

# Italian Prime Minister Renzi announces constitutional referendum for December

Marianne Arens  
1 October 2016

On Monday, Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi (Democratic Party, PD) announced the date for his promised referendum on fundamental constitutional reforms. Under conditions of a deep crisis of European and Italian capitalism, it will now take place at the latest possible date, December 4.

The “Renzi-Boschi referendum”—named after Renzi and his Reform Minister Maria Elena Boschi—is a step towards authoritarian forms of rule and lays the basis for fierce attacks on Italian workers. The reforms seek to ensure stable majorities for governments in a tightly run parliament. Italy’s traditional bicameral system would be broken up, the upper chamber, the Senate, significantly disempowered and the decision-making processes simplified and speeded up in parliament.

Should Renzi’s referendum pass, the House of Representatives, the lower chamber, would form the actual legislature. Only this chamber could then make laws and pass a vote of no confidence in the government. In addition, the legislative process would be accelerated: In future, the House of Representatives would have to debate a bill from the cabinet within five days and vote on it not later than 70 days. Following the constitutional amendments, a decision on combat missions by the Italian armed forces could be taken by the House of Representatives in expedited proceedings.

The upper chamber, the Senate, which had previously stood on an equal footing in the legislative process, would in future be limited to representing the regions, essentially only performing an advisory role. The number of senators would be reduced from 315 to 100. Apart from five senators appointed by the president on an honorary basis, the other senators would no longer be elected but appointed by the regional governments. They would only be permitted a “co-determining role” when it comes to constitutional amendments, or in dealing with the concerns of the regions or EU affairs.

The strong emphasis on plebiscitary elements in the Italian constitution would be pruned back. The electoral reforms introduced by the referendum go hand in hand with the so-called “italicum” and a reform of popular initiatives. In future, these would require three times as many signatures as before, i.e., 150,000 instead of 50,000. For a popular referendum to block a law already passed, 800,000 instead of 500,000 signatures would be needed. To save costs, the reforms also provide for the abolition of the provinces, with the exception of the autonomous provinces of Trento and Bolzano. The National Council for Economy and Labour (CNEL) would also be abolished.

Renzi claims that the reforms would give the country “stability.” In fact, they meet the demands of finance capital, which openly demands the establishment of authoritarian regimes in southern Europe to enforce the “reforms” necessary from their perspective against the resistance in the population.

A 2013 strategy paper by the Economic Research Europe Group of JPMorgan on “The Euro Area Adjustment” declared: “The political systems in the periphery were established in the aftermath of dictatorship, and were defined by that experience. Constitutions tend to show a strong socialist influence, reflecting the political strength that left-wing parties gained after the defeat of fascism.”

It continues: “Political systems around the periphery typically display several of the following features: weak executives; weak central states relative to regions; constitutional protection of labour rights; consensus-building systems which foster political clientalism; and the right to protest if unwelcome changes are made to the political status quo. The shortcomings of this political legacy have been revealed by the crisis.”

For a long time, Renzi has linked the reactionary referendum with his personal fate and declared, “If the

referendum fails, my political time is over.” Now he has put off the date for the vote as long as possible, since he cannot assume he will win the referendum. Renzi has the support of most of the PD, and the Civic Choice party of former Prime Minister Mario Monti. The coalition partner Area Popolare (AP), under Interior Minister Angelino Alfano, also supports the government reform.

However, Renzi’s course is increasingly reviled in the population. All his “reforms,” from the pension reforms to the “Jobs Act,” to the education reforms, have been at the expense of the workers, the old and the poor. There have been repeated strikes and protests by pilots, teachers and other sections of the working class. On Thursday evening there was a 24-hour railway strike against privatization.

The country is a social powder keg, and the severe earthquake in central Italy has further exacerbated the situation. Some four and a half million people now live in absolute poverty, and youth unemployment (officially around 40 percent) has reached astronomical levels, at 70 to 80 percent in some parts of southern Italy. The country is deeply indebted to the tune of €2.2 trillion and the debt ratio is 132 percent of gross domestic product. Italian banks are facing collapse and are burdened with worthless bonds amounting to €360 billion.

In Berlin and Brussels, concerns are spreading that the referendum could not only accelerate Renzi’s demise, but that of the EU itself. “In any case, the likely beneficiary is the euro-sceptic Five Star Movement that won the cities of Rome and Turin in the local elections in June, and is demanding a referendum on Italy’s membership of the eurozone,” *Die Zeit* commented. “By then, not only Renzi has a problem, but all of Europe. Italy is the third largest economy in the eurozone, and the monetary union would be unlikely to survive a Iexit, the departure of Italy.”

In a situation in which the Italian working class has not yet established its own revolutionary party to intervene independently in political events, only right-wing and nationalist forces can benefit from the anger against Renzi.

The leader of the Five Star Movement, Beppe Grillo, recently received unexpected support from billionaire and former prime minister Silvio Berlusconi. The former right-wing prime minister had launched the constitutional reform together with Renzi in 2014. A year later, however, the election of Sergio Mattarella as president broke the Renzi-Berlusconi pact. Since then, Berlusconi has counted as one of Renzi’s opponents and opposed the constitutional reform. He recently issued the slogan, “We

will vote No in the referendum and agree with Beppe Grillo on electoral reform with proportional representation.”

The No camp combines its referendum campaign with the worst forms of nationalism and demagoguery. This is especially true for the Lega Nord (Northern League) of Matteo Salvini. He is whipping up sentiments against foreigners and refugees, and is also drumming for a No in order to replace Renzi with an even more right-wing government. The right-wing populist forces are also demanding Italy withdraw from the EU, with Grillo calling for a referendum on membership of the eurozone.

As with the so-called Brexit referendum on UK membership of the European Union, the pseudo-left groups in Italy play a key role subordinating the working class to one or another wing of the bourgeoisie. The “left” No camp includes Sinistra Italia (SI), an amalgamation of Nichi Vendola’s SEL with a group of PD renegades around Stefano Fassina, who works closely on a European level with Oskar Lafontaine, former chairman of the Left Party in Germany; Jean-Luc Mélenchon, leader of the Left Front, French sister party of the Left Party; and Yanis Varoufakis, former finance minister in Greece’s Syriza government.

Maurizio Landini, general secretary of the metalworkers’ union FIOM, has also joined the No camp, as well as a wing of the PD led by Massimo D’Alema, the former leader of the Stalinist Italian Communist Party. The nationalist slogans of the pseudo-left hardly differ from those of their right-wing allies.

The best example of this was supplied by Paolo Ferrero, general secretary of Rifondazione Comunista (Communist Refoundation). Commenting on the referendum, he has demanded an “avalanche of votes against the mutilation of the constitution! We are saying no to this government, which, without any shame, is trampling underfoot the Charter and the sacred right of the Italian people to determine their own future.”



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**