# The Italian elections: A perspective for the working class

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All the political problems that confront workers and young people across Europe are expressed in concentrated form in the elections to be held in Italy this Sunday.

The elections take place against the backdrop of a deepening social crisis. According to official statistics, 8 percent of the population lives in "absolute poverty." The official unemployment rate is 11 percent and has hit 30 percent among youth. Many people who eke out a meagre existence without regular employment are not even counted in these statistics. At 58 percent, Italy has one of the lowest employment rates in the euro zone.

The second factor hanging ominously over the election is the growing danger of war. The United States, the leading power within NATO, is threatening to go to war with Russia and China. The European Union, of which Italy was a founding member, is preparing to assert its great power ambitions and to wage wars in the Middle East, Africa, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia under German and French leadership. Europe needs "a shared projection of power in the world," declared German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel this month at the Munich Security Conference. It cannot make do without military rearmament, "because as the only vegetarian, we will find it damn hard in the world of carnivores."

There is strong opposition to both social inequality and war in Italy. Class tensions are at the breaking point. The Italian working class possesses a long tradition of militant struggle, stretching back to the *Resistenza*, the working-class struggle against Mussolini's fascists. Fifteen years ago, in Rome alone three million took to the streets to protest against the war in Iraq. But this opposition finds no political expression in the current election campaign.

The chief reason for this is the rightward shift of political tendencies and parties that once portrayed themselves as "left" or "socialist." Italy's horrendous levels of unemployment and poverty are largely the product of policies pursued by so-called centre-left governments. While the right-wing governments under Silvio Berlusconi were characterised by unrestrained corruption and self-enrichment, the names of the centre-left prime ministers Romano Prodi, Massimo D'Alema and Matteo Renzi are inseparable from public spending cuts and austerity directed against the working class.

An especially despicable role was played by parties like *Rifondazione Comunista* and *Sinistra Ecologia Libertà* (SEL), which recruited their members from sections of the former Communist Party, petty-bourgeois protest parties, and the trade unions. While they attempted to dominate the protests against social attacks and war, they always backed the capitalist state and government when they came under pressure from below. In 2006, *Rifondazione* even entered the hated Prodi government.

More than 25 years of experience with these tendencies, which have repeatedly regrouped and renamed themselves, has irrevocably demonstrated that these are not left-wing or socialist working-class organisations. Instead, they are right-wing parties of the upper-middle class and union bureaucracy, which always defend the capitalist order against a threat from below.

Some of them are now participating in the election under the name *Potere al Popolo* (Power to the people). This is an alliance of political bankrupts whose main task is to discredit socialism. Besides Podemos (Spain), Die Linke (Germany) and *La France insoumise* (France) of Jean-Luc Mélenchon, one of their role models is Greece's Syriza, led by Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras, who has imposed the brutal austerity

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diktats of the Troika on the Greek working class.

The bankruptcy of the so-called “Left” is the reason for the rise of the Five Star Movement (M5S) led by the comedian Beppe Grillo. In 2014, M5S won a quarter of all votes after Mario Monti, another prime minister supported by the centre-left parties, offloaded the impact of the global economic crisis onto the working class by enforcing brutal austerity measures. Grillo’s success was due above all to his tireless and repeated denunciations of the political elite’s corruption.

However, it is now obvious that M5S is a right-wing, bourgeois party. This is demonstrated by M5S’ support for anti-immigrant chauvinism, its alliance with Britain’s UKIP and the Alternative for Germany at the European level, and its involvement in corruption in cities like Rome where it is in government. Two days after the announcement of the election date, M5S also struck a passage from its constitution prohibiting it from forming coalitions with other parties.

“It is time to enter government,” stated lead M5S candidate Luigi Di Maio. “We will not leave Italy in chaos, but issue an appeal to all political forces on election night and initiate discussions.” Di Maio has not declared who his favoured partner would be. But all parties are in principle potential candidates, including the far-right Lega and Berlusconi’s right-wing Forza Italia.

If M5S is leading the polls with almost 30 percent of the vote, it does so only because there exists no serious left-wing alternative capable of mobilising the working class against capitalism and war.

Social anger is at the boiling point. For this reason, all parties have focused their election campaigns on agitating against refugees and immigrants. This anti-refugee agitation is aimed at dividing the working class, and directing the anger of the exploited and oppressed against the most vulnerable section of the population. At the same time, it is encouraging and strengthening right-wing fascist tendencies, which are raising their heads with growing confidence.

The 81-year-old Berlusconi, who is barred from standing due to a tax fraud conviction, has aligned his Forza Italia with the far-right Lega and the neo-fascist Fratelli d’Italia. This coalition currently leads in the polls. It is benefiting from the current Democratic Party (PD) government’s xenophobic policies, including the arming of militias in Libya and the construction of concentration camps to block refugees from crossing to Italy.

Since the beginning of February, when a Lega supporter fired indiscriminately on immigrants in the town of Macerata, fierce conflicts between racists and antifascists have dominated the election campaign. Last Sunday 100,000 demonstrated in Rome against racism and fascism, while in Milan 50,000 attended a xenophobic rally.

The elections on 4 March will intensify Italy’s social and political crisis. While the PD, its allies, and to a lesser extent Berlusconi and M5S promote the EU and its austerity policies, the Lega and fascistic groups attack it from the standpoint of Italian nationalism. Both policies lead down a blind alley and contain immense dangers.

The danger of war, the rise of the far-right and fascist forces, and the attacks on democratic and social rights can only be stopped by a movement that mobilises the revolutionary potential of the Italian, European and international working class. This requires the building of an Italian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

The sections of the ICFI, the Socialist Equality Parties, are the only political tendency that has defended the Marxist programme of socialist internationalism against social democracy, Stalinism and their pseudo-left supporters.

We fight for a programme that links the struggle against war, fascism and social attacks with the fight against their source: the capitalist profit system. Not a single social problem can be resolved without expropriating the major banks, corporations and super-rich, and organising society according to social need rather than the accumulation of private profit. Our answer to the European Union is not the strengthening of the nation state, but the United Socialist States of Europe.

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