

Weakened Italian government clings to power

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Though substantially weakened, Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte will remain in power, and there will be no early elections. These were the results of the vote of confidence in the Italian parliament, which Conte won in both chambers.

In the House of Representatives, where the majority is clearer due to electoral law than in the Senate, a majority of 321 of the 630 deputies voted for Conte on Monday. By contrast, after a 12-hour debate Tuesday, only a minority of 156 out of the 321 senators backed him.

Conte's survival was thanks to the very party that initially triggered the crisis by leaving the government. Former Prime Minister Matteo Renzi along with 13 other representatives of his party Italia Viva abstained in the vote. Had they voted no, the government would have fallen on Tuesday. One-hundred and forty senators from the opposition parties voted against Conte. He will now head a minority government that will have to seek majorities in parliament as and when required.

Under conditions of the deepest social and economic crisis in the post-war era, the government crisis cannot simply be traced to the personal rivalry between Conte and Renzi, as many media outlets claim. Rather, it would be much more accurate to see it as an expression of the decline of the system of bourgeois parliamentarianism. Opposition to the government is growing in the working class. Its policies have made Italy one of the epicentres of the pandemic in Europe, with 83,000 deaths and more than 2.4 million infections, while the ruling class is turning increasingly to far-right and fascistic forces.

If elections were to be held now, 24 percent of the vote would go to the right-wing extremist Lega under Matteo Salvini, and 17 percent to the fascist Fratelli d'Italia. Together with Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia (8 percent), the right-wing parties would have a clear

majority. The two main governing parties, by contrast, enjoy the support of just 20 percent (Democrats) and 14 percent (Five Star Movement). Renzi's split-off from the Democrats, Italia Viva, currently has 3 percent.

The rise of the right-wing extremists is thanks, in the first place, to support from influential business and intellectual circles. Seventy-five years after his assassination by partisans, the fascist dictator Benito Mussolini is once again a socially acceptable figure. Secondly, they also profit from the policies of the so-called centre-left parties, which have played the leading role in imposing social spending cuts over the past three decades, and have always enjoyed the support of the trade unions and pseudo-left parties, like Rifondazione Comunista.

The mass opposition among the working class finds no political expression in the existing political setup. Strikes and protests repeatedly erupt, but they are suffocated by the trade unions and subordinated to the Democrats.

The right-wing extremists benefit from this by winning support from dissatisfied sections of the middle class and even among some impoverished workers. The spectacle of the governing parties, who squabble like vultures over money and influence, plays directly into the hands of the fascist demagogues.

The government crisis was triggered by a dispute over the €209 billion Italy is supposed to receive from the European Union's (EU's) coronavirus fund. Renzi, who during his first term as prime minister from 2014 to 2016 gutted labour regulations and decimated pensions, saw this as a chance to renew his project of "modernising" Italy.

In a public campaign against Conte, Renzi claimed that the funds should be made available to the major corporations, rather than the small businesses and self-employed that make up the clientele of the Five Star Movement, with whom Conte is aligned.

“One doesn’t need to be a Keynesian to understand that the only way to growth is through public and private investment,” wrote Renzi in an open letter to the prime minister published in *Corriere della Sera* on December 17. He appealed for a “coherent industrial policy, from steel to the roads.” The €209 billion is “the last chance we have,” he warned, referring to the long-serving head of the European Central Bank, Mario Draghi.

Renzi also demanded that Italy borrow a further €36 billion from the European Stability Mechanism, which ties its loans to strict austerity measures. For the Five Star Movement, this amounted to waving a red rag to a bull. One of the reasons for its electoral victory in 2018 was a campaign against the EU, and it is therefore now seeking to symbolically distance itself from the EU, as its practical cooperation with it continues to deepen.

On foreign policy, Renzi advocated the aggressive pursuit of imperialist interests in alliance with the EU and “the new world of Biden’s America.” Italy must “position itself in light of the great challenges of the Asian century,” go to Africa, and play a role in the Mediterranean region, “where our presence has noticeably declined over recent years and the influence of Russia and Turkey has increased.”

When Conte only partially responded to Renzi’s demands, Renzi withdrew his ministers from the government and provoked the latest crisis. He probably only wanted to intensify the pressure on Conte, but he accepted new elections and the prospect of the victory of the right as a price worth paying.

However, the support Renzi had hoped for from Berlin and Brussels did not materialise. The Italian, German, and European press expressed horror that he had triggered a government crisis in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, when all European governments have their backs to the wall. They feared that the visible collapse of state authority could provoke an intervention by the working class, which would call capitalist rule as a whole into question.

The decay of Italian democracy will continue under the Conte government, an unstable alliance of the Five Star Movement and Democrats. This will in turn increase the speed with which the bourgeoisie is turning to an authoritarian, fascist solution.

The only way out of this crisis is the independent intervention of the Italian and international working

class. The struggle against fascism, mass death in the pandemic, poverty, and war is possible only on the basis of a socialist programme—by expropriating the super-rich, the corporations, and banks, and the construction of a socialist society.



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