

Renzi elected Democratic Party leader as protests spread across Italy

Marianne Arens
12 December 2013

Since Monday, a protest movement has gripped Italy. Calling itself the “pitchfork” movement, it is directed against the government, although it lacks a clear program.

In Rome, Turin, Milan, Genoa and also in Puglia, tens of thousands took to the streets, while lorries blocked major roads and students and unemployed youth occupied train stations. Many trains were cancelled because protesters were sitting on the tracks.

The protests against the government’s tax increases began among Sicilian farmers and were taken up by long-distance drivers who blocked routes. Since then, it has spread rapidly to other sections of the population. In the cities, it is mainly students and the unemployed who are on the streets, demanding jobs, social protection and a perspective.

Clashes took place on Monday in Turin city centre with the police, who used tear gas. But in the end, members of one police unit removed their helmets and declared themselves in solidarity with the protesters.

In Italy, which has been in its longest recession since 2008 in the post-war period, youth unemployment has surpassed 40 percent. Poverty among the elderly has sharply risen, as a consequence of pension “reforms” by three successive governments, led by Silvio Berlusconi, Mario Monti and Enrico Letta. Numerous firms have gone bankrupt, 5 million people are living in poverty, and 6 million are unemployed.

Prime Minister Enrico Letta of the Democratic Party (PD), who is in the process of imposing the latest austerity package with the 2014 budget, is under increasing pressure within his own party. On Sunday, his challenger Matteo Renzi won the primary election for party leader with 70 percent of the vote.

The 38-year-old Renzi, who was previously mayor of Florence, has made populist criticisms of the “Brussels

bureaucracy,” demanding that the European Union (EU) not be allowed to determine Italian economic policy. He is calling for an immediate reduction of the number of serving politicians and for nationwide cuts of €1.5 billion to political appointees’ salaries.

His election as party leader was held in the style of an American primary election. Not only party members, but everyone could take part, provided they were aged 16 or over and paid a contribution of €2. It was more of a populist contest rather than a democratic election, since those who did not support Renzi stayed at home rather than voting for the other candidates, Gianni Cuperlo or Pippo Civati.

“This is not the end of the left, but an end of a group of leaders of the left,” he said in a speech late on Sunday evening. He has been hailed by the bourgeois press as a “charismatic reformer.” Many newspapers compared him with Tony Blair, who transformed the Labour Party in Britain with the neo-liberal “New Labour” project over a decade ago. The German financial daily *Handelsblatt* wrote that Renzi means “less communism, less party cadres.”

In his victory speech, Renzi demanded that “reforms” be implemented more quickly and decisively than previously. At the heart of this had to be the “mobility of the labour market,” a euphemism for the destruction of workers’ rights and immediate cuts in the state work force. Among other things, Renzi intends to do away with the second parliamentary chamber and provincial administrations.

The Democratic Party, which emerged from the Italian Communist Party, long ago abandoned its social commitments and became an organ for the implementation of the interests of the Italian and European banks. Already under Letta and the interim party leader Guglielmo Epifani, the PD has sought to

fulfil the demands of the European Union (EU) in collaboration with the centre-right camp.

Like Letta, Renzi began his political career in the Christian Democrats. Renzi's victory against his competitor Cuperlo, who enjoyed the support of the old party leadership around Massimo D'Alema, means that the formerly Christian Democrat Marghiringa faction has total control of the Democratic Party.

Renzi will now replace the former trade union head Epifani in the leadership of the PD. Epifani led the party temporarily since early this year. After the elections in February 2013, previous chairman Pierluigi Bersani resigned along with the entire party leadership, because he could not achieve a majority in parliament for a government.

Renzi represents an explicitly right-wing, pro-business course. He is on good terms with Fiat chief Sergio Marchionne and has supported his attacks on auto workers.

Renzi would have preferred immediate elections, but last Wednesday the constitutional court declared part of the current election law to be in breach of the constitution, which had given the victors a large bonus of seats in parliament. Renzi has now promised to work for immediate electoral reform and to cooperate closely with Letta on this.

For his part, Letta is hoping that he can lead the government at least for the next year, including from July to December 2014 when Italy will hold the EU presidency. Letta said he had not voted for Renzi, but for Gianni Cuperlo.

Letta announced a further vote of confidence for next Wednesday, in order to obtain the support of parliament after the resignation from the government of Berlusconi's faction Forza Italia from the former PDL.

Berlusconi spoke out on Sunday evening in favour of an extra grand coalition. His reconstituted party was prepared to cooperate with Renzi, as well as with Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement and Nichi Vendola's *Sinistra Ecologia Libertà* (SEL, Left Ecology Liberty).

Berlusconi's spokesman Renato Brunetta said, "If Berlusconi, Renzi and Grillo work together, we will have a new election law within a week." Parliamentary elections should take place in May at the latest, along with the European elections, he added.

Vendola sought to praise Renzi prematurely, when he

wrote on Sunday on Facebook that Renzi had closed a period of Italian history by "liquidating an entire political nomenclature." "It will be necessary to speak with him and reach an agreement, but I believe that today space for a new left has emerged. A left which is free from nostalgia," he continued.



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