

# Low turnout in Italian regional elections

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Last month's regional elections in Emilia-Romagna and Calabria were a massive vote of no confidence in the government of Matteo Renzi (Democratic Party, PD). Almost two-thirds of the electorate voted with their feet by not casting a ballot.

Although Renzi's PD was able to win the election, it did so with an extremely low voter turnout. In Emilia-Romagna, PD candidate Stefano Bonaccini won 49 percent of the vote on a turnout of 37.7 percent. This was a little over half of the turnout in the 2010 regional elections, when it was 68.1 percent. This means that only one in six voters actively gave their support to Bonaccini's government.

Second place was taken by Alan Fabri of the Lega Nord (Northern League), which obtained almost 30 percent of the vote with the support of Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia and the fascist Fratelli d'Italia Alleanza Nazionale. With just 13 percent, Giulia Gibertoni of Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement (M5S) received barely half the vote the M5S received in last year's parliamentary election.

In both Emilia-Romagna and Calabria the outgoing regional presidents were involved in financial scandals. Bonaccini's predecessor in office, PD party colleague Vasco Errani, was forced to resign in July when it was revealed that his brother had pocketed public funds, and in Calabria, Guiseppe Skopelliti fell victim to a corruption scandal in April. The elections were an important test for the Renzi government in Rome following the European elections in May.

In Calabria, where almost 44 percent went to the polls, compared to 59 percent in 2010, PD candidate Mario Gerardo Oliverio was victorious with 61 percent of the vote. Forza Italia obtained close to 24 percent of the vote and the New Centre-Right (NCD) nearly 9 percent. Grillo's M5S narrowly failed to keep their one seat in the regional parliament, obtaining less than 4 percent of the vote.

For Grillo, the latest election results are a severe setback, especially in Emilia-Romagna where his party celebrated a sharp rise in support two years ago. During its first parliamentary election in 2013 M5S secured 25.5 percent, and at the European elections in May this year it obtained over 21 percent. Since then, the party has lost a significant portion of its influence and 400,000 votes, over 280,000 in Emilia-Romagna and 120,000 in Calabria. Five parliamentary deputies and 15 senators have left the party.

Only one party was able to gain votes at the regional election: the Lega Nord, with over 19 percent. After the resignation of their seriously ill leader Umberto Bossi in 2012, the party was caught in a corruption scandal and its support fell to 4 percent. Large sections of the party left at the time to join Beppe Grillo's M5S.

The latest election results show that Bossi's successor, the Milan-based Matteo Salvini, has been able to win these layers back. To do so he employed vicious anti-immigrant propaganda and open provocations. He agitated in front of accommodation for Roma and provoked daily attacks on refugees. In Milan, he called for exclusive carriages for Italian women on public transport to protect them from foreigners.

Beppe Grillo's programme had an extremely reactionary core from the outset. As the *World Socialist Web Site* pointed out early on, Grillo had profited from the political vacuum caused by the economic crisis and the bankruptcy of the "left" with his provocative campaigns and concentration on the Internet.

Recently, he has increasingly competed with Salvini on right-wing populist themes that had previously only been associated with the Lega Nord.

He has encouraged separatism, chauvinism and even fascist propaganda. An example was a blog on Grillo's homepage containing an interview with the right-wing writer Arrigo Petacco that tried to absolve the fascist

dictator Benito Mussolini of the murder of socialist Giacomo Matteotti. Matteotti's murder by Italian fascists marked the prelude to Mussolini's dictatorship in 1924.

Another blog from Grillo raised the issue of the separation of several regions and a general decentralisation of power. In it, a situation is denounced in which "Venetians, Friulians, Tristians, Sicilians, Sardinians and Lombards don't see any point at all in remaining in this nightmare where democracy has vanished ... the Venetian republic would set an example." The "Kingdom of two Sicilians" was also mentioned, and Grillo based himself explicitly on Bosnia, which he said "is just on the other side of the Adriatic."

Grillo's followers protested over this post and wrote comments like, "I was one of your fans, and I gave you my vote. Today, after these Lega positions emerged, I will never give it to you again. I thought you wanted to change Italy. No, you want to destroy it."

It is precisely because of the increasingly open competition with the Lega Nord that Grillo is losing more of his supporters to the right-wing original. The differences between Grillo and the Lega Nord, which until now has focused on the north and called for the separation of Padua, are solely of a tactical character. Salvini has recently been mobilising people across Italy for a "League of peoples." His goal is an Italian-wide movement like France's National Front of Marine le Pen.

This illustrates the danger confronted by the working class as a result of the rise of such right-wing movements. Although the close to 30 percent of the vote given to Lega Nord candidates at the election corresponded to just 11 percent of the total electorate, the party's right-wing extremist positions correspond increasingly to the interests of the bourgeoisie.

The core of the propaganda from both the Lega Nord and Grillo's M5S is aimed at dividing the working class: native against immigrant, young against old, self-employed against employed, Italians against the rest of Europe. The division of the working class is strategically significant from the standpoint of the government and the Italian bourgeoisie. In the past, they have relied on the trade unions, the PD and its pseudo-left allies to keep control of the opposition in the working class.

Particularly in Emilia-Romagna, such a high abstention rate in an election must have set the alarm bells ringing among the bourgeoisie. Emilia-Romagna was referred to as part of the "red belt" in northern Italy during the last century, where the Italian Communist Party and its successor PDS had their strongholds. But this period is long gone.

The population has turned its back on the PD. In comparison to the European elections, the PD lost almost 800,000 votes in the regional elections, and could only hold on to the state presidency because there was no alternative.

The trade union confederations CGIL and UIL, along with the metalworkers union FIOM, have called a general strike for December 12. But workers are increasingly breaking out of the control of the traditional unions, as shown by the recent protests on November 14.

The Renzi government is continuing the social attacks of its predecessors, led by Berlusconi, Mario Monti and Enrico Letta. It is provoking ever more anger and desperation with its "reforms." Last Wednesday, the chamber of deputies voted for Renzi's Job Act. The labour market reforms as well as the election reform are to be adopted by parliament before Christmas.

The pension reform and several drastic austerity packages have already significantly worsened living conditions for workers. Precarious working conditions, unemployment, poverty among the elderly, a youth unemployment rate of 45 percent, and increasing numbers of layoffs and plant shutdowns are creating the conditions for social resistance.

The November 23 regional elections underline the urgency of building a political leadership that can mobilise the Italian working class on the basis of a socialist and internationalist programme in preparation for the coming class battles. Only the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) represents such a perspective.



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