

Italy's Five Star populists and social democrats try to form shaky coalition government

Mike Head
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Despite denouncing each other vehemently until days ago, the leaders of Italy's "centre-left" opposition Democratic Party (PD) and the populist Five Star Movement yesterday agreed to form a coalition government. Their sudden alliance is an attempt to prevent early elections triggered by last week's departure of the far-right Lega party from its 14-month coalition administration with Five Star.

Reuters reported that the financial markets and the European political establishment greeted the news enthusiastically, "betting that Italy will get a fiscally prudent government." Elections could be forestalled until 2023, while deficit-cutting austerity measures are imposed. Together the two parties would have a narrow majority in parliament. But the proposed partnership is likely to prove highly unstable and crisis-ridden.

In the first place, the two parties have not even agreed on a shared policy platform and team of ministers. Five Star chief Luigi Di Maio and his PD counterpart Nicola Zingaretti pledged to find common ground "for the good of the country." Yet both parties are committed to further harsh spending cuts directed against the working class under conditions of high unemployment, worsening social inequality and budget-slashing dictates from the European Union (EU).

President Sergio Mattarella, himself from the PD, was widely expected to grant lawyer Giuseppe Conte, the existing Five Star-anointed prime minister, a mandate to form a new government today. Mattarella had been meeting party leaders in emergency talks to head off the capitalist elite's latest political crisis, which was provoked by Lega leader Matteo Salvini, who quit as interior minister and tabled a no-confidence motion against the government.

Despite these manoeuvres at the highest levels of the Italian ruling class, the tentative accord could unravel quickly. Unexpectedly, the founder of Five Star, Beppe Grillo issued a statement late on Wednesday saying the ministers should be technocrats and not elected politicians. Grillo, who came to prominence by presenting Five Star as an "anti-establishment" movement, evidently fears a backlash from the base it cultivated on that basis.

In a related complication, Five Star has said it will put any deal with the PD to an online vote of its members. Many Five Star supporters have taken to social media to denounce such a pact with the party that Five Star has in the past derided as part of the "establishment."

Even if a government can be formed, it will be on a collision course with the working class. The next government must present a budget that complies with European Union deficit guidelines by October 15. To do so, €23 billion must be saved, which will require massive further cuts to social spending at the expense of working class households.

That conflict could be cynically exploited by the Lega and its allies, which would be nominally in opposition, to divert the immense social discontent in reactionary nationalist and authoritarian directions, as the fascist dictator Benito Mussolini did in the 1920s and 1930s.

Nervous about the political instability in Europe's fourth largest economy, the corporate media internationally claimed that the new coalition could sideline Salvini and the fascistic "hard right." The *New York Times* said the "sudden turnabout in Italy's politics" was "a relief to the European establishment after 14 months of euroskeptic provocations, anti-

migrant crackdowns and flouting of the [EU] bloc's financial rules."

In reality, the enforcement of the EU's dictates, on top of the partnership between the two parties, is more likely to further discredit both the PD and Five Star. It also will open the door for Salvini and his allies—the billionaire Forza Italia leader, Silvio Berlusconi, and Fratelli d'Italia, the direct successor to Mussolini's fascist party—to escalate their anti-refugee and nationalistic agitation, while posturing as opponents of the austerity offensive.

Salvini is a professed admirer of US President Donald Trump. In typical demagogic rhetoric, Salvini yesterday declared that the new coalition was likely hatched in France, at last weekend's G7 summit, at which Conte represented Italy. Conte, Salvini charged, was a prime minister "brought to you by Paris, Berlin, and Brussels." Salvini's Lega won 34 percent of the vote in May's elections for the European Parliament by railing against the EU as an oppressor of Italian sovereignty.

Salvini also branded the new government alliance a "Monti encore." He was referring to the technocratic Prime Minister Mario Monti, who governed from 2011 to 2013. Backed by the PD and other parliamentary parties, Monti inflicted on the working class the burden of the 2008–09 global financial breakdown and the subsequent Italian debt crisis, including by raising the retirement age, increasing taxes and attacking working conditions via "labour market reforms."

The PD—whose origins go back to the Stalinist Italian Communist Party, dissolved in 1991—has attacked Salvini from the right. It sought to prevent new elections, because otherwise the adoption of the EU-driven budget for the coming year would be jeopardised. Former Prime Minister Matteo Renzi (PD) accused Salvini of wanting to reverse the pension cuts decided by Renzi's 2014–16 government.

Far from opposing Salvini's xenophobic line, the PD also set the course for it. Salvini's predecessor as interior minister, Marco Minniti, first sealed off the Mediterranean Sea and turned it into a mass grave three years ago, in cooperation with the Libyan coastguard. Moreover, every government in Europe is pursuing similarly vicious anti-refugee measures.

Salvini is only able to win votes with his demagoguery due to the disaffection resulting from decades of "left-

wing" austerity. Since the early 1990s, governments led or backed by the PD have alternated with openly right-wing governments, many led by Berlusconi, each one enriching the wealthy elite at the expense of the working class.

For decades, the Italian working class has repeatedly reacted with militant strikes and political protests, and there is a powerful anti-fascist tradition, which goes back to the resistance against Hitler and Mussolini. This resistance has been stifled, again and again, by the PD and its trade union and pseudo-left accomplices, making the development of a genuine socialist and internationalist party an urgent necessity.



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