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100 years since Mussolini's March on Rome

One hundred years ago, on October 31, 1922, Benito Mussolini, leader of the National Fascist Party, marched through Rome at the head of several thousand Blackshirts. The day before, Italy's King Vittorio Emanuele III had appointed him Italian prime minister.

It was the prelude to a brutal dictatorship that would last 23 years. The fascists suppressed democratic rights, terrorized and crushed the organized labour movement, waged horrific colonial wars, allied with Hitler's Germany for World War II and sent 9,000 Jews to the gas chambers.



Mussolini (second from left) inspects Blackshirts before the March on Rome

The regime of “Il Duce” became the model for numerous other dictatorships, and the term fascism the epitome of tyranny and barbarism. Mussolini's most eager disciple was Adolf

Hitler, who imitated the “March on Rome” a year later with a coup in Munich. The putsch failed, but Hitler nevertheless took power in Berlin 10 years later.

The hundredth anniversary of Mussolini’s seizure of power is not only of historical interest but of burning political actuality. A week ago, his political heirs took over the Italian government.

The new prime minister, Giorgia Meloni, may have declared fascism a “historical question” for tactical reasons, but it is unmistakable that she and her party are firmly rooted in the fascist tradition. The ranks of the Fratelli are teeming with admirers of Mussolini and of fascist war criminals, they maintain close ties to militant neo-Nazis and far-right elements in the state apparatus, and they advocate aggressive nationalism and racism.

Meloni herself leads the party from the former office of Giorgio Almirante, who, under Mussolini, ran the fascist daily *Il Tevere*, as well as the anti-Semitic journal *La difesa della razza (Defence of Race)*, and from 1946 to 1987 led the Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI), the successor organization to Mussolini’s Fascist Party and predecessor to the Fratelli.

Meloni’s takeover of the government, more or less openly welcomed by all Italian parties and European governments, is part of a turn to the right by the entire international bourgeoisie. Faced with an insoluble economic crisis and an upsurge of the class struggle, it is turning to war against Russia and China and to authoritarian forms of rule to suppress the working class.

This gives the lessons of the March on Rome an extraordinary timeliness. History does not repeat itself, or at least not in the same form. But to understand and combat the return of Mussolini’s heirs to the head of the Italian government and the dangers they pose, the study of these lessons is indispensable.

The March on Rome

The fascists have transfigured the March on Rome into a myth, according to which 300,000 Blackshirts, carried by the people, accomplished a national revolution and 3,000 martyrs gave their lives.

The reality was very different. Mussolini's call to march on Rome was answered by just 5,000 fascists on October 27, who, starved and ill-equipped, became stuck in the rain and mud near the capital. They were joined by about 10,000 more the following day. Mussolini remained in Milan, where he attended the opera for two consecutive evenings—ready to flee across the nearby Swiss border in case of failure.

It would have been easy for the army to disperse the mob. After much hesitation, Prime Minister Luigi Facta issued an order to that effect. But the king refused to sign the declaration of an emergency and instead instructed Mussolini to form a new government on the evening of October 29. The latter then travelled in a sleeping car to Rome, where he took office on October 30. It was not until the next day that the new head of government marched into the capital at the head of a carefully staged triumphal march.

The legend of the March on Rome served both the fascists and all those who helped them to power well. For the fascists, it was a founding myth and unifying ritual; for their economic and state supporters, it covered up the fact that it was they, and not “the people,” who had helped the dictator to power.

But it is obvious that powerful forces from business, the army and the police urged the king to opt for Mussolini. Mussolini was able to draw on a considerable war fund for the March on Rome. The Federation of Industrialists had transferred 20 million lire to him. The fascists were needed to crush the workers' movement after the country had been on the brink of socialist revolution for four years.

