Italy: Beppe Grillo's inexorable move to the right

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24 January 2013

The Five-Star Movement (Movimento Cinque Stelle, M5S) led by comedian Beppe Grillo is regarded as the protest organisation with the best chance of success in the current Italian election campaign. The Five-Star Movement, which claims to be an alternative to the main political parties led by Mario Monti, Pierluigi Bersani and Silvio Berlusconi, is currently polling at around fifteen percent.

A closer look at the movement, which explicitly does not consider itself as a party, shows that it is moving rapidly to the right. Beppe Grillo's statements hardly differ from those of any other right-wing populist: he seeks to arouse racist sentiments, while attacking the European Union from the right and polemicising against the welfare state.

The movement arose from protests against widespread political corruption, but Grillo has always rejected taking any clear position on class issues. He has taken up environmental and other issues fashionable amongst layers of the middle class, but has consistently refused to defend the working class against the brutal social attacks carried out by right and "left-wing" governments alike.

Last year the government of Mario Monti introduced austerity policies which not only plunged working people into unemployment and poverty, but also had huge consequences for the middle class. Shopkeepers, small entrepreneurs and craftsmen are being hard hit by the recession, and their economic woes are compounded by dramatically increased fuel costs, new property taxes and tighter tax controls.

Under these circumstances Grillo's movement undertakes to speak for sections of the petty bourgeoisie who regard most oppressed layers of the working class and the welfare state as the main problem and are embracing a right-wing nationalist course.

The Five-Star Movement's rightward shift demonstrates that the "fight against corruption" taken up as a single issue does not provide a progressive response to the social crisis. The main responsibility for the rise of Grillo's right-wing movement rests with pseudo-left tendencies, which have supported the austerity policies of the governments of Romano Prodi and Mario Monti, while simultaneously fomenting illusions in Grillo's movement.

Beppe Grillo has always prided himself on the fact that he had no program. His protest movement was born six years ago on the basis of his performances as an impromptu comedian in Genoa. He attacked corrupt politicians and railed against tax evasion and the self-serving mentality of the political elite.

He first won political influence after Romano Prodi replaced Silvio Berlusconi as head of government in the spring of 2006. The entire centre-left camp, including Communist Refoundation, participated in Prodi's government. When it became clear that there would be no social progress in Italy under Prodi, Grillo's show suddenly became very popular. He appeared across Italy in concert halls before audiences of thousands.

In September 2007 he called for a day of protest, his so-called "V-Day", where V stood for "Vaffanculo", i.e. "Go stuff yourself". Amid open-air concerts and other actions, signatures were collected for a petition demanding that those with a criminal record be banned from elections for public office.

In the parliamentary elections of 2008, Grillo called for abstention, declaring that the election campaign between the two major camps was a "phoney war between twin brothers". Grillo, one of the most famous TV entertainers in the country in the 1980s, was subsequently banned from performing on television. Grillo's movement was by then spreading rapidly through the Internet and social networks.

When Silvio Berlusconi returned to power in 2008, Grillo received growing support from celebrities such as the former state prosecutor Antonio di Pietro, journalist Marco Travaglio, and dissident TV presenter Michele Santoro. They all supported Grillo and criticized both Berlusconi and centre-left Democratic Party politicians, but never challenged the capitalist system.

In 2010 Grillo took part in regional elections for the first time, forming his Five-Star movement. The five stars stand for the environment, drinking water, technology, transportation and a positive approach by Italians to one another.

The regional elections of 2010 were characterized by a sharp decline in voter turnout which fell by ten percent. Grillo notched up his first success, based on a single-issue campaign demanding that no convicted or accused person should become a parliamentary deputy.

During the election Grillo benefited from the decline of Communist Refoundation, which had participated in the Prodi government in 2008 and failed to win re-election to parliament. In Emilia Romagna, a former stronghold of the Communist Party, Grillo won six percent while the vote for Communist Refoundation plunged to 2.8 percent.

In 2011 when social protests developed in Italy in the wake of the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia, Grillo was held up as a political alternative.

In June 2011 four referendums were held (against the privatisation of water and energy projects, and against nuclear power), in which some 95 percent of participants delivered a stinging rebuff to the Berlusconi government. To prevent opposition to the government from taking a socialist direction, Attac, Greenpeace and the SEL (SEL - Left, Ecology, Freedom) led by Nichi Vendola all praised the supposedly non-political character of the referenda.

This fell in line with the campaign to present Grillo as a pseudo-alternative. They all applauded his supposed "freedom from any

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ideology" and his fight against the caste of "political scientists and policy assistants," as Nichi Vendola said.

Following intense pressure from the EU the Berlusconi government was replaced in November 2011 by a non-elected government of technocrats led by Mario Monti. The successor parties of the Communist Party and the trade unions supported Monti's radical austerity measures and attacks on the working class, thus giving more momentum to the Five-Star Movement.

