

# The Italian “left” and Nichi Vendola

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The rising popularity of Nichi Vendola, president of the southern Italian Apulia region and president of *Sinistra, Ecologia e Libertà* (Left Ecology Freedom Party—SEL), is a phenomenon that deserves careful examination.

With the opening of a crisis for the government of Silvio Berlusconi, triggered by the resignation of neo-fascist leader Gianfranco Fini from the majority, the prospect of a broad coalition government is becoming more and more likely. On Tuesday, Pierluigi Bersani, Secretary of the Democratic Party (PD), openly declared his readiness to form an alliance “with all those who are game, including Christian Democrats and Fini.”

Vendola, who is ready to stand in PD primaries and become the new Democratic leader (polls already show his ratings have surpassed those of Bersani), is open to a similar arrangement. With regard to Gianfranco Fini, he recently remarked that the neo-fascist “appears as a more presentable interlocutor. The fact that there is a more civil language is fine... To think about co-opting him on this side [the “left”] means to have little confidence in ourselves and our reasons.”

In other words, Vendola does not consider himself as having any substantial disagreements with the program of the right wing; it’s just a question of self-confidence in implementing harsh measures against workers. So vast is the vacuum in the Italian left.

Whatever the immediate consequences of the current political crisis in Italy, figures such as Vendola are catching the eye of the bourgeoisie. As the capitalist crisis intensifies, they may be called on to provide a “left” cover for extremely right-wing policies.

Vendola was elected to the post of Apulia President by joining the center-left *L’Unione* coalition (former prime minister Romano Prodi’s political creation) and winning its primaries. He has a long history in the ranks of Italian Stalinism. As a young student in 1972, he joined the *Federazione Giovanile Comunista Italiana* (Italian Federation of Communist Youth—FGCI). He later became a member of the Stalinist Italian Communist Party (PCI) and its Central Committee in 1990. After the collapse of the USSR, the PCI dissolved. Vendola, with the support of other Stalinists, was responsible for the formation of a new entity called *Rifondazione Comunista* (Communist Refoundation—PRC).

In the 2008 election, PRC suffered a humiliating loss of all congressional seats as a direct consequence of its participation in the right-wing policies of the Prodi government. The policy of the government was characterized by harsh attacks on pensions, welfare and democratic rights, along with an aggressive military policy that

included the expansion of the US base in Vicenza and increased funding for troops in Afghanistan and southern Lebanon.

A year later, Vendola continued his rightward trajectory, leaving PRC and forming the party he currently leads, a broad coalition with former Christian Democrats, Stalinists, environmentalists and ex-radicals.

Vendola’s political career has been based on his unconditional allegiance to the state apparatus and to the national bourgeoisie. Within the span of two decades, he navigated the bureaucratic maze of Italian institutions occupying a number of legislative and governmental posts, from Chamber’s Deputy to a member of the Culture, Science and Education Commission, the Justice Commission, the Anti-Mafia Commission and the Environment, Territory and Public Works Commission.

It is important to understand the events that shaped Vendola’s orientation from a broader international standpoint. In the late 1970s, as he was developing his political perspective, the bourgeoisie launched a counteroffensive in response to a massive upsurge of the working class in the period from 1968 to 1975. In country after country, governments, thanks to the treacherous betrayals of the Stalinists and Social Democrats, were able to take measures to suppress the revolutionary potential that had developed. The most horrific expression of this process was the establishment of the Pinochet regime in Chile.

In Italy, the PCI enjoyed more than 34 percent of the vote in 1976. The Italian working class had reached enormous momentum and its militancy was observed carefully around the world. For the Italian bourgeoisie it became necessary to ensure the stability of its order.

This is the political basis of the *Compromesso Storico* (Historic Compromise) between the PCI and the Christian Democrats, a Popular Front project in the tradition of Stalinism aimed at subordinating the working class to the power of the capitalist state. Although it never took place due to the assassination of the Christian Democrat Aldo Moro in 1978, it was a clear sign that the PCI had nothing to do with Marxism and had no intention of fighting for power, despite the bitter class struggles convulsing Italy at the time.

The year 1980 in Italy marked a definite change in the relationship between workers and the traditional labor organizations, as well as the beginning of a trend of industrial defeats. That year, Fiat workers were betrayed by the trade unions CGIL-CISL-UIL and by the PCI in the “35 days” strike. The end result was a capitulation by the unions to the demands of the stockholders. The factory council issued a statement declaring, “The trade union leadership has in fact accepted

that to get out of the crisis we must favor competitiveness based on an increased exploitation of workers.”