The special task of fascism is to squeeze the desperate petty bourgeoisie “into a battering ram against the working class and the institutions of democracy,” declared Leon Trotsky in 1932. To this end, it uses national, racist but also social and anti-capitalist demagoguery. Once in power, however, it proves to be a naked dictatorship of finance capital:

After fascism is victorious, finance capital gathers into its hands, as in a vise of steel, directly and immediately, all the organs and institutions of sovereignty, the executive, administrative, and educational powers of the state: the entire state apparatus together with the army, the municipalities, the universities, the schools, the press, the trade unions, and the cooperatives. When a state turns fascist, it doesn't only mean that the forms and methods of government are changed in accordance with the patterns set by Mussolini—the

changes in this sphere ultimately play a minor role—but it means, primarily and above all, that the workers' organizations are annihilated; that the proletariat is reduced to an amorphous state; and that a system of administration is created which penetrates deeply into the masses and which serves to frustrate the independent crystallization of the proletariat. Therein precisely is the gist of fascism... (Leon Trotsky, "What Now?")

When Trotsky wrote these lines to arm the German workers against the rise of Hitler, he drew on the lessons of Italy, which he knew very well. The Third and Fourth Congresses of the Communist International, at which Trotsky played a leading role, had dealt intensively with the Italian question.

Terror against the working class

Italy after World War I was swept by a wave of militant labour struggles, rural unrest, and insurrections that put socialist revolution on the agenda. Mussolini, who had turned from being a socialist into an ardent nationalist and war supporter in the course of the war, organized armed gangs called *fasci* to intimidate the workers. The terror they exercised defies description.

Financed by industrialists and landowners and covered for by the police, the heavily armed fascists drove to meeting places or private homes of well-known workers' leaders, where they pillaged, tortured and murdered. Women and children were often threatened to force the wanted to surrender. It is estimated that the fascists murdered some 3,000 socialists and trade unionists in this way in 1921 and 1922 alone.

Initially, fascist terror was concentrated in rural areas and small towns, where workers and farm laborers rebelled against slave-like conditions. But by the end of 1920, it extended to the large industrial cities.

By the summer of that year, the revolutionary wave had reached its peak. Over 500,000 workers occupied factories and shipyards, raising red and black (anarchist) flags and throwing management out of the plants, responding to a lockout at the Alfa Romeo plant in Milan. Workers' power was in the air.

But no political leadership existed that was ready to seize power, as the Bolsheviks had done in Russia in 1917. True, the leadership of the Socialist Party was in the hands of the

Maximalists under Giacinto Serrati, who had opposed World War I and joined the Communist International. But the Maximalists' commitment to workers' power was purely platonic. They refused to break with the reformists, who provided the labour minister at the time and dominated the unions, and had no strategy or tactics for conquering state power.

Eventually, the unions managed to stall the strike with the help of some empty concessions. The media cheered, "Reformism has saved civilization!", "The revolution didn't happen because the CGdL (association of trade unions) didn't want it."

Now fascism went on the offensive. On November 21, 300 armed fascists marched to Bologna City Hall, where the socialist administration was being sworn in, and murdered seven socialists. In the weeks that followed, they continued their attacks in other cities with the acquiescence of the police. The fascist movement gained momentum. Small action groups armed with clubs, revolvers, grenades and even machine guns drove around the country hunting down socialists and militant workers. The fascist movement's membership grew from 20,000 to 180,000 in five months.

"Behind the histrionic facade was a core of well-targeted brutality designed to break the working-class movement," Christopher Duggan describes their actions in his history of Italy. "Party and trade union buildings were ransacked, and the offices of left-wing newspapers devastated, while key figures in the Socialist Party such as deputies, mayors, councillors and *capilega* were singled out for intimidation, beatings, torture and on occasions murder."

Government leader Giovanni Giolitti, a bourgeois liberal, invited Mussolini to run in a joint "national bloc" in the spring 1921 elections. The elections turned out to be a success for Mussolini. The Fascists won 37 seats; but the Socialists remained the strongest party with 123 seats.

