

# Italy after the European elections

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The governing Democratic Party (PD) emerged as the winner in the European elections on May 25 in Italy with 40.8 percent of the vote. Beppe Grillo's populist Five Star Movement came second with 21 percent. Shortly before the election, polls had been predicting a neck-and-neck race between Grillo's followers and the Democrats for first place.

Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia came third with almost 17 percent, the Liga Nord won 6 percent, and the New Centre Right (NCD), a split-off from Berlusconi's party, 4.4 percent. The electoral list "An alternative Europe with Tsipras" just passed the 4 percent hurdle with 4.03 percent and will send three politicians to the European parliament.

Voter participation, at 57.2 percent, was nearly ten percent below the previous election in 2009, when 66 percent took part. Had there not been regional and communal elections in parts of Italy on May 25, even fewer people would have gone to the polls.

The sense of relief over Matteo Renzi's victory was palpable within ruling circles. The Milan stock exchange responded to the victory of its favoured candidate with a 3.4 percent rise, and a drop in the interest rate by 14 points on Italian ten-year government bonds.

Heads of government in Brussels congratulated Renzi on his election victory, and German Chancellor Angela Merkel described him as a "matador." Italy takes over the presidency of the EU council in July. The European bourgeoisie had feared that a victory for Beppe Grillo would "finally throw Italy's already unmanageable political relations into chaos," wrote *Der Spiegel*.

The German banker Schmieding told the newspaper *Die Welt* that with Renzi's victory, the risk had decreased "that Italy, one of the most important countries, will descend into political turbulence." The PD chief now had "a strong mandate for labour market and institutional reforms."

These "reforms" will once again be at the expense of the working class, which has been paying for the crisis with higher unemployment and rampant poverty among youth and the elderly since the beginning of the recession in 2008. According to an inquiry published at the end of May by Istat, the number of jobs in Italy was almost one million less (984,000, or 4.2 percent) than in 2008. Even compared with 2012, the number dropped by 2 percent.

The figure for youth unemployment officially surpassed the 40 percent mark last year and is now much higher. According to the new study, only 40 percent of young people between 15 and 34 have some sort of employment.

The election victory by the Democrats is above all due to the absence of any genuinely left alternative to their right-wing politics.

From the beginning, the *World Socialist Web Site* pointed to the right-wing character of Grillo's party. This has now been confirmed.

During the election campaign, Grillo was strongly critical of the EU and the government in Rome. He announced at an election rally on the Piazza San Giovanni in Rome that his supporters would march to Rome and blockade President Giorgio Napolitano's residence for as long as it took him to dissolve parliament and call fresh elections.

In the election itself Grillo suffered declines of over 40 percent in former Five Star Movement strongholds (Sicily, Friuli Venezia Giulia, Trentino-Alto Adige).

He responded by seeking out UKIP (United Kingdom Independence Party) leader Nigel Farage in Brussels, offering to collaborate with him on a European level. UKIP represents an outright reactionary programme including deregulation, anti-immigrant chauvinism, low business tax and ruthless militarism.

The protagonists involved in the "Tsipras List" seized the opportunity of the election result to move even

closer to the Democrats. Only a few hours after polls closed, the “Tsipras List” effectively dissolved into its constituent parts.

The leaders of Nichi Vendola’s SEL (Left, Ecology, Freedom) gave a series of interviews to daily newspapers, in which they advocated closer collaboration with or even joining the Democrats. They justified this on the basis of the rise of Eurosceptics in the EU.

SEL parliamentary fraction leader Gennaro Migliore proposed a united party with the PD in *la Repubblica*. “We cannot wait, we have to place ourselves at the heart of developments,” Migliore said. “The challenge” was “to create a unified left in Italy, which fulfills the desire for change.” SEL deputy Ileana Piazonni stated in *Espresso* that she wanted to “lead the left together.”

Nichi Vendola, chief of SEL and governor of Apulia, declared on May 28 in Naples, “Renzi now has to use the powerful lever provided to him by the electorate to change Europe.” If he did so and shifted course in Europe, “we will transform our criticism and oppositional views into consensus,” Vendola said.

The stance of Rifondazione Comunista (Refounded Communism), which also joined the Tsipras List, was summed up by a politician from Apulia, Nicola Fratoianni, on Facebook. He did not share Vendola’s view, he wrote. After the election, a “political appeal” was necessary to all of those who had “understood” the Tsipras List as “an important opportunity for a strong and innovative, non-sectarian and non-minority left.”

This has nothing to do with an independent political alternative for the working class. This group would like to maintain a certain distance from the PD, in order to provide it with a more effective left cover. All of those associated with Refounded Communism, the successor party to the Italian Communist Party), are part of a small, privileged middle class, which seeks to defend its well-paid posts in the trade unions, state bureaucracy and the media.

Renzi, who seized control of the government in February, celebrated the election win as a personal triumph. In fact, his electoral success was anything but overwhelming. Barely 23 percent of registered voters gave him their backing.

His reaction to the election was to announce “very tough and decisive reforms.” “Italy is taking it seriously this time,” he said in an interview on 31 May

given to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *ElPaís*, *The Guardian*, *LeMonde* and Italy’s *LaStampa*. He would firmly impose his reforms to the labour market, constitution and electoral system.

Renzi is pursuing a wide-ranging programme of privatisations and social cuts. His government intends to cut state spending by €34 billion within two years. At the same time, his defence minister Roberta Pinotti has made clear that Italy unconditionally agrees with and supports the aggressive actions of Germany and the United States against Russia over the Ukraine crisis.

The false accounting practices recently proposed by the man who stood in the election as the “destroyer” of the corrupt elite are also revealing. In the campaign, he made repeated promises to lead the fight against corruption and waste. But now, faced with the issue of Italy’s declining GDP, he has arrived at quite a novel solution: Italy is to improve its GDP by incorporating the black-market economy in its calculations from September 2014.

The “black market economy” not only includes “illegal work,” but also cigarette smuggling, the drug and weapons trade, and prostitution. This has even provided the occasion for members of the party of Silvio Berlusconi, who has been charged with corruption several times, to mock the government. Senator Maurizio Gasparri from Forza Italia suggested that ECB chief Mario Draghi could be replaced by Salvatore “Toto” Riina, a well-known mafia boss.

The European elections have made clearer than ever that the Italian working class has no party or organization that speaks in its name. A huge vacuum exists between the working class and the entire political spectrum.



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