

Italy before the elections

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23 February 2013

Italian parliamentary elections will be held on Sunday and Monday with the country facing social disintegration.

Italy's economic output has shrunk by 7 percent since 2008. The unemployment rate has risen over the same period from 6.5 percent to 11.2 percent. The rate for young people is 37 percent.

Last year alone, half a million people lost their jobs. Average per capita income is at the level of 1993. Consumer spending per family has fallen in the last 12 months by an average of €1,391.

Despite this social catastrophe, not one of the dozens of parties and lists on the ballot genuinely defends the social interests of working people. A broad front extending from the centre-left coalition of Pier Luigi Bersani, a former official of the Communist Party, to the centre-right coalition of the incumbent prime minister, Mario Monti, is determined to continue the austerity measures that have devastated Italian society.

In the absence of any opposition from the left, the right-wing camp of Silvio Berlusconi, who headed the Italian government for 8 of the last 12 years, has benefited from popular anger over the social cuts.

The 76-year-old multibillionaire, who faces a number of criminal proceedings for business and sexual offences, has attacked the European Union and the German government in his election campaign. He promises to break with the austerity measures adopted by Monti and reverse tax increases.

In recent polls, Berlusconi has been able to significantly close the gap on the poll leader, Bersani. Nevertheless, it is difficult to predict whether Berlusconi will be able to catch up with Bersani because, according to Italian electoral law, opinion polls are not permitted in the last two weeks before the elections.

The mere possibility of a Berlusconi victory has triggered panic across Europe. European governments

are openly intervening in the Italian election and international banks are threatening consequences if Berlusconi wins outright or achieves a majority in one of the two houses of parliament, an outcome that would allow him to block legislation.

“It has been a long time since such harmony prevailed in Europe. Conservative and progressive, northern and southern countries are all united by the fear of a return of Berlusconi,” wrote the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*.

German finance minister Wolfgang Schäuble, a Christian Democrat, has warned the Italian electorate “not to repeat the mistake of voting for Berlusconi.” Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle (a right-wing Liberal) has urged Italian voters to cast their ballots for a pro-European course and a continuation of Monti's austerity measures. The president of the European Parliament, Martin Schulz, a Social Democrat, has likewise appealed to the electorate to prevent Berlusconi's reelection.

An economist from the Swiss bank UBS, Martin Lück, has warned that Italy will be “brutally punished on the markets” should Berlusconi make a comeback. The exorbitant interest rates on Italian government bonds, which fell under Monti from 7.5 percent to 4.4 percent, would return.

The chief economist of the Allianz insurance group, Michael Heise, has also pushed for a continuation of Monti's “reforms.” Italy's very high unit labor costs needed to be reduced, he said. Only in this way—i.e., at the expense of workers, can the third-largest economy in the euro zone recover from recession, he declared.

In the Italian election campaign, fears of Berlusconi's return serve to cement all parties behind Monti's austerity measures. Pseudo-left organisations such as Communist Refoundation (PRC) and other parties that emerged from it are playing a crucial role in this respect.

One split-off from the PRC, Left Ecology Freedom (Sinistra Ecologia Libertà—SEL), led by the president of the region of Puglia, Nichi Vendola, has joined Bersani's centre-left coalition and thereby publicly lined up behind Monti's austerity measures.

The PRC itself has joined Civic Revolution (Rivoluzione Civile), a coalition of liberal and green parties led by former anti-Mafia prosecutor Antonio Ingroia. The central programmatic demand of this coalition is the fight against corruption and crime—i.e., opposition to Berlusconi. Social issues play an entirely secondary role (see “In the Italian elections, Rifondazione Comunista emerges as a bourgeois party”).

Critical Left (Sinistra Critica), another spin-off of the PRC, which is affiliated to the Pabloite United Secretariat, advocates complete abstention. Having received nearly 170,000 votes in the 2008 election, it has announced it will not participate this year and makes no call for a vote for other parties. The organisation justifies its position by arguing that “today” (in the midst of the deepest social crisis in 70 years) “the political and organisational conditions do not exist...for an effective, broad-based anti-capitalist coalition.”

This position is designed to assist the line-up of official conservative, left and pseudo-left parties and trade unions behind Monti's austerity programme.

In addition to Berlusconi, the Five-Star Movement (Movimento Cinque Stelle—M5S), headed by the comedian Beppe Grillo, has been able to exploit the growing popular dissatisfaction with Monti's austerity policies and the EU. While the election rallies of other parties have been poorly attended, tens of thousands have flocked to the open-air meetings held by Grillo. He is especially popular among the younger generation.

Grillo's programme focuses on attacks against corruption and the political class as a whole, which he denounces in a crude and often obscene manner. He attacks the European Union and presents a motley list of demands, ranging from environmental issues, to the protection of national industries, to tax cuts.

Grillo has always refused to take a clear position on class issues. He insists that his movement is neither right nor left—while shifting steadily to the right. His political rants increasingly resemble those of other right-wing populists (see “Italy: Beppe Grillo's inexorable

move to the right”).

The Italian elections reveal the fundamental political problem existing all over Europe. Under conditions where social contradictions are sharpening and anger against austerity measures is growing, all of the official parties, including the pseudo-left organisations such as the PRC, close ranks with the ruling class.

Regardless of the outcome, the election will mark a further stage in the intensification of the class struggle. If Bersani emerges as the victor, or a coalition of Bersani and Monti wins, the attacks on the working class will be intensified, preparing the way for the next political crisis and the next series of social eruptions. If Berlusconi emerges as the surprise winner, or if there is a stalemate, experts expect a violent reaction from the financial markets.

In either case, the most important task is to prepare the working class for the coming class struggles by building a new revolutionary party.



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