

Why the far-right won in Italy

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The results of Italy's March 4 parliamentary elections must be taken as a warning by the European and international working class. The collapse of the official "left"—the Democratic Party (PD) and its pseudo-left appendages—has led to an electoral victory for the far right, including the Five Star Movement (M5S), led by comedian Beppe Grillo, and the extreme-right Lega, formerly the Lega Nord.

Notwithstanding their demagogic social promises, these far-right parties will intensify the anti-working class policies of the PD government just voted out of office, including the assault on refugees and immigrants. Lega leader Matteo Salvini threatened during the election campaign to deport half a million immigrants if his party came to power.

Other Lega politicians want to segregate train cars on the basis of skin colour and religion. They bluster about the supposed extermination of the white race due to an invasion of refugees. The M5S, which initially focused chiefly on corruption within the established parties, has long been agitating against refugees.

The ability of the far-right to so aggressively raise its head in Italy, a country whose working class has long and militant anti-fascist traditions, testifies to the utter bankruptcy of the official "left." The racist and fascist policies pursued by the right-wing parties are not supported by the broad mass of workers. Just days before the election, 100,000 people demonstrated in Rome against racism and fascism. The votes for Lega and M5S are largely an expression of hatred of the established parties, which have presided over a social catastrophe and supported the deeply despised war policies of NATO and the European Union.

In the United States, the close ties of the Democrats and their presidential candidate Hillary Clinton to Wall Street and the military/intelligence apparatus paved the way for Trump to enter the White House. In Europe, social democratic parties have lost the support of the

working class due to their pursuit of neo-liberal policies.

In every case, it is the far-right that has benefited. In France, the National Front came in second place in last year's election; in Germany, the far-right ultra-nationalist Alternative for Germany entered parliament for the first time, and in Austria, the Freedom Party (FPÖ) shares government power.

The growth of the right wing due to the anti-working class policies of the nominal "left" parties is especially pronounced in Italy. Since the 1990s, the successor organisations to the Italian Communist Party have repeatedly enforced the interests of the financial markets and the European Union's austerity dictates against bitter opposition from the working class.

Over the past six years, four successive prime ministers—the technocrat Mario Monti, who was backed by the Democrats, and the three PD prime ministers (Enrico Letta, Matteo Renzi and Paolo Gentiloni) have rolled back the historic gains of the workers' movement and slashed social benefits.

The consequences of these policies are seen in Italy's disastrous social conditions, with 10 million people living in poverty, 7.5 million unemployed or underemployed and 10 million without healthcare. The official "left" has presided over a dramatic redistribution of income and wealth from the bottom to the top. Today, the richest 1 percent of the population owns 240 times as much wealth as the poorest 20 percent.

The Five Star Movement and the Lega, which together won almost half of all votes cast, appealed to popular anger against the government and the ruling elite. Both parties attacked the EU, promoted nationalism and scapegoated refugees. Lega, whose stronghold is in wealthier areas of northern Italy, combined these demagogic calls with demands for tax cuts. The Five Star Movement, which was most

successful in the impoverished south, has pledged to fight for a guaranteed basic income and better pensions—promises it has no intention of keeping.

The pseudo-left organisations, which contested the election as the Potere al Popolo (Power to the People) alliance, also bear responsibility for the rise of the extreme right. These tendencies portray themselves as “left-wing” and “anti-capitalist,” but have for years supported the right-wing policies of the PD and the trade unions. The driving force behind Potere al Popolo was Rifondazione Comunista, a party that used its influence in the 1990s to prop up bourgeois governments and ultimately entered the hated centre-left government of Romano Prodi.

Potere al Popolo’s international models include parties such as Spain’s Podemos, Jean-Luc Melenchon’s Unsubmissive France, and Greece’s Syriza, which came to power by promising to end European Union austerity and has since imposed more brutal social attacks than its predecessors. These betrayals have repulsed workers and young people, and—in the absence of a true Marxist and socialist alternative—driven desperate sections of the population to vote for parties such as the M5S and Lega. Potere al Popolo polled little more than 1 percent in the election.

The collapse of the official Italian “left” and its pseudo-left appendages underscores the fact that the fight against the growth of the far-right and the turn of the ruling elites to war, fascism and dictatorship can be stopped only by a revolutionary socialist movement of the working class. The growing number of strikes and working class protests across Europe as well as in Asia and the US shows that the conditions for the emergence of such a movement are ripening internationally.

The Italian election marks the beginning of a new period of political crises and class struggles. It has intensified the crisis of the European Union. The formation of a new government could drag on for months, possibly resulting in new elections. Italy’s banking system faces the threat of complete collapse. While the ruling elites are seeking to remilitarize Europe and crack down on social and democratic rights, political and social opposition is growing throughout the continent.

Amid the rise of German and Italian fascism during the 1930s, Leon Trotsky wrote that the “*political* situation as a whole is chiefly characterized by a

historical crisis of the *leadership* of the proletariat.” This remains the most urgent question today.

Everything now depends on the construction of a Marxist party to mobilise the revolutionary potential of the Italian, European and international working class. This means building sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International in Italy and throughout Europe.



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