

Italy: Mass demonstration in Rome against right-wing government

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On Saturday, February 9, the first major national demonstration against the right-wing government of Lega and the Five-Star Movement took place in Rome. According to the organizers, 200,000 participants marched through Rome under the slogan “A future for work.” The three trade union umbrella organizations CGIL, CISL and UIL had called the protest.

The demonstration was marked by an obvious contradiction. The large number of participants shows that the international class struggle is also awakening in Italy. The march was supported by angry workers, retirees and groups of school students who wanted to fight the government’s right-wing course. Some of the banners read: “Hands off pensions,” “Less state [attacks] against social networks—more welfare state,” and “stop racism.”

But the initiators of the demonstration—union leaders, Democratic Party (PD) representatives and pseudo-left politicians—lent the rally a pro-business orientation. They even managed the feat of attacking the ultra-right Lega/Five-Star government from the right.

The Conte government, which took over government in June last year, is the most right-wing Italian government since the fall of the fascist regime of Mussolini in 1945. It is pursuing a chauvinist, xenophobic course, expanding the military and the police state and driving tens of thousands of migrants into illegality.

The government wants to begin paying its so-called “citizens income” shortly before the European elections in May. However, this is far from providing an unconditional basic income for all, as was promised in the general election campaign. Like the Hartz IV welfare and labour “reforms” in Germany, the “citizens income” of €780 maximum, which applies only to Italian citizens, serves the state as a whip to force the

needy to undertake any work offered and to lower wages overall. As a result, the government has met with increasing resistance among working people.

The union leaders who spoke at the rally on Saturday criticized the government from the standpoint of that wing of Italian capital that works closely with the European Union and has carried out massive social cuts over the past three decades, supported by the Democratic Party.

They argue like worried business leaders and accuse the government of leading the country into recession with unrealistic projects. “For months, the decline in industrial production points to the risk of a recession in Italy,” the CGIL said in its call for the demonstration. At the rally, Maurizio Landini, CGIL Secretary-General, called for more investment. “The bottom line is investment: without a specific plan of public and private investment, you will not be able to get work done.”

Landini, the former head of the metal workers federation FIOM, became Secretary-General of the CGIL in January 2019. In addition to the two other union leaders, Carmelo Barbagallo (UIL) and Annamaria Furlan (CISL), the former CGIL leaders Guglielmo Epifani and Sergio Cofferati marched with him at the head of the demonstration. Both represent a split from the PD: Epifani stands for the party MDP-Articolo Uno, and Cofferati for the Free and Equals (Liberi e Uguali, LeU). In addition, prominent PD politicians, such as current PD chief Maurizio Martina and former head of government and PCI leader Massimo D’Alema, also took part in the demonstration.

Together with these union bureaucrats and representatives of former PD governments, employers and a president of the business association

Confindustria also participated. Ermanno Bellettini, head of Confindustria in Romagna, criticized the government's halting of several projects, such as oil and gas exploration off the coast of Italy, justifying the collaboration with the unions by saying, "We too are equally concerned."

The main speech at Piazza San Giovanni in Laterano was given by Annamaria Furlan, leader of the Catholic CISL. She too, spoke in tune with the national interests of Italian business. "The Italian working people love Italy," announced Furlan. But under the current government, industrial production was in decline and economic output was declining, she said. "The only thing that keeps growing is the spread," the union president announced. The "spread" is stock market jargon referring to the interest differential between Italian and German government securities.

Furlan appealed to the government to work with the unions. "We have provided important suggestions on how to get the country back on track ... We want economic growth, because without growth there is no work ... without growth there is no future for our country."

These were not the words of a representative of the working class but of the Italian ruling class. The close partnership of the three big trade union federations—CGIL, CISL and UIL—with representatives of Italian capital and the PD camp has a long tradition. It made possible the social attacks of earlier governments and paved the way for today's Lega/Five-Star government.

In a TV interview in 2016, former Prime Minister and EU Commissioner Mario Monti confirmed the crucial role the unions played in the introduction of the hated Fornero pension reform, reversing in one fell swoop the old-age security that Italian workers had fought for after the fall of fascism in 1945. When he introduced the pension reform by decree in December 2011, union leaders did not seize the opportunity for social revolt. "No other country has implemented such a drastic pension reform so easily," Monti gleefully noted.

The rise of the Five-Star movement from nothing is a result of this class collaboration, which is fully supported by the pseudo-left organizations. For example, Rifondazione Comunista called for support for the demonstration on February 9, without saying a word of criticism about its political line.

A break with these organizations and the trade unions is the most important precondition for fighting social attacks and the rise of the right. As long as they suppress the working class's preparedness to fight and divert it into the dead end of class collaboration, the right-wing can benefit from growing disappointment and anger.

This was shown the day after the demonstration in Rome, in the results of the regional election in Abruzzo, which had been shaken by devastating earthquakes in 2009 and 2016. The right-wing camp won the election with 49 percent and its top candidate, Marco Marsilio of the fascist Fratelli d'Italia, is the new regional president.

The Lega, which supported Marsilio's candidacy, was the strongest single party, with 27.9 percent. In contrast, the votes of the Five-Star Movement halved. At 19.3 percent, it did not receive half as much as in the last regional election in 2014 (40 percent). The so-called "centre-left" alliance under the leadership of the Democratic Party (PD) received only 31.2 percent, the PD alone just 11 percent.

A year ago, Beppe Grillo's Five-Star Movement had risen to become the country's strongest single party. It won the parliamentary election in 2018 with almost a third of the vote. But despite claiming to be "neither right nor left," it entered a governing coalition with the far-right Lega, who have used it as a stepping-stone for its further advancement. Meanwhile, the Lega is by far the strongest single party.



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