

The political crisis in Italy

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The political crisis in Italy has an international character, regardless of its national peculiarities. The country's ruling class is responding to growing social tensions by moving toward authoritarian and fascist rule. Similar symptoms of a deeply sick society can be found in more or less pronounced forms in every capitalist country. The problems and tasks facing the international working class as a whole are revealed in Italy as if under a microscope.

After 14 months of joint government, right-wing Lega leader Matteo Salvini has denounced the alliance with the populist Five Star Movement (M5S) and called for new elections. Based on good polling data, he hopes to form a government, that he will dominate, with the Fratelli d'Italia. The latter stands in the direct historical continuity of Italian fascism. In the last European elections, it even sent a great-grandson of the fascist dictator Benito Mussolini (Cesare Mussolini) into the race.

There is no resistance against this rightward development on the part of the so-called centre-left parties. On the contrary. The Democrats (PD)—whose origins go back to the Italian Communist Party, dissolved in 1991—attack Salvini from the right. They want to prevent new elections, because otherwise the adoption of the budget for the coming year would be jeopardized. To this end, they are now working with the M5S, which until recently they had described as a “right-wing extremist movement” that “poses a threat to democracy and Europe.”

To meet the European Union budget requirements, €23 billion must be saved. Former Prime Minister Matteo Renzi (PD) accuses Salvini of jeopardizing this goal because he wants to reverse the pension cuts decided by Renzi's government. He also accuses Salvini of being close to Russia.

On the other hand, Renzi expressly defends Salvini's inhumane refugee policy, with which he has been

whipping up the most backward, racist sentiments for months. You had to be “intellectually honest” here, he told the French newspaper *Le Monde*. It was not “a problem between the PD, M5S and Lega, but between Europe and Africa.”

Renzi's remarks are symptomatic of the relationship with Salvini. The Lega leader is not an opponent of the ruling elites, but merely the most aggressive representative of their general turn to authoritarian rule.

Before Salvini developed the Lega Nord into a national right-wing party, it had been a coalition partner of Silvio Berlusconi for a total of ten years—a coalition that in turn belonged to the European People's Party group of German Chancellor Angela Merkel. Salvini's inhumane refugee policy, which literally runs over dead bodies, openly propagates what the European Union has been practising for a long time by sealing its borders and transforming the Mediterranean into a mass grave.

The fact Salvini is even able to win votes with his rightist demagoguery is due to the bitterness and frustration resulting from decades of “left-wing” austerity.

Since the early 1990s, when the Christian Democrats and Socialists sank in a whirlpool of corruption, Italian politics have followed a regular pattern. Right-wing governments led by media billionaire Berlusconi alternated with so-called centre-left governments, led either by technocrats or by the PD itself. While the former generously handed out money to the party's corrupt clientele, the latter cut spending again at the expense of the working class.

This policy was covered up by the trade unions and several pseudo-left parties (Rifondazione Comunista, SEL, Sinistra Italiana, etc.), which suppressed every independent movement of the working class and helped the centre-left governments, if necessary, to gain a majority.

The result has been a social disaster. At just under 10 percent, the Italian unemployment rate is the third highest in Europe and rises to over 28 percent among young people. The pension system was shattered by PD governments after the financial crisis of 2008, the labour laws eroded, the growth of precarious work encouraged, and the net income of the lower groups reduced by up to 25 percent. Nevertheless, public debt has reached a record 135 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) and the Italian banking system is on the brink of collapse.

The conflicts between Salvini's Lega, Renzi's PD and the other establishment parties are purely tactical. They revolve around *how* best to enforce social attacks on the working class, and on foreign policy issues, in particular the attitude toward the European Union and Russia. There is consensus on the need for further social attacks, in the face of the banking crisis and a looming international recession.

The parallels with other countries, especially the US, are obvious. Donald Trump, a representative of the ruling elites, has used the social cuts implemented by President Barack Obama to channel frustration with the social catastrophe into reactionary channels and mobilize fascist elements. In Germany, the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) owes its rise to a conspiracy within the state apparatus, in particular the secret service, and the support of other parties.

In the Italian parliamentary election of March 2018, the Five-Star Movement filled the political vacuum left by the Democrats and the pseudo-lefts. It proclaimed itself an anti-establishment party, claiming to be "neither left nor right" and became the strongest party, with a 33 percent vote share. But within a short time it confirmed the Marxist insight that the petty bourgeoisie is incapable of independent politics and, in times of crisis, works with the most reactionary sections of the bourgeoisie if the working class cannot show a progressive way out of the social impasse.

The M5S acted as "stirrup holders" for Salvini and supported every measure, even the most reactionary, of the interior minister. Many voters turned away from the M5S. One and a half years later, it achieved only 18 percent in the polls, while Lega's result more than doubled to 37 percent.

However, electoral votes and opinion poll results are not synonymous with a fascist mass movement. The

Italian working class has repeatedly reacted with militant strikes and political protests against social and political attacks. And there is a powerful anti-fascist tradition, which goes back to the resistance against Hitler and Mussolini, and which years of political decline could not stifle.

This powerful potential has to be unleashed. This is the only way to fight and defeat the fascist threat. This presupposes several things:

1. The working class is an international class. It is closely linked together worldwide through the production process. Hundreds of thousands of Italian workers and young people work, study and train in other countries. This must be the basis for a political offensive against the real danger. Workers must unite across Europe and internationally, and categorically reject any form of national, racial and other division.

2. The fight against the right requires a socialist program. It is impossible to avert the danger of fascism and war without eradicating their cause, the capitalist profit system, and breaking the power of the banks and corporations.

3. It is impossible to oppose the right and the fascists without politically breaking with the Social Democrats, the unions and their pseudo-left hangers on. Subordination to these organizations and their electoral support as allegedly the "lesser evil" weakens the working class and strengthens the fascists. The Italian experience has just confirmed this.

4. The working class needs its own international revolutionary party. The number of strikes and mass demonstrations are increasing worldwide, but they lack a political perspective and leadership. The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) is the only political party in the world to defend the Marxist program of world socialist revolution against all attacks. The establishment of a section of the ICFI in Italy is urgently needed.



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