In January 1921, Amadeo Bordiga, Antonio Gramsci and other left-wing representatives broke with Serrati's Socialist Party and formed the Communist Party. However, it was too young and inexperienced to immediately overcome the crisis of proletarian leadership. The lack of a revolutionary leadership that could unite the struggles of the working class and lead it to the conquest of power eventually paved the way for Mussolini.

In his book *Fascism*, which is well worth reading and which he published in 1934 while in exile in Switzerland, author Ignazio Silone, who was among the founders and leaders of the Communist Party, wrote:

The Italian working class succumbed without a fight. The march on Rome proceeded without provoking the slightest resistance from the working class. The reformists, the maximalists and the communists were not prepared for the march on Rome. ... The Italian proletariat appeared like an army that had heroically fought four years of illusory battles. ... At the head of the Italian working class had been missing the Italian Lenins and Trotskys

In taking over the government, however, Mussolini had not yet consolidated his dictatorship. His cabinet included Fascists, as well as representatives of the Catholic People's Party, democrats, liberals and two military officers. He even invited the right wing of the Socialist Party to collaborate, and one of its leaders, Gino Baldesi, agreed, but then had to back out. Mussolini needed another three years to establish his unrestricted authority as "il Duce."

Lessons for today

The situation in Italy today differs in several respects from that of a hundred years ago.

Mussolini came to power *after* an uprising by the working class, which had been disoriented, paralyzed and betrayed by the Socialists and the trade unions. He was able to rely on a mass movement of ex-soldiers and bitter petty bourgeois who turned rabidly to the right after the defeat of the 1920 strike movement.

Meloni took over the government *before* the outbreak of open class battles, which were developing at a rapid pace as a result of inflation, the pandemic, the Ukrainian war and the economic crisis. She does not have a fascist mass movement behind her but owes her success to the so-called "left" parties and the trade unions, which in the past three decades bore the main responsibility for the social attacks and systematically suppressed the class struggle. The political vacuum they left behind has made the Fratelli d'Italia the strongest party.

But that does not make her any less dangerous. The ruling class – not only in Italy – is relying more and more on authoritarian forms of rule to suppress the class struggle, in addition to the bureaucratic apparatuses of the trade unions, the Social Democrats, the former Stalinists and their allies. That is why the leaders of the European Union have welcomed Meloni with open arms.

EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said: “I am ready and happy to work in a constructive way with the new Italian government.” France's President Emmanuel Macron met with Meloni in Rome on her first day in office, with her describing the meeting afterwards as “cordial and useful”. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz spoke to Meloni on the phone on Friday to discuss the Ukraine war and express his “interest in good cooperation and partnership in the EU, Nato and G7”.

In other countries, too, the ruling class promotes far-right parties, integrates them into the state and government, and adopts their right-wing policies. This is true of Vox in Spain (with which Meloni has close ties) as well as the AfD in Germany, the Rassemblement National in France, and the Sweden Democrats in Sweden – to name just a few. In the U.S., the Republicans under Donald Trump are turning into an openly fascist party, while Democratic President Joe Biden claims that America needs a strong Republican Party.

Those who claim that the fascist danger can be stopped by supporting or forming an alliance with allegedly democratic parties, as numerous pseudo-left groups do, are deliberately misleading the working class.

These parties have long since adopted the program of the fascists in migration policy, social austerity, external rearmament and war, and other areas. They will not hesitate for a moment to make common front with the fascists against the working class – as their political forebears did in Italy in 1922 when they joined Mussolini's first government, and in Germany in 1933 when they voted for Hitler's Enabling Act and gave him dictatorial powers.

Mussolini's record remains a searing and unforgettable lesson in the devastating cost to the working class when it is blocked from struggling for power in a revolutionary situation. Today, as in 1922, the critical political task is to smash the grip of counterrevolutionary nationalist bureaucracies over the class struggle. This means building

parties that know how to unite the growing resistance of the international working class to social cuts, war and fascism in an irreconcilable struggle against capitalism – sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International in Italy and other countries worldwide.

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