In the meantime Beppe Grillo adopted ever more right-wing positions. In a blog he authored one year ago he argued against giving citizenship to immigrant children born in Italy. He wrote: "State citizenship for those born in Italy, but whose parents do not have Italian citizenship, does not make sense." Such a demand was only intended to "divert Italians from the real problems with the aim of turning them into fanatics".

Later, he went even further and declared he wanted to "see only Italians" in his movement. He also spoke out publicly against the immigration of Roma families from Romania to Italy.

When several newspapers criticised his comments, Grillo responded nervously in his blog: "Whoever now writes that I am a fascist, does so against their better judgment and is an ass-kisser of the system." He stressed that M5S was "not an ideological movement."

One Grillo supporter on the city council of Treviso, David Borrelli, conceded publicly, however, that there were similarities between M5S and the fiercely anti-immigrant Northern League.

Moreover, when devotees of the extreme right-wing movement Casa Pound sought to meet with Grillo based on his anti-immigrant statements, Grillo responded: "M5S has no prejudice regarding the people it meets with." Casa Pound is a movement that derives its name from the fascist writer and Mussolini admirer, Ezra Pound.

During the same period, Grillo discovered hostility to the EU and the demand "Get out of the Euro" as a means to promote his movement. In an interview with the US news agency Bloomberg in May 2012, he declared: "The euro is a rope around our neck. It is being drawn tighter every day."

At the same time, the "Grillini" won their best ever result in the local elections held in May 2012. While the turnout in the elections dropped, the M5S picked up an average of eight percent of the vote. In the city of Parma and in three other municipalities, pro-Grillo candidates, standing for the first time, were elected to the post of mayor.

This electoral success was repeated in November, when the Grillo movement emerged as the strongest single party with fifteen percent in the election for the Presidency of the region of Sicily. In the election, various protest lists and political outsiders were able to win votes at the expense of all those parties which backed Monti's austerity measures, as voter turnout dropped to just 47 percent.

It was already evident that many of the votes for Grillo came from disenchanted Berlusconi supporters and, in northern Italy, from the camp of the Northern League. In Sicily, Grillo's movement with 15 percent overtook Berlusconi's Party of Freedom (PdL), which plummeted from 33 to 13 percent.

In a run off election in Parma, Grillo supporter Federico Pizzarotti beat the candidate of the Democratic Party (PD), taking more than sixty percent of the vote. Pizzarotti, a 39-year-old project manager for a bank, now boasts that as mayor of Parma he has implemented even stricter budgetary policies than his right wing predecessor. Prior to the election, a campaign by the Grillo movement successfully stopped the construction of a new metro in Parma.

As the crisis deepens, Grillo's protest movement, which did not have and did not want to have a program apart from its opposition to corruption, has increasingly become a rallying point for right-wing petty-bourgeois layers. This is confirmed by a glance at the movement's electoral demands and publications, which agitate on behalf of small and mid-size entrepreneurs against the working class.

For example, Grillo argues for a reform of the Italian stock market in favour of small shareholders, the promotion of local, Italian products, support for small and medium enterprises, and the withdrawal from the European Union and the Euro.

His rejection of the European Union and the euro has nothing to do with the defence of the interests of the working class, which correctly regard the EU as an instrument of the banks and the driving force behind austerity measures. Grillo defends the capitalist foundations of the economy and is trying to steer social discontent into right-wing, nationalist channels by combining his attacks on the EU with a protectionist economic policy.

He demands: "we need to put a stop to the flight of companies abroad and we need to create the conditions for attracting foreign investment and foreign companies to come here, not to Austria and to Slovenia."

He also writes: "The foundation of the Italian economy is the small and medium-sized companies... They are the milch cows in a country strangled by bureaucracy… It is the bureaucracy itself that is by now an insuperable obstacle for anyone starting an enterprise. Either we start to build companies once again or we die with the decline of the welfare state."

The "welfare state" is understood here as an obstacle to the prosperity of the petty bourgeoisie and the middle class that has to be trimmed back. This is only possible, however, at the expense of workers, pensioners, the unemployed and youth.

Grillo's recurring theme—his tirades against waste, corruption, abuse of office and for "clean" politics—serves primarily to promote an authoritarian state. At no point does he identify the capitalist interests that serve these political mechanisms.

In all his attacks on politicians and parties, he describes the entire "party system" as a "cancer on democracy." His populism—typical of right-wing demagogues—serves to cover up the class interests served by definite parties. It is aimed above all at preventing the working class from developing its own independent, socialist and internationalist party.

Grillo maintains that all parties are "dead souls which will disappear soon" to be replaced by his own movement "without structures, party factions and membership cards."

While Grillo is trying to create as much political confusion as possible, his own social status is clear. As a multi-millionaire, he is one of the wealthiest citizens in Italy. Already back in 2005 he declared a taxable annual income of nearly 4.3 million euros.

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