

Italy: Pseudo-left founds Italian Left Party

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Several hundred representatives of the Italian pseudo-left gathered in Rimini February 17-19 to found the Sinistra Italiana (Italian Left Party, SI). Its role is to defend bourgeois rule, the European Union and the euro in their deepest crisis to date.

The driving force behind the new Italian Left Party is Nichi Vendola, a former leader of the Italian Communist Party (PCI). He co-founded Rifondazione Comunista in 1991 and, in 2009, the party alliance Sinistra, Ecologia, Libertà (Left, Ecology, Freedom, SEL). In Rimini, he gathered together some 650 politicians, trade unionists and officials, mainly from the SEL and Rifondazione Comunista, as well as several defectors from Matteo Renzi's Democratic Party (PD) and Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement (M5S).

The new party has an extremely amorphous programme based on the lowest common denominator, as the name "Italian Left Party" demonstrates. The only thing of which these "lefts" are certain is their commitment to Italy. For example, it says in the party statutes, the SI is a "union of men and women who have assembled to represent labour, as it is constituted in today's Italy."

The SI is not entirely new: It has existed as a parliamentary slate for two years. Nichi Vendola brought it into being in July 2015, in order to cover up the treachery of Alexis Tsipras in Greece and establish an Italian counterpart to Greece's Syriza, Spain's Podemos and Germany's Left Party. Its predecessor was the Lista con Tsipras (List for Tsipras), an electoral alliance that contested the 2014 European elections three years ago.

In August 2015, the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote: "Vendola's support for Tsipras' austerity policies underscores that, like Tsipras in Greece, he is prepared to sacrifice all the social rights of the working class to defend the interests of European capitalism. Given the

growing crisis of the Renzi government, he wants to establish a new political vehicle to this end."

This was the focus of the congress in Rimini. The new pseudo-left party has the task of channelling opposition to the ailing centre-left government of Renzi confidante Paolo Gentiloni. Its role is to head off an independent movement of the working class by those turning to an international socialist perspective.

The new party elected Nicola Fratoianni as its secretary. The 45-year-old began his career as a youth leader in Rifondazione Comunista, the successor to the PCI, which he headed for years in Apulia before forming the SEL together with Nichi Vendola. He increasingly became the right hand of Vendola, who was regional president of the desperately poor Apulia region for 10 ten years, from 2005 to 2015.

In Rimini, Fratoianni stressed that the new party would represent "a broad political project." He promised that it would cooperate with the PD as long as this precluded Renzi's re-election. Even Vendola stressed, "Sinistra Italiana is ready to join with others." He hoped to receive 10 percent of the vote in the next elections.

Artur Scotto, SEL parliamentary group leader, also expressed a fundamental willingness to cooperate with the PD. Scotto was a rival of Fratoianni for the new party leadership, but withdrew before the SI was founded. Before the congress, Scotto said, "We have to throw ourselves into the fray and not stand on the sidelines and watch. For me, the centre-left camp is the perspective. I am looking to the post-Renzi era."

The PD is in a deep crisis and threatens to break apart after Matteo Renzi's referendum on constitutional reform was clearly lost on December 4, 2016. The clear rejection by nearly 60 percent of the electorate expressed the social opposition to the austerity measures of the Renzi government and the European Union. Renzi subsequently resigned as Italian prime

minister, leaving the post to his confidant Paolo Gentiloni.

In fact, Renzi's resignation was a manoeuvre prior to his standing again as a candidate for prime minister in early elections. But in the meantime the crisis in the PD has intensified. On February 19, the same weekend the SI was founded, Renzi resigned as party leader.

At the same time, he announced he would stand in the PD primaries on April 9. "You can force me to resign, but you cannot stop me running again," he told his inner-party opponents before he left on a trip to California.

He has been tweeting from there every day, and commented on the party crisis words like: "While politicians are arguing, I am thinking about the future" and "It's nice to be a patriot—Long live Italy." The newspaper *Il Fatto Quotidiano* speculated that Renzi wanted to transform the PD into a "party of the nation" or a "party for all."

His opponents are rallying around the former party leader Pier Luigi Bersani, who fears that in this way the ruling party will whip up the working class against it. On the TV show "Martedì," Bersani said he hoped people did not perceive the whole thing as a dispute over the person of Renzi.

Bersani, Massimo D'Alema and other PD bigwigs had demanded Renzi give up pushing for early elections and leave Paolo Gentiloni in office until the end of the legislative period in February 2018. They fear that early elections could benefit the EU opponents Beppe Grillo and the far-right Northern League. Renzi, however, has rejected this.

Bersani, D'Alema and other politicians from the early days of the Democratic Party now want to leave the PD. They have announced they will not participate in the next party congress. "The firm doesn't exist any longer," said Bersani. Even the ex-governor of Emilia Romagna, Vasco Errani, wants to leave Renzi, who had recently appointed him as special commissioner for earthquake reconstruction.

Romano Prodi, the former prime minister, European commissioner and representative of the banks, who was involved in founding the PD, recently declared that the party was committing "political suicide." It is visibly losing support in the population. The reason is the desperate social situation, a youth unemployment rate of 40 percent, rampant poverty affecting pensioners, a

wave of bankruptcies among small and medium-sized enterprises and the unresolved banking crisis.

The PD deserters and the new party SI have no progressive answer to this. They are merely trying to forestall the rapid breakup of the ruling party. Like the new Social Democratic Party chairman Martin Schulz in Germany, who allegedly wants to reverse parts of the Agenda 2010 welfare and labour "reforms" of the Schröder government, they want to support a referendum called by the Italian General Confederation of Labour (CGIL) to reverse Renzi's labour market reform, called the Jobs Act. This is all a transparent manoeuvre to maintain control over an increasingly angry population.

The founding of Sinistra Italiana serves to cover up these manoeuvres and to prevent the outbreak of open class struggles. Like Syriza in Greece, these practised bourgeois politicians are quite ready to join the government to carry out the attacks on the working class themselves. At the same time, they are driving voters towards the right-wing populists with their nationalist and pro-EU policies.

Their programme does not differ fundamentally from Grillo's Five Star Movement (M5S). This has already been shown by the fact that several M5S politicians have abandoned Grillo and joined the new SI, such as senators Francesco Campanella and Fabrizio Bocchino, and parliamentary deputies Adriano Zaccagnini, Leandro Bracco et al.

Grillo is trying to exploit the coming to power of Donald Trump for his own benefit, and is aggressively calling for elections to be held swiftly. He claims that his party is the only one that can achieve the necessary 40 percent for a one-party government. The M5S is currently polling just below 30 percent.



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