

# Grillo's Five Star Movement wins mayoral elections in Rome and Turin

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With almost 70 percent of the vote in Sunday's run-off elections, Virginia Raggi, candidate of the Five Star Movement (M5S), has been elected mayor of Rome. Beppe Grillo's protest party also claimed a victory in the industrial city of Turin. Voter turnout reached an historic low of 50.5 percent.

The electoral victory of the M5S is in the first place a resounding defeat for the governmental policy of Matteo Renzi (Democratic Party, PD). In his third year of office, the head of government, who from the beginning presented himself as the "scrapper" of party privileges, has lost the better part of his initial fascination for the middle class.

It is increasingly clear that Renzi is playing the same role in Italy that Socialist Party (PS) politician Manuel Valls plays in France: He responds to the economic crisis with harsh attacks on the working class, the deregulation of the labour market and the enforcement of brutal pension and education reforms.

His austerity measures have done nothing to change the national debt of more than €2 trillion. They are aimed exclusively at the working population and socially vulnerable groups. The official slightly decreased unemployment rate of 11.5 percent conceals the fact that almost 36 percent of the population capable of working has been excluded from these statistics as "inactive." With a 40 percent youth unemployment rate, two out of five young people go without work, education or prospects for the future.

The trade unions and pseudo-left groups have supported the Renzi government and continue to provide political backing. Under these conditions, the working class lacks any way to articulate its opposition in a progressive way. At the moment, their protest takes the form of support for the M5S.

The high voter abstention rate also indicates

widespread dissatisfaction with all parties. On average, only half of the eligible voters in the more than 100 communities and cities in which the run-off elections took place came out to the polls. There was a 10 percent drop in turnout compared with the first round of voting.

The M5S presents itself as a pure alternative that is "neither left nor right" and declares war on the privileged old elites. In Rome in particular, attorney Virginia Raggi, 37, has pledged to take action against incompetence and corruption and to rid the "mafia capital" of waste and privilege. But Raggi offers nothing new: Three years ago, when the city was threatened with bankruptcy, it was only saved by a governmental decree, the so-called *Salva Romater*, which was bound up with severe social cuts.

Beppe Grillo now claims his movement will bring to power young, competent people who have nothing to do with the old corrupt parties. But the programme of the M5S is anything but progressive. It mixes environmentalism and grassroots democratic concepts—such as energy transition, decision making through online proceedings and public referendums—with reactionary nationalism.

The movement has a capitalist program and bases itself on small and mid-size businesses. In the fight against "waste," the M5S is ready to cut tens of thousands of jobs in the public sector. During her campaign, Virginia Raggi declared, "Today we have so many employees who aren't being utilised at all and to whom we pay salaries for nothing in return."

In the European Parliament, Beppe Grillo sits in the same fraction as Nigel Farage of the Brexit party UKIP. Like them, Grillo argues for Italy's exit from the EU and even for the reintroduction of the lira. When it comes to immigration, he adopts the tone of the

extreme right. On his blog, Grillo disputes the right of immigrant children to Italian citizenship. He “only wants to see Italians” in his movement. His latest hobbyhorse, the “citizen’s income,” a new version of Germany’s Hartz IV welfare laws, will only apply to individuals with Italian passports.

The M5S has profited from the 25-year-long decline of the Communist Party of Italy’s successor parties (the Democrats of the Left and the Democratic Party, as well as the Communist Refoundation Party and their offshoots). This was especially clear in the M5S’s election victory in Turin, where 31-year-old businesswoman Chiara Appendino was elected mayor.

Appendino won the run-off election with an almost 10 percent lead over the incumbent mayor, Piero Fassino (PD). In doing so, she brought to an end the decades-long rule of the centre-left camp. Fassino embodies in exemplary fashion the decline of the Italian left. A communist party member since the days of Enrico Berlinguer, Fassino was in the leadership of the PDS, the Democratic Party of the Left, and since 2007 the Democratic Party. He was a minister in several governments.

The disintegration of the former Communist Party of Italy and its successors was also expressed in the call of one of its prominent members, Paolo Ferrero of Communist Refoundation, for a vote in favour of the Grillo party. In a guest contribution for the *Il Fatto Quotidiano* newspaper, Ferrero wrote on the day after the first round of voting that the M5S would be “seen as the most successful instrument to replace the ruling class.”

He continued: “The elements of political ambiguity within the M5S, which have been an obstacle for a long time, now accentuate the possibility of a successful transition in a situation where the common sense of the masses does not recognise the origins of the crisis in neo-liberal politics.” According to Ferrero in a rare expression of self-awareness, anyone from the PD and all those who collaborated with the PD for years lack any genuine credibility.



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