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Italy

Send in the clowns

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This article written on 25 September foreshadows the resignation from the Italian government of the members of Silvio Berlusconi's PDL (People's Liberty Party) on the 28 September 2013.

Former prime minister Berlusconi has been twice convicted of fraud by the highest court in the land. He has called his plight the result of a coup d'etat by a left-dominated judiciary and has organised the collective pre-resignation of all his MPs if the Senate committee on the 4th October decides to ban him from political office. He claims not to have slept for 55 nights and lost 11 kilos – the latter claim disputed by a journalist who managed to see him close up. If they carry out their threat it means the coalition government falls and new elections will take place.

Napolitano, the president, who did everything to set up a government between the PD (Democrat Party) and Berlusconi's PDL (People's Liberty Party), thereby giving the former a new lease of political life, has published a note saying this unprecedented move by Berlusconi is damaging to Italian political institutions.

Letta, the current PD prime minister, last week talked of taking his government through the whole of 2014 and was backed by Napolitano. He enthused about Merkel's victory in Germany, how it was good for Europe and also as an example for Italians who can make their coalition government work well. Letta has to cobble together an agreement about a new budget when the PDL does not want any tax on houses (the IMU) and the PD does not want a rise in VAT. The problem is that unless cuts are made the deficit risks breaching the 3% of GDP EC imposed rule that the Italian government is fully signed up to. Even without that other economists estimate there are deeper structural debts to be dealt with requiring even more austerity.

Here in Italy people are not even seeing the slight signs of economic recovery that are evident in Britain. There is negative growth for 2013 and around 0.7 forecast for 2014. A recent official report said there were 5 million Italians living in absolute poverty where they lack a basic necessity such as being able to eat meat. Nine million are in relative poverty and unemployment is officially nearly 13% and over 30% for young people. Tens of thousands of small businesses or independent traders have gone bust and are experiencing the sort of insecurity that only sectors of the working class previously experienced.

The political class and mass media are also furiously debating the shambles around the takeover of the privatised Italian Telecom by Spanish Telefonica. It was originally privatised at a knockdown price while it was making good money and then was sold on several times to various Italian business interests. Letta was intensely relaxed about it all saying this is the market. Unions like the CGIL and some PD MPs have adopted a nationalist approach as though Spanish capitalists are any different from Italian ones when it comes to cutting wages, jobs or worsening conditions for working people. They have even complained that Telefonica want to get their hands on the Telecom-owned 'jewels' in Latin America – in Brazil or Argentina where it owns telecom companies. Presumably it's okay for Italians to own part of the telecommunications in Latin American countries but not for Spanish companies to take over Italian ones. Of course we now have debates about how Spanish control would affect the Italian security services use of the network. The interests of working people, whether working for Telecom or Telefonica, are not really on the agenda. Just like something I saw in a television debate where the PD representative thoroughly agreed with a statement from the Sole 24 Ore journalist (a bit like our Economist) about how the problem in Italy was how to reduce taxes and reduce labour costs and to make reforms in institutions, law and infrastructure so that business can work.

Whatever happens with the government in this latest crisis and how soon there are new elections is less important than whether there are any political forces offering a solution in the interests of working people.

One hesitates to define the PD as a left party representing in any way at all the interests of working people. It collaborated with the vicious austerity government of Monti and has formed a coalition with Berlusconi's party despite declaring up to the last that it was not going to do so. This government is paralysed and has not brought in any significant measures. It cannot agree on taxes, it is split on what to do about Berlusconi legal position, it has different views on state financing of political parties and it is a long way from changing the electoral system to avoid the same stalemate emerging from the next elections. Since Bersani's resignation following his failure to get the party to unite around an agreed candidate for president, the leadership was temporarily assigned to an old trade union bureaucrat, Epiphani and Letta was given the premiership. But the party is split into warring factions. Matteo Renzi, the mayor of Florence, and the so-called rottamatore – literally someone who scraps old cars – wants to renew the party by throwing out the old guard. He is likely to win both the primary for leader and the congress. The last national meeting a week ago could not even agree on the date for the congress but did decide on early December for the primary election. No real politics was discussed but much of the current leadership manoeuvred through the debate on dates to prevent or rather delay Renzi's coronation. Renzi is an Italian Blair who warmly embraces neo-liberal policies, he recently said that focussing on equality was a problem in Italy because it pushed out merit (!). He uses some of the modern, even radical language about liquid parties, new structures and better communications to put forward a more presidential type of party built around him. Renzi aspires to a PD majority government without any allies to his left although most people think he would be happy to ally with other centre right forces. An anti-Renzi candidate, Cuperlo, does exist but it hard to see him as representing a very strong left wing alternative – like Bersani he merely verbally emphasises a more traditional relationship to the PD's historical base in the trade unions and among working people.

