *Corriere delle Sera* at the time of the recent conflict in Fiat over trade union rights in which he fully supported the Marchionne plan that severely limits the right of trade unions such as the more militant FIOM.

The second theme in the ideological narrative being created around the Monti government is that at last Italy is going to deal with all its anachronistic, protectionist and restrictive practices which are holding back economic growth. Trade union rights are lumped into this discourse alongside legitimate issues such as professional associations like notaries or taxi drivers controlling who can practice that trade. Trade union defence of workers interests is presented as protecting special interest groups like older workers against the rights of young people to get jobs.

Italy's state deficit is not fundamentally due to a housing bubble or national banks being as reckless as the UK's. Private debt such as credit card balances is also less significant. The causes of the deficit are much more to do with many years of systematic corruption and substantial tax evasion. It has just been estimated that 'lost' tax is equivalent to about 15% of GDP each year. Any state run service or expenditure for welfare or regional development is inherently inefficient. Political parties have placed their supporters in state institutions like the health service, distributed false pensions or directly pilfered taxpayers money. If you add in organised crime like the camorra or the mafia who take their slice you can see how the deficit reaches 120% of GDP. Anyone who knows Italy will tell you that welfare benefits are much lower than the UK and resources for education are also much worse so the deficit is not at all due to over-generous payments to 'lazy' Italians whatever commentators from elsewhere will tell you. The political class itself in all its thousands of representatives at local, regional and national level milks the state coffers with their high salaries and myriad benefits.

The class struggle left does not underestimate the difficulty of the present situation. Monti as the anti-Berlusconi non-party figure will have some impact on public opinion, particularly if the main opposition parties actively support him. Banks in Italy did not get involved in the same mess as banks like Northern Rock did in the UK so a banker in power is not necessarily a red rag for people. People are fed up at the corruption and nepotism that blight public and private services so any sign of reform may attract them. It is likely too that Monti will make some measures slightly more 'egalitarian' and give the rich some token hits.

A mass movement independent of the PD does exist and was seen in the successful rank and file victory of the committees in the anti-privatisation and anti-nuclear referendums a few months ago. This movement mobilised for the 15th October with a demonstration of 200,000 in Rome. Unfortunately the violent actions of the Black Bloc minority meant the police could divert the march and prevent an occupy camp being set up. The leadership of the movement is not so structured or as firmly embedded in the communities, schools, colleges and workplaces as it needs to be if it wants to challenge the hegemony of reformist forces like the PD. Much of the anti-Berlusconi or anti-political caste feeling is also at times rather anti-political exemplified by comedians like Beppe Grillo who popularises slogans telling politicians to *Va fa n'culo*.(go f..k yourself). It does not lead to an organised challenge to the PD and for an overall political alternative. This also requires a political analysis and popularisation of the economic issues like the debt or redistribution. Campaigns like *We must stop them – Revolt against the debt* [www.rivoltaildebito.org] are trying to organise a broad campaign. The anger and mobilisation is real enough over the last year or so in Italy whether you are talking about students, militant trade unionists led by the FIOM, community groups around issues like water or the Val Susa anti-high speed train link. The base of the PD is not immune to pressure and if you follow the web chat on the *Unita* site it suggests that many are not happy with PD leader Bersani's political line. There is potential for the radical left to have an impact here if it can develop a united, non-sectarian line. The first message for the left has to be to expose the government as one directly led by European finance supported by Italian capitalists that will make things a lot worse for working people. The second has to be a clear class explanation of the debt with understandable alternative proposals such as non-payment of toxic debt and a public audit.

How long the Monti government wants or will be given is another hot issue. The European Troika and Monti himself would prefer it lasting for a year but any combination of forces in parliament could vote it out at any time. The PD is saying it should reform the electoral law as well as implement its economic policies and it is happy to let the technocrats rule for a significant period(see Bersani's statement of 15.11.11). Monti would prefer a few leading figures from the PD and Berlusconi's PDL to be alongside him in the government as political cover given the unpopular measures he will be taking. Although Bersani has stated he is happy to give it more time than currently supported by the PDL he is also wary about being too far identified with the government and is on record as preferring mostly technocrats in power.

What is certain is that the degree of restructuring and the scale of attacks on working people required by European and Italian capital are not easily achieved. Bond costs were still too high even on the Monday after the end of Berlusconi. The markets are still not convinced, Italian bonds were being bought on the 15th November at over 6% which is unsustainable. Will the new government be able to contain struggle from the main trade unions or others to defend pensions, fair labour laws and wages? Will the radical left be able to play a role in mobilising an opposition? If resistance does emerge Italian working people could yet hold back the offensive. If it does not then it will be facing defeats that will turn back not just the gains made after 1968/9 but many of the social conquests still enshrined in the 1948 Constitution and post-war settlement.