

The significance of Italy's Sardines movement

Marc Wells

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In less than two months, Italy's Sardines movement has gained international visibility. Through the use of Facebook and other social media, it has organized flash mobs and protests throughout Italy, attracting hundreds of thousands of participants. It is now planning a national congress in March.

The initiative began in mid-November, when former deputy prime minister Matteo Salvini, leader of the fascist Lega, organized an event in the city of Bologna to launch the candidacy of Lega's Lucia Borgonzoni for Emilia-Romagna's presidency in the regional elections taking place Sunday, January 26. The protest rapidly spread to other Italian and European cities. Last Sunday, a week before the regional elections, another 40,000 joined a Sardines' rally in Bologna.

This turnout is one reflection of deeply rooted anti-fascist sentiments in the Italian working class. It is an expression of massive social anger, coming amid a global resurgence of the class struggle. However, the perspective and politics of those directing it and manipulating it behind the scenes lead to a dead end as they are opposed to an independent struggle of workers against capitalism, which is the only way to defeat fascism.

Since the formation of Italian regions 50 years ago, Emilia-Romagna has always been ruled by the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and the parties that replaced it after its dissolution, the Democratic Party (PD) and its petty-bourgeois allies. The historical betrayals of the PCI and its successors opened the path to reactionary local administrations and made the region vulnerable to the influence of fascist politicians such as Salvini.

The immediate aim of the Sardines is to prevent an election victory of the Lega's candidate Borgonzoni against the incumbent regional president Stefano Bonaccini, a Democrat. That is, they are trying to keep in power the very forces whose policies paved the way for Salvini.

The movement was initiated by four youth (Mattia Santori, Roberto Morotti, Giulia Trappoloni and Andrea Garreffa), who created a Facebook page titled "6000 sardine contro Salvini" (6,000 sardines against Salvini). Their announcement called for "No flag, no political party, no insults. Create your own sardine and participate in the first fish revolution in history." The name of their initiative seeks to promote the idea that they would fill squares like sardines, and, like sardines, they would advance as one large sardine family.

The manifesto they published in the immediate aftermath of their first organized event is a mild complaint against the right-wing populism of Salvini's Lega. They lament the hatred and the lies propagated by the fascist organization and its leaders, their vulgar and offensive language, the way they ridicule serious subjects.

There is no programmatic demand in the manifesto, only a generally romantic but vapid language about the passion for beauty, nonviolence, creativity and the ability to listen. Sardines leader Santori articulated that the movement is "against no one, we tried to awaken a people tired of seeing their values stepped on." In more recent days, in a widely broadcast message Santori spoke of "a reaffirmation of democracy: we are anti-fascist, pro-equality, against intolerance, against homophobia."

On December 14, a hundred thousand protested in Rome against hatred, fascism and discrimination. The rally opened with a Sardines organizer's

statement: "We are taking back the squares of the left." Carla Nespolo, president of the National Association of Italian Partisans, stated: "The Italian Constitution is not neutral to fascism, it is anti-fascist."

At the rally, Santori presented the first programmatic "demands" of the movement: "Those elected must pursue politics, not election campaigns ... Anyone appointed to the office of prime minister must communicate only on institutional channels ... We demand transparency on the political use of social media ... We demand that the media protect, defend and approximate truth and translate this effort in messages truthful to the facts ..."

He continued: "We demand that violence be excluded from political tones and content in every form ... We demand that the 'Security Decree' be revised focusing not on fear, but a desire to build an all-inclusive society that understands diversity as wealth, not as a threat." Santori concluded: "We believe in institutions and we think politics can be ameliorated by citizens' participation."

One may ask why hundreds of thousands of people would take to the streets within a few weeks and join dozens of protests throughout Italy on the basis of such limited perspective. It makes no reference to social inequality, and there is not a word about ongoing and potential wars, nor anything about attacks on democratic rights beyond a perfunctory reference to a review of the reactionary "Security Decree."

A chasm separates the Sardines' insipid program from the political mood of the population. One confirmation of this is the approval they have received from parties and organizations across Italy's bankrupt political establishment.

First, the ruling Five Star Movement (M5S) has openly participated in Sardines events, aiming to revive M5S's declining influence among workers and students. Speaking to *La Repubblica*, M5S congressman Luigi Gallo stated that "the Sardines are speaking to us ... they represent a good sign, similar to what happened 15 years ago with [M5S co-founder] Beppe Grillo." He said that at the Sardines events, "there were M5S activists as well as our spokespeople."

Grillo himself glorifies the Sardines as a "hygienic-sanitary movement" against the vulgarity of current politics.

The co-ruling PD also speaks openly of its intent to co-opt the Sardines. Culture Minister Dario Franceschini stated that "in those squares there are PD and M5S electors who are more to the left, disappointed moderates. The PD and M5S universes are bonding."

The Sardines' Santori is an outspoken supporter of regional presidential candidate Bonaccini against the pro-Salvini Borgonzoni. He has asked for a meeting with prime minister Giuseppe Conte, who was originally appointed by the M5S-Lega coalition, to explain to him the Sardines' demands.

Sardines have also been anointed by figures like former premiers Romano Prodi and Mario Monti, who best represent the interests of the European financial oligarchy, as well as the Vatican's Cardinal Pietro Parolin.