In light of this context, Vendola adopted a strategy of class collaborationism. This political orientation becomes clear with a closer examination of his policies and the reaction of the bourgeoisie to them.

As the president of Apulia, Vendola leads a region with a 12.5 percent official unemployment rate. Real figures are much higher, given that up to 21 percent of the population is involved in unaccounted work (so-called *lavoro nero*). In 2010, the Vendola government implemented substantial social cuts, from various disability funds to pre-school, primary and elderly education to sports activities. However, he is best known for having facilitated the exploitation of the region by domestic and international capital, especially in the field of renewable energy.

*Financial Times*’ Guy Dinmore observes that Vendola “has won over investors in the region’s growing renewable energy sector. At a recent international conference on solar power, investors named Puglia [Apulia] as the most attractive region in Italy’s south.” Emma Marcegaglia, president of *Confindustria* (Confederation of Industrialists), enthusiastically agrees. In a recent statement at the Confindustria assembly in Vicenza, she asserted, “Vendola is the best governor in Italy’s south; Apulia is a well-managed region.”

Marcegaglia’s preference is not a case of personal sympathies. She has a solid business relationship with the Vendola administration. Her company *Ecoenergia S.R.L.* is building an incinerator near the town of Modugno. The initiative has encountered several difficulties, including environmental concerns, given the alleged negligence by the local government to issue a proper assessment of environmental impact.

However, there is another issue that better defines the class interests that Vendola defends. In a recent interview, Vendola claims that “as far as the public part of waste management, I cancelled all incinerators. EfW [Energy-from-Waste] is part of the energy industry; it’s not an environmental issue. The energy industry is regulated by EU and national laws.”

Besides the extraordinary contempt for environmental issues such as waste management which he essentially thinks are best left to the profit system, this is the statement of an exemplary bourgeois politician who’s fully subservient to the nation-state and to the EU, a coalition among European bourgeoisies.

With particular regard to what Vendola favorably calls “Europeism”, the Manifesto approved last month at the First Congress of *Sinistra, Ecologia e Libertà* strikes an ominous note. The document explains, “A violent and prolonged attack to the euro and to Europe as a political subject and social model is occurring.” The perpetrator, according to the Manifesto, is the “super-class of predators at Wall Street.” This amounts to a defense of European capital against the American counterpart, a formula for the escalation of trade and currency wars.

Another case of Vendola’s free market policies can be found in the

town of Corigliano d’Otranto, where the *Cogeam* consortium, an arm of Marcegaglia’s group, is building a landfill on top of the largest natural water reservoir in the Salento region, authorized for 20 years by the Vendola administration.

It is under the guise of “concern” for the environment that Vendola participated on November 16 in the R20, a climate initiative sponsored by California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger. Vendola stated that he shared the experience of his region “that goes counter-trend and unites green economy with knowledge and creativity.” These are code words that represent a marketing strategy to attract investors.

Last August the Israeli paper *Haaretz* published a column naming Vendola “the white Obama.” In response to this definition, Vendola said he was “flattered.” In fact, according to his party’s First Congress Manifesto, “the US, thanks to Obama’s economic policies, is favoring an economic recovery.” The same document asserts that “some measures of restraint to the excesses of Wall Street have been taken in the US through the initiative of president Obama.”

In fact, over the past two years Obama has facilitated, not restrained, the predatory practices of Wall Street. Trillions have been handed to the banks, followed by severe cuts in pensions, education and jobs. In the auto industry in particular, Obama forced workers to accept the destruction of jobs, living standards and working conditions in order to return the US auto industry to profitability. These are the policies Vendola approves of.

The role of a politician like Vendola is to ensure that workers do not find a way to assert their class interests. His perspective is perfectly in line with the nationalist policies of the trade unions, as well as their capitulation to the diktats of Fiat’s CEO Sergio Marchionne (see “Unprecedented attacks on Fiat workers”).

It is also significant to record the role of *Rifondazione*, Vendola’s previous laboratory of capitalist reform. PRC Secretary Paolo Ferrero was asked in a recent interview if the Apulia government was the flagship of *Rifondazione*. His response was a clear “absolutely yes.” He praised the primaries as “extraordinary,” but most significantly he declared that Vendola is doing many “positive things” for the region.

Under conditions of deepening crisis, these are the forces to which the Italian bourgeoisie may well turn next in order to shore up its political rule.



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