

The failure of the Italian referenda

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An important vote on six referenda took place in Italy on May 22. All of the initiatives failed to pass because the required quorum of over 50 percent of eligible voters was not met. Though only 32 percent of the electorate voted, this event could mark a significant moment in the evolution of Italian politics, and provides an occasion for a discussion of its ongoing crisis.

The six questions posed to the voters were wide-ranging. Perhaps the three most significant initiatives concerned the existing electoral law, labour legislation and the financing of trade unions.

The first initiative would have altered the electoral law to establish a uniform “first-past-the-post” system. Twenty-five percent of parliamentary seats are currently, and will for the time being continue to be, assigned on the basis of proportional representation.

The second initiative would have abolished Article 18 of the “statuto dei lavoratori”, which spells out the rights of Italian workers and the general framework of labour legislation. The specific article targeted for extinction by the referendum imposes on companies that employ over 15 workers the obligation to hire back workers who were unreasonably fired, as determined by a court system.

The third initiative would have eliminated the automatic withholding of money from pension checks that is supposed to finance unions. This initiative was, from a legal standpoint, a moot point, since this is not the way such withholdings actually occur.

The media, in Italy and abroad, have explained the failure of the referenda with dismissive platitudes about “most Italians' disgust with politics as usual” and “referendum fatigue”. The *New York Times'* Alessandra Stanley made these observations in her article after the vote. Stanley made sure to remind the reader that the failure of the referenda did not necessarily imply that Italians were opposed to the proposed measures.

This is a shallow and wrongheaded—if predictable—approach to the political questions raised directly and indirectly by the vote. These questions provide a measure of both the degeneration of the Italian left, and the anti-democratic and anti-working class character of the

current, much heralded period of “reforms”.

It is important to identify the forces that spearheaded and supported the referenda. At the forefront of the political effort was the Radical Party, a small but vociferous group of ex-leftist radicals. The instructive trajectory of their political decay has now reached the terminal stage of free-market libertarianism.

More predictably, Confindustria, the organisation that articulates the interests of manufacturing and industrial capital in Italy, solidly supported the social measures. Its newspaper, *Sole 24 Ore*—the Italian equivalent of the *Wall Street Journal*—enthusiastically endorsed the initiatives.

The ruling Left Democrats (DS) supported the referendum on the electoral law while offering half-hearted opposition to the patently reactionary measure concerning labour legislation. Their opponent, the plutocrat Silvio Berlusconi, while by no means unhappy with the abolition of workers' rights, urged the electorate to stay home. Berlusconi adopted this tactic in order to deal another blow to the centre-left government, on the heels of the DS's defeat in recent regional elections.

Berlusconi's allies, the post-fascist National Alliance (AN) and the right-wing faction of the Catholic centre, supported the referenda. The three main Italian trade unions and the Stalinists (Rifondazione Comunista and Comunisti Italiani) opposed the referenda. Rather than mobilising the Italian working class, however, the unions were cautious to present their opposition in the most narrow and apolitical terms, while the Stalinists saw the vote as a chance to pull the centre-left government a few, carefully measured inches to the left.

In the short term, therefore, the outcome of the vote appears mainly as a victory for Berlusconi and as a mere bump on the road to the electoral and social “reforms” that are portrayed as inevitable.

It is important to clarify the significance of the recent vote with respect to the general political character of these reforms.

The referendum on the electoral process was only the latest episode in an ongoing series of reforms that is explicitly aimed at creating a “bipolar” political system. In

such a system, two centrist parties would be able to capture all of the electorate and eclipse the “extreme” ends of the political spectrum. This would generate the kind of US-style political discourse in which many meaningful and urgent political questions tend to vanish beyond the horizon of what is politically contestable. This system, we are told, is the best institutional guarantee of “stability”—something that can always safely be read as the preservation of the economic and social status quo.

It is not at all clear in what sense a normal “first-past-the-post” system can be said to be democratic, since the relative composition of legislatures comes to significantly differ from the relative preferences expressed by the electorate. The electoral system that would have been in place had the referendum won, however, was anything but normal. Because of the specific procedural arrangements contained in the existing legislation, a successful “yes” vote would have resulted in a system so patently anti-democratic that, according to Italian political scientist Roberto D’Alimonte, it would have been possible to predict with absolute certainty the number of seats the centre-right would win in the next election.

The two main political pillars of the capitalist order in Italy—Berlusconi’s Forza Italia and the DS—have so far produced only bickering failures on the question of electoral reforms. This is the result not of a fundamental disagreement over the ultimate “bipolar” outcome, but of tactical political exigencies, as well as the opposition of smaller parties. At any rate, the centre-left government has indicated, even in the face of this unfavourable result, its intent to pursue these electoral reforms in the legislature.

The social referenda constituted the latest round of assaults against the political and social conquests of the working class in Italy. The DS, the largest political organisation that rose from the ashes of the old Communist Party, has spearheaded these so-called “reforms.”

It is no accident that the recent and ongoing dismantling of the “welfare state” has—in Italy as in most of the Western countries—been engineered not by openly and historically reactionary forces, but by those “left” parties that can present some “progressive” credentials to the working class. Toward this aim, the DS has been flooding all channels of political discourse with the mantra of “flexibility”. This label is merely a fig leaf covering a series of reactionary measures that range from extensive privatisations, to severe cuts in the health care and pension systems, to the elimination of wage indexing to compensate for inflation, to the erosion of workplace regulation.

It is possible to read in the rejection of the referenda a forceful, if largely silent, opposition to all of these political developments. This is particularly true with respect to the

initiative eliminating the “just cause” provision for firing workers. This was the only referendum in which the “no” vote prevailed, and by a wide margin.

Nearly 10 million voters rejected this initiative, and this does not account for the indeterminate number of people who voted “no” simply by staying home. These figures can be fruitfully compared to the “anti-union” referendum. Here the “yes” vote prevailed by far. Many of the same people who voted to preserve the rights of workers simultaneously indicated dissatisfaction with the unions.

As in the case of the electoral reforms, and perhaps even more shamelessly, the social “reforms” will be carried out in the face of the referendum debacle. Only a day after the defeat of the initiative, Confindustria and the three major trade unions met to settle the matter of “exit flexibility”—the freedom to fire workers at will—since this could not be done through the referendum. Only the last-minute opposition of one of the three unions prevented a quick agreement from being reached.

The outcome of the referenda, in sum, exposed the arrogance of a ruling class that wanted to see the Italian workers happily vote for the worsening of their own political and social conditions. It has deepened the long-term crisis of the Italian left, and, in the short term, further weakened the already critical condition of the centre-left government.

While the immediate outcome of the vote can only be welcomed, the political and social questions facing the working class in Italy remain pressing and unresolved. The existing forces—from the former Communist Party politicians and the radicals, to the Stalinists, to the trade union bureaucracy—offer no solution. Their claims of representing the interests of the workers are more timid and spurious than ever. A principled and effective struggle addressing the ongoing crisis can only begin with the revival of a revolutionary, internationalist and socialist perspective on the part of the working class and its assertion of political independence.



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