Italian referendums inflict another defeat on Berlusconi

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The latest referendums in Italy in mid-June inflicted another political defeat on Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. On the Pentecost weekend, June 12 and 13, four referendums opposing various aspects of his policies were passed by majorities of up to 95 percent in favor—a clear signal to the government.

This continues the trend that commenced during the May municipal and regional elections, in which his party, The People of Freedom, lost the mayoral election in Milan and other important communal and provincial elections.

The first referendum concerned the ban on nuclear power plants, which was introduced in Italy in 1987 following a plebiscite in the wake of the Chernobyl disaster. Berlusconi's government planned to abolish the ban in April with a new plebiscite—but this was cancelled because of the Fukushima disaster. In the run-up to the plebiscite, the Italian government had cited Japan as a role model for safe nuclear energy. After the disaster, Berlusconi quickly tried to prevent the referendum, but was only able to postpone it, following an unfavourable legal ruling in early June.

Two other referendums were related to laws legalising the privatisation and marketing of drinking water; and the fourth referendum was about the so-called "law of legitimate impediment", which would allow officials to ignore a summons if they could not appear in court due to "important" reasons. This would have enabled Berlusconi to defy the court in two ongoing cases, one involving financial corruption, the other, the so-called "Ruby case," where he is accused of paid sex with an under-aged girl.

Voters clearly used the referendums to punish Berlusconi, with 27 million Italians casting ballots. The four referendums achieved not only an absolute majority of participants, but also of eligible voters. For the first time in 16 years, the result of a plebiscite is valid, because more than 50 percent of those eligible (57 percent) participated.

In an article called "Addio Berlusconi", the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* wrote: "Never has the Prime Minister been so unpopular in polls since he entered politics in 1992.… Voices in favour of Berlusconi's policies were not just hard to detect, they simply did not exist."

The relatively high participation was unexpected, because the votes had been systematically blacked out by Berlusconi's own media and TV channels, and downplayed in the state media. The campaign was led mainly through Internet platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, with young voters playing the main role. Moreover, the referendum campaign was supported by numerous committees and citizens' initiatives working outside of the official parties and concentrating on a single issue.

The anti-government sentiment had been fueled by an incident in Rome on the National Day of Innovation, when Renato Brunetta (PDL), one of Berlusconi's ministers, rudely interrupted and insulted a young questioner who introduced herself as "precarious employee." "You are most vile part of Italy," Brunetta declared and left the room. At the entrance, more young people held up a banner saying, "It's called innovation, in fact it's precariousness."

The incident caused great outrage. On the Internet, hundreds stated that they felt personally offended by Brunetta's attacks and protested against them. Italy's youth are particularly affected by the crisis. According to recent figures, only 50 percent of young people between the ages of 18 to 29 have a steady job in northern Italy. In southern Italy, only 3 out of 10 young people have a steady job. These figures were published by the Nation Council of Economy and Labour (CNEL) on June 8.

Representatives of the racist Northern League (Lega Nord), the second governing party alongside Berlusconi's PDL, expressed their deep frustration over the results of the referendums. Roberto Calderoli (LN), minister for simplification of laws, called the results a second "blow in the face" for the government, after the municipal elections. He said he "wants to prevent these blows from becoming routine."

The official opposition

On the same evening, Pierluigi Bersani, head of the Democratic Party (PD), the biggest opposition party, called for Berlusconi's resignation, declaring that the referendum was clear proof of the "divide between government and country."

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But in reality, the referendums' results are equally directed against the opposition parties, whose policies are fundamentally identical to those of the government on all those issues.

A first draft bill for the privatisation of drinking water was actually drawn up with the active participation of Bersani, when he was minister for economic development during the administration of Romano Prodi. On the Internet, a recording from 2008 can be found where Bersani argues, "In Italy, water is not a public good, it comes from God." In the effort to curtail wasteful use of water, private corporations could "play an important role," Bersani declared.

And in the case of opposition to nuclear power, Bersani and the PD only took this line after the Fukushima disaster. A cable published by WikiLeaks shows that in November 2007, Bersani, then minister, signed a five-year contract for research and development of nuclear technology with the U.S. According to the text sent to the US by American Ambassador Ronald Spogli, Bersani argued that "Italy is not out of nuclear power generation, it has only been suspended." GNEP can play an important role in changing Italian attitudes towards nuclear power.

The role of Attac, Greenpeace and Rifondazione

The result of the four referendums could not be clearer. The defence of drinking water against privatisation especially expresses a clear class mandate against the enrichment orgy of the ruling financial aristocracy.

At the same time many citizens' initiatives and local committees, supported by petty-bourgeois groups such as Attac, Greenpeace and comedian Beppe Grillo, are doing their utmost to prevent youth from turning to a socialist orientation.

They are fomenting the most limited reformist illusions, glorifying the referendums and claiming that the struggle against privatisation, nuclear power and corruption can be achieved without a struggle against the capitalist system.

They glorify the low political level of political discourse and the "renunciation of all politicians." For example, Nichi Vendola, regional president of Apulia and leader of the Left Ecology Freedom (Sinistra Ecologia Libertà, SEL; formerly Rifondazione Comunista, Communist Refoundation Party) explained at a party meeting on Saturday: "We have reached our first goal.… In the struggle for public water and against nuclear power, the associations, movements and Catholic sections have won." The losers, on the other hand, are the "political theorists and career politicians."

The Pabloite group Sinistra Critica (Left Criticism) also glorified the movement's "non-political character." For example, Flavia D' Angeli and Emilano Vitti, spokesmen for Sinistra Critica, wrote in a comment entitled "All hail the water committees," that these committees had played a "decisive and, in some ways, historical role." "They had been working in secrecy, they have gathered the most signatures ever gathered for a referendum…. Today's victory is their victory."

This renunciation of "career politicians" is directed not only against the established parties, but also against the formation of a consciously socialist alternative.

This is the way Rifondazione Comunista, its successor Left Ecology Freedom, Sinistra Critica and other petty-bourgeois groups play into the hands of the political right, which is also intent on getting rid of Berlusconi, in order to replace him with an even more aggressive, right-wing regime.

The British *Economist* magazine writes that Berlusconi "has been a disaster as a national leader" and continues: "Italy comes 80th in the World Bank's 'Doing Business' index, below Belarus and Mongolia, and 48th in the World Economic Forum's competitiveness rankings, behind Indonesia and Barbados.… In the mid-1990s successive Italian governments, desperate not to be left out of the euro, pushed through some impressive reforms."

International and European banks are also exerting strong pressure on Italy. In the discussions about Greece, advocates for the banks, such as ECB head Jean-Claude Trichet and German Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble demand that Italy overcome its economic weakness and reduce its high state debts. The same austerity measures used against the working class in Greece are also to be carried out in Italy.

While representatives of the financial sector and economy are cheering the growing opposition against Berlusconi, they want to use his removal to establish a regime that will carry out significantly harsher attacks against the population.

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