Nikki Vendola's SEL (Socialism, Ecology and Liberty) is the nearest project to the left of the PD but is locked into a debilitating alliance/competition with it. The SEL owes its parliamentary group entirely to an electoral alliance with the PD which meant in practice (rather than on paper) it could not put forward a political perspective independent of some sort of PD led government. During the electoral campaign Vendola even talked about ministers. It drew the line at supporting the current coalition but would be happy with some repeat of a left of centre government. Nothing has been learned from the disaster of the left of centre Prodi government which destroyed Rifondazione, a left split from the PD of the time. Renzi is unlikely to offer Vendola the same electoral berth again, which would put the SEL parliamentary group at risk. A few weeks ago he appeared to welcome some of the modernising aspects of Renzi whereas this week he criticised the latter's position on equality as being "from someone who does not seem to live in the real world of Italy today". Vendola has also been the governor of the big Puglia region and has not carried out any policies that would distinguish him from a PD led region. However he and his party will be looking to regroup with any forces that might emerge from the PD when Renzi wins or with other soft left forces. The problem is that the weak left currents in the PD talk a good game but like the apparatus and their posts in the institutions. Other forces external to the PD still essentially look to tie themselves to the PD train in some way in a similar way that critical left forces in Britain try to reclaim Labour or push it to the left.

Another political project is forming around figures like Landini, the leader of the most radical trade union, the FIOM and Rodota who is a well known and respected as a constitutional and human rights expert. It fits generally within the framework of the Ingroia electoral campaign and the intellectuals who signed the ALBA declaration. Their initiative is around defence of the Italian constitution in the face of attempts by both the PDL and PD to modify it in a less progressive direction – opening the door to a more presidential system. Unlike in Britain this written constitution reflects the context and relationship of class forces coming out of the liberation from Fascism. It enshrines things like the right to work and many other democratic rights. They also reject the way the Troika imposed balanced budget has been accepted into the constitution. A big demonstration has been called for the 12th October which is drawing wide support. However they pitch the event very much in terms of forming a new movement or association rather than a party and indeed no political forces have been allowed to join the declaration or to speak at the demonstration. Although there is some reference to austerity it is hardly the main focus of the project and it tends to promote a certain illusion in power of the constitution which had not prevented a whole series anti-working class policies over the last decade or so. Nevertheless it is a positive initiative that the radical and active left are supporting.

A more radical anti-capitalist political project is developing from the trade union and political radical left called Ross@. Its main spokesperson is Cremaschi who is a well known radical trade unionist. They have already held a national meeting and it may succeed in regrouping some of the radical left that was involved in the Rifondazione project. The PRC (the group led by Ferrero who still has the Rifondazione brand) is involved to various degrees as well as smaller groups such as Sinistra Anticapitalist (Anti-capitalist left) which is one half of what used to be Sinistra Critica. This force clearly places itself like Left Unity in Britain as a group building a political alternative to the PD rather than as a pressure group of some sort trying to push the PD to the left. Ross@ is building the demonstrations on the 12th and 13th of October, the first organised by the left trade union forces against austerity and the second by the social movements.

Alongside the forces described above there are the social movement currents who are relatively well embedded in Italy through the history of the social centres – a sort of radical community base for politics and culture. There have been some well publicised and supported occupations and expulsions of community based groups of this sort – Communia in Rome was a recent example of this but there are groups in most big cities. Some forces on the radical left such as the other half of what was Sinistra Critica think that, given the massive defeats suffered by the labour movement, that now is the time to talk about a total reforming of a movement and to de-prioritise initiatives like Ross@ where according to them the same old groups are reforming with the same old structures.

Apart from these political projects there are examples of very militant resistance in Italy but it is isolated and does not constitute a national fightback against austerity. The NO-TAV movement against the high speed train link in the Val de Susa is an immense movement of local people defending their community against both PD and PDL support for the mega project through their valley. Trade unionists are mobilised mostly in defensive struggles to save factories in the aluminium (Alcoa), Iron (Ilva) and white goods sector (Indesit). Vicious legal and repressive measures have been used against workers and activists as the ruling class use the crisis to continue to change the relationship of forces against working people. NO-TAV activists have been smeared with the terrorist tag as the building project suffers regular sabotage. The government has worked with bosses like Fiat's Marchionne to prevent workers rights to be represented by whichever union they choose. It is aimed at sidelining the more militant FIOM union. A victory has been won after 3 years with the Italian courts condemning Marchionne and vindicating the FIOM. With the unprecedented threat of mass resignation and the likely fall of the government sooner or later the political situation is far from stable. Politicians mostly from the right are scapegoating immigrants and even racially abusing a PD woman minister who is black.

Although the labour movement and the social movements are on the back foot the situation could change quite rapidly and further political recomposition is likely.

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