

In run-up to constitutional referendum

Italy: Another earthquake and an impending political crisis

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Yet another earthquake shook central Italy on the evening of October 26. Two major tremors reading 5.4 and 6.1 on the Richter scale and over a hundred aftershocks affected the entire region of Marche and could also be felt in Rome. Because people were still awake and immediately ran outdoors, the only person who died as a consequence of the earthquake was an elderly man who had a heart attack.

Two months ago, several earthquakes struck the region of Gran Sasso and the villages of Amatrice, Accumoli, Pescara and Arquata. Almost 300 people were killed and over 400 injured. Numerous buildings collapsed and people spent the night in the cold and pouring rain. After Wednesday's earthquake, thousands of people are in need of emergency accommodations, drinking water, toilets, warm clothing and a new home.

Minister President Matteo Renzi (Democratic Party) promised the earthquake victims two months ago that "rebuilding has priority." However, even the damage of the earlier earthquakes had not been repaired. For example, seven years after L'Aquila was hit by an earthquake in 2009, the city centre is still one big construction site, and some of it has simply been left in ruins, empty and abandoned. Most people are still living in improvised housing that is now falling apart as well. Balconies have collapsed and the wind blows through walls and ceilings.

On account of the earthquake, Renzi interrupted his national referendum campaign tour and returned to Rome from Venice. The vote on December 4 could, however, bring about a shakeup of an entirely different kind: a political earthquake with far reaching consequences, not only for Italy, but also for the fate of the EU.

On December 4, Renzi's most important reform, the constitutional referendum, will come to a vote. If passed, it would abolish the two-house system of parliament and simplify and accelerate the decision process. The Italian government wants to use the reform to prepare for war and impending class struggles.

The government is following the dictates of finance capital, which demands the introduction of authoritarian forms of rule in order to carry out supposedly necessary "reforms" against the opposition of the population. Renzi has, for a long time, connected the passing of this reactionary referendum with his personal fate. "If the referendum fails, my political career is at an end," he has declared.

However, Renzi cannot be at all certain of the victory of the referendum. His policies in recent years and the attacks of his government on workers, pensioners and youth have enormously intensified social tensions. According to a report published by Caritas Italy on October 7, the number of people in absolute poverty has grown by 1.8 million to a total of 4.6 million in eight years. To an increasing extent, poverty affects not only southern Italy, but also the northern regions. As the report says, it affects "the entire society and not just isolated groups."

With his pension reform, his "Buona Scuola" school reform, his "Jobs Act" labour reform, he has carried out a sustained attack on basic social rights. For weeks, there have been repeated strikes and protests against the government. In September, package deliverers, truck drivers, railway workers and flight personnel employed by the airline Alitalia went on strike. On September 15, an Egyptian worker was run over and killed by a strike-breaking truck, leading to days of protests by tens of thousands of people.

On Friday, October 21, over a million workers all over Italy took part in strikes organized by the so-called rank-and-file trade unions. This included strikes at Fiat factories, in particular the FCA factory in Pomigliano near Naples.

The "rank and file" trade unions (COBAS, CUB, USB and others) have taken up these struggles because the traditional trade unions support the labour and market reforms of the Renzi government. Union bureaucrats such as CGIL head Susanna Camusso are in fundamental agreement with Renzi that the Italian economy has to be saved at the expense of

workers. The large metal working union FIOM, which belongs to CGIL, expelled all workers who took part in a boycott of the enforced Saturday shifts at Fiat.

It comes as no surprise that tens of thousands of workers are leaving the traditional unions and turning to “alternative” rank-and-file unions. However, these organizations are dominated by pseudo-left conceptions and their policies do not go beyond a nationalist and trade union perspective. The tense political situation demands an international and revolutionary program, but the “rank and file” unions close their eyes to this necessity, just like the traditional unions.

Instead, they allow right-wing forces to take the political initiative.

In effect, Lega Nord, the fascists and other right-wing radicals are responsible for a massive mobilization against the referendum. Lega Nord head Matteo Salvini has called for a blockade of several Northern Italian cities, such as Milan and Bologna, supposedly in order “to free Italy” and “to stop immigration.” They have also called on the Five Star Movement of Beppe Grillo to take part in the blockade.

Beppe Grillo has called for a “no” vote in the referendum. Grillo and his Five Star Movement could be the victors if Renzi loses the referendum on December 4. This poses a threat to the very existence of the EU.

Beppe Grillo is the most important EU ally of Nigel Farage of the UK Independence Party (UKIP). Farage was the main proponent of the Brexit movement, which achieved a majority in favour of the United Kingdom’s exit from the EU on June 23. Grillo also calls for Italy to quit the EU and the euro.

The victory of the opponents of the referendum could further intensify the crisis of the EU, which is already threatened with a split and conflicts such as the disagreement over refugees and the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) between the EU and Canada. Following the austerity diktats in Greece, Spain and Italy, growing layers of the population see the EU as the main culprit in attacks on wages, jobs and social programs.

However, the Five Star Movement does not attack the EU from the left, from the standpoint of the European working class, but from a right-wing nationalist standpoint. A national solution would make the crisis in Italy even worse. This has already been demonstrated by the deep crisis of the Italian banks, which are on the verge of collapse. The Italian banks have bad loans on their books amounting to over €360 billion.

On October 27, the troubled bank Monte dei Paschi di Siena suspended trading for the third time in a week. Its share prices moved like an extreme temperature curve and the renovation plan, to which the union had agreed, now

includes layoffs of 2,600 employees and the closing of 500 branches.

This is why, in order to win support for his referendum, Matteo Renzi is trying to portray himself as a representative of Italian interests in opposition to the EU. In the current struggle over the Italian budget, he has made an ultimatum to the EU commission, demanding that it approve Italy’s planned deficit. *La Repubblica* held a prominent interview with Economics Minister Pier Carlo Padoan, in which he warned the EU Commission: “If the EU rejects our budget, this would be the beginning of the end.”

The 2017 draft budget includes a planned deficit of over 2.3 percent of GDP in the coming year. However, for Italy and other highly indebted EU member states, the EU has only approved a maximum of 2.2 percent, instead of the usual debt ceiling of 3 percent.

However, Renzi insists on passing a more flexible budget, and justifies this with the growing number of refugees from Africa and the enormous expense of rebuilding after the earthquake. On the day of the earthquake, he said on television that, effective immediately, he would only take into account “the needs of Italian citizens, but not those of Brussels technocrats.”

Renzi’s promises are—as always—grandiose and not to be taken seriously. He has promised a significant increase in pension payments to retirees and wants to increase social welfare by €500 million. This would barely be a drop in the bucket, since even a meagre improvement of conditions for those living in poverty would, according to official numbers, require an immediate expenditure of €2 billion.



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