

# The protracted decline of Italy's Democratic Party

Marianne Arens  
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With the impending parliamentary elections in Italy, which must take place in May 2018 at the latest, the Democratic Party (PD), which under Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni still heads the government in Rome, confronts a similar fate as other Social Democratic parties in Europe: they are losing voters, breaking apart and sinking into insignificance.

In the regional election that took place in Sicily on November 5, the PD candidate for regional president, Fabrizio Micari, received only 19 percent of the vote, while the PD as a party received just 13 percent. This was far behind an alliance of right-wing and fascist parties, which won the election with just under 40 percent of the vote, and Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement, which received 35 percent.

The PD won the election in Sicily five years ago. But its regional president, Rosario Crocetta, did not solve any of the burning social problems. On the contrary, he imposed a harsh austerity programme that left the infrastructure—road construction, schools, garbage collection, etc.—even more neglected. Although he was elected with much premature praise as being a fighter against the mafia, he also disappointed in this regard and even attracted the attention of the state attorney.

The social situation in Sicily is catastrophic. Many of Italy's problems find their most concentrated expression here. For example, since the closure of the Fiat works on the island, young people have had hardly any job prospects. Over 70,000 young people under the age of 30 have left Sicily in the last year.

The vacuum left by the politics of the PD has been exploited by right-wing forces. While more than half of all voters stayed at home, and turnout reached a historic low of 46.5 percent, the 81-year-old ex-Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, who is not allowed to hold political office himself until 2019 due to accounting fraud and

judicial corruption, celebrated something of a comeback. He organized a right-wing alliance between his own Forza Italia, Lega Nord and the fascist party Fratelli d'Italia and even acted as a campaigner. The banker Sebastiano ("Nello") Musumeci, who comes from the post-fascist Alleanza Nazionale and calls himself a "decent fascist," was elected Regional President.

The election in Sicily reflects the situation throughout the country. Here too the Democratic Party is in free fall.

Less than a year ago, on December 4, 2016, then Prime Minister Matteo Renzi lost the referendum on constitutional reform. He resigned, leaving the affairs of state to his close confidant Paolo Gentiloni, but hoped for a comeback in April when he was elected chairman of the PD.

The municipal elections in June then revealed a similar picture to that in Sicily: with an extremely low turnout, the government camp collapsed. The PD lost numerous municipalities to the Lega Nord or the Five Star Movement.

In parallel with this, the PD has eroded in parliament. In February, a group of PD parliamentary deputies joined Nichi Vendola's newly formed party Sinistra Italiana. Shortly thereafter, former party leader Pierluigi Bersani and other parliamentarians left the PD and founded the Movimento Democratico e Progressista (Mdp). They were followed by Giuseppe Pisapia with the newly founded "Insieme" (Together). And most recently, Pietro Grasso, the party's prominent senate president, declared his resignation from their parliamentary group on October 26. In Sicily, a section of the renegades did not support the PD candidate, but the slate of Claudio Fava, the son of a mafia victim, which contributed to the poor result.

According to current opinion polls, the PD has hardly any chance of heading the next government. With just under 30 percent support, the alliance of parties headed by the PD stands well behind Berlusconi's right-wing alliance (36 percent) and just ahead of the Five Star Movement (28 percent).

The right will also benefit from the new election law, called the "Rosatellum," which the PD backed in October, along with the right-wing. The mixture of first-past-the-post and proportional representation favours the formation of electoral alliances and should actually isolate the Five Star Movement, which has refused to join any alliances so far. But now it is favouring the right-wing, who can form slates without first agreeing on a common programme.

The deeper reason for the demise of the PD is the anti-working-class policies it has been prosecuting for 25 years, which have completely discredited it in the working class. The traditional Italian party system imploded at the beginning of the 1990s in a huge corruption scandal. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the influential Communist Party (PCI) also dissolved itself. Its successor party, the PDS, then took on the task of stabilizing Italian capitalism.

While the right-wing governments under Silvio Berlusconi were busily lining their own pockets, the governments supported by or led by the PDS saw their task as bringing order to the public finances at the expense of the working class. The depression of wages and destruction of social rights and achievements bear their signature. In this, the PD was assisted by pseudo-left organizations such as Rifondazione Comunista, which even joined the government of former European Commission President Romano Prodi in 2006, thus sealing their own fate.

In these 25 years, the PD has moved further and further to the right and gradually absorbed into its ranks the remnants of the Christian Democrats, who, under Matteo Renzi and Paolo Gentiloni, finally took the lead.

The PD has systematically attacked the social and democratic rights of workers, and is in no way inferior to the right-wing extremists in terms of militarism and xenophobia. For example, Interior Minister Marco Minniti (PD) is responsible for a deal with the Libyan Coast Guard, which employs the most brutal means to prevent refugees crossing the Mediterranean to Italy.

Reactionary right-wing forces then moved into the political vacuum that this created. On the one hand, the Five Star Movement—which pretends to be an opponent of the establishment, but in key issues such as social and refugee policy, represents a right-wing, neoliberal and racist program—was able to profit from it. On the other hand, right-wing forces such as the Lega Nord (Northern League), which now calls itself just "Lega", acts as a national party and follows the example of the French National Front, are gaining ground.

The Italian sociologist Ilvo Diamanti describes the decline of the PD as a "crisis of a mass party, which apparently has no answers to the needs of society today." In this he hits the nail on the head. The parties which once called themselves "left-wing", have abandoned any interest in the social issues facing the mass of the population. Instead, they represent the interests of capital and wealthy layers of the middle class.

The rise of right-wing and fascist forces poses a great danger. It can only be prevented by building a revolutionary socialist movement in the working class that is independent of the Social Democrats, the unions and their pseudo-left appendages.



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