Grillo’s Five Star Movement loses Italian local elections

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Last week’s Italian local elections were characterized by low turnout and heavy losses for the Five Star Movement (M5S) of comedian Beppe Grillo.

In 563 cities where elections were held, only 62.4 percent of eligible voters went to the polls—15 percent less than in 2008. The Five Star Movement, which emerged as the largest party in the parliamentary elections in February with 25 percent of the vote, lost about half of its share of the vote.

The local elections are not directly comparable with the national elections, since Grillo’s movement has no developed party structure and is not present in many smaller municipalities. However, M5S also lost much support in larger cities, where it is well represented.

For example, in the capital Rome, Grillo’s supporters received only 12.8 percent of the vote, about half as much as in February. In its strongholds in the north of the country, M5S received only 8 to 9 percent of the vote, although its rise had originally started in local politics. For example, it holds the mayor’s office in the city of Parma, and has a strong presence in the regional parliament of Sicily.

The Democratic Party (PD) of Prime Minister Enrico Letta recorded some gains. It is in the lead in the 11 cities in which run-off elections will take place on June 9 and 10. With 42.7 percent in the capital, Rome, Democratic candidate Ignazio Marino is well ahead of the incumbent Gianni Alemanno (30.2 percent), a former fascist and now a member of the People of Freedom Party (PdL) of former prime minister Silvio Berlusconi. In the north, the Democrats won some municipalities from the right-wing Northern League. In national opinion polls, however, the Democrats are behind Berlusconi’s PdL.

The Five Star Movement owed its success in February’s parliamentary elections to popular outrage with the austerity policies of the European Union, implemented by the “technocrat” government of Mario Monti, with the support of Democrats and initially also the PdL. The political bankruptcy of the Italian “left” enabled Grillo to succeed with his virulent attacks on corrupt politicians, gathering crowds of tens of thousands and winning their support for the election of his movement.

However, after the general election it quickly became clear that Grillo has no answer to the social crisis, personally favours tough austerity measures and has a right-wing bourgeois programme. His authoritarian style of leadership also inflamed sharp inner-party conflicts around organizational rather than programmatic issues. There was a rebellion when Grillo, who has an income of millions, ordered that the 163 M5S parliamentary deputies only keep €2,500 for themselves out of their MP salaries of just over €10,000 a month.

There were also violent conflicts regarding the question of whether M5S deputies support a government led by the Democrats. Here, Grillo’s negative attitude prevailed, and the Democrats finally formed a grand coalition with Berlusconi’s PdL. Political observers believe the defeat in the local elections will aggravate conflicts within the M5S.

In his blog, Grillo responded to the electoral losses of his movement with a ferocious diatribe against the voters. As was the case following the general election, he attacked public sector workers and pensioners, whom he accused of selfishness in supporting corrupt parties.

It was wrong to make the media responsible for the loss of votes for the M5S, Grillo writes. Voters were well informed, he claims: “People knew what they were voting for ... they are fully responsible for the choice they have made.” Five hundred thousand people whose livelihoods depend on politics, 4 million people who are covered by a public salary, as well as 19 million pensioners are keen to maintain the status quo, he commented. “They voted for themselves, and only then for the country.”

To them, Grillo counterposes “freelancers, the

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unemployed, those in precarious jobs, small- and medium-scale employers and students", who are hit hard by the crisis. The two groups, which he calls "Italy A" and "Italy B", are joined together like Siamese twins, according to Grillo. "Italy A cannot live without the taxes of Italy B; and the latter is ruined."

There is an obvious attempt to divide the working class, and to whip up the unemployed, self-employed and small business owners against public sector workers and pensioners, in order to push through tax cuts and massive austerity measures.

This explains why the vote for Grillo's movement has halved and many voters stayed away from the polls. Many who had voted for Grillo in the parliamentary elections found that he has no answer to the social crisis, which has massively worsened as a result of the austerity policies of the outgoing Monti government.

According to new figures from the Italian statistics office Istat, about 8.6 million Italians were living below the poverty line last year, representing 14 percent of the population, and twice as many as two years ago. The purchasing power of Italian consumers fell last year by 4.8 percent due to large tax increases.

Forty percent of young people cannot find a job. One in five Italians cannot adequately heat their homes. Meat is a luxury item for one in six; more than half cannot afford a vacation. For this year, Istat predicts an economic decline of 1.4 percent and an increase in the unemployment rate from 10.7 percent to 12.3 percent.

The worsening of the crisis means the political situation is becoming increasingly unstable. The approval rating of the new government, a grand coalition under Democrat Enrico Letta, has fallen from 43 percent to 34 percent within two weeks. The two governing parties, Letta's Democrats and Berlusconi's PdL, are deeply divided internally and between themselves.

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