Discussions are taking place between Sardines and various pseudo-left groups. *Rifondazione comunista*, another PCI split-off, has called for participation in the Sardines' events, calling for a new "constituent and

welcoming spirit, planning together the common home and a new way to do politics.” It has, moreover, highlighted the words of economist Emiliano Brancaccio who, in a recent interview, warned Sardines against technocratic selections. *Rifondazione*, in essence, is playing the role of Sardines’ consulting partner.

Marco Ferrando’s *Partito Comunista dei Lavoratori* (PCdL) also welcomed the Sardines’ initiative: “We share the basic sentiment that animates many youth squares. We too feel the same profound nausea for xenophobia, misogyny, reaction ... the tricolor militarism dressed in police clothes.”

Ferrando has participated in every organization that has historically betrayed workers, from the Pabloite United Secretariat to the amalgam known as the Coordinating Committee for the Refoundation of the Fourth International, a receptacle for Pabloites, Stalinists and opportunists of all stripes. Equally significant was Ferrando’s participation in *Rifondazione* until 2006.

The PCdL has also expanded its field of complicity in recent days with the Stalinists’ new PCI, founded in Bologna three years ago from recycled *Rifondazione* members and Stalinists, the Pabloite Sinistra Anticapitalista (Anticapitalist Left) headed by Franco Turigliatto, infamous for his critical support in 2007 to the Prodi government, and a faction of *Rifondazione*.

This aggregate of historical opportunism gathered December 7 in Rome as a national unitarian assembly of left opposition, the sole purpose of which is to weave a new political straitjacket to force on the working class.

One thing must be clear: for all the anti-fascist rhetoric and slogans used in the Sardines’ lexicon, fascism is threatening to make a comeback precisely because of the treacherous role these pseudo-left forces have played historically in disarming the working class and suppressing the class struggle, in favor of collaborationism with the bourgeois state. The nationalist orientation of the political forces engaged in the Sardines’ operation makes it irreconcilably hostile to the interests of the international working class.

In the last 30 years, Italy has been no exception in the face of the global crisis of capitalism: Living standards for the majority of the working population have decayed, while a small oligarchy of ultra-rich have utilized the political establishment to implement measures that reverted all the gains made by workers through bloody struggles, especially in the aftermath of World War II.

A massive wave of privatizations, deregulations and social cuts immediately followed the dissolution of the Soviet Union and was propelled by center-left technocratic governments in the 1990s, whose parliamentary base was provided by the mainstream bourgeois successor of the PCI, today’s PD. *Rifondazione Comunista*, an allegedly more radical organization, assumed the role of the old PCI: packaging bourgeois politics with “communist” rhetoric in order to politically disarm and contain workers.

The *Rifondazione* project, which was hailed by every pseudo-left tendency in the European Union as the way forward for the “left,” collapsed when it gave critical support to the Prodi government in 2006, responsible for a rigid anti-worker domestic program, an attack on democratic rights, especially aimed against immigrants, and an openly pro-imperialistic, pro-war foreign policy.

Rifondazione consequently tanked in the 2008 election, losing all parliamentary representation. Workers were disgusted by the politics of war, opportunism and betrayal. The vacuum created was of great concern to the ruling class, especially as it coincided with the great recession of 2008, which threatened to plunge Italy (and the world) into industrial and financial disaster.

The vacuum was filled by Beppe Grillo’s Five-Star Movement, a right-wing populist party, which was launched under the guise of combating

corruption, bureaucracy and monopolies. M5S has been co-running the government since June 2018 under prime minister Giuseppe Conte, first through an alliance with the fascist Lega, then through a deal with the PD, exposing their fake anti-establishment posture.

But only a year-and-a-half later, the true colors of the Five-Star Movement are now glaring, and its ratings have drastically plunged to half what they were in June 2018. The vast majority of workers are disgusted by the anti-immigrant policies and attacks on jobs, as shown by the ongoing restructuring of the ILVA steel plant.

In foreign policy, M5S has consistently showed support for US and European imperialism. Premier Conte’s meetings with US President Donald Trump and Egyptian dictator Abdel Fatah Al-Sisi, as well as Hungarian fascist prime minister Viktor Orbán’s renewed support, make clear that M5S pursues the same imperialist ambitions as its predecessors.

Social conditions are deteriorating for Italian working families. Fifteen percent live in relative poverty, according to a conservative report issued last June by the state’s Istat. Unemployment remains close to 10 percent and the proliferation of the gig economy is rendering the labor market extremely precarious, especially for younger workers. A UIL trade union report published last September signals a significant worsening of conditions since 2017, with 75 percent of gig workers earning up to a measly €5,000 a year.

The situation is so grim that President Sergio Mattarella felt compelled to warn the political elite about the danger of social instability due to “the enemy we need to defeat together: lack of work, that work which is the foundation of our Republic. Employment, when one has it, is precarious or underpaid.”

It is this socially and politically repugnant environment that is pushing hundreds of thousands of Italian workers and youth into struggle. However, this vast mass will inevitably come into conflict with the Sardines movement, as its objective role is not to lead workers into a struggle against world capitalism, the real root of the problem, but rather to maintain control within the confines of the establishment, politically disarm workers and prevent their independent mobilization.

Many attending the protests genuinely reject a system that is destroying their lives. The Sardines’ strategy, however, is to oppose Salvini in full conformity with the program of the PD and its petty-bourgeois allies, like *Rifondazione* and Ferrando. However, it is the political bankruptcy of these forces that has made possible the rise of Salvini, and the ruling elites’ moves to rehabilitate fascism. The critical issue is and remains mobilizing the working class independently of and against social democracy and the pseudo-left to fight the accelerating drive to police-state rule.



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