

Italy faces the threat of a far-right government

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It is looking increasingly likely that a neo-fascist party will take over the government in Italy this autumn, exactly one hundred years after Benito Mussolini's march on Rome.

With just under seven weeks to go before the September 25 general election, the right-wing alliance—comprised of the neo-fascist Fratelli d'Italia, the far-right Lega and Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia—is well ahead in the polls. With a 45 percent share of the vote, it could win around 60 percent of the seats due to Italy's complicated electoral system—a mixture of proportional representation and majority voting that clearly favours larger parties and party alliances.

Within the right-wing alliance, in turn, the Fratelli lead with 24 percent, followed by Lega with 11 percent and Forza Italia with 8 percent. Giorgia Meloni, the 45-year-old leader of the Fratelli, is therefore considered the most promising candidate for head of government.

Meloni leads a party that stands in the unbroken historical continuity of Mussolini's fascist movement and still bears its symbol, the green-white-red flame, on its coat of arms. At the age of 15, Meloni joined the youth organization of the Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI), which succeeded Mussolini's fascist party after his death and provided a political home for numerous high-ranking fascists.

In 2008, Silvio Berlusconi appointed the 31-year-old, by then a member of the MSI's successor party Alleanza Nazionale, as youth and sports minister. After the Alleanza Nazionale dissolved into Berlusconi's Forza Italia, Meloni founded the Fratelli d'Italia in 2012 to continue the fascist tradition. The party pays homage to the memory of *Il Duce* and is supported by neo-fascist thugs. Its election rallies regularly feature the "Roman salute," the Italian equivalent of the Nazi *Sieg Heil*.

Although Meloni herself no longer openly acknowledges Mussolini for tactical reasons, she does not distance herself from him either. Instead, she downplays the fascist dictator, saying that he must be "seen in the context of history."

Her international allies and political views, however, leave no doubt where Meloni stands politically. She admires former US President Donald Trump and maintains close ties to Spain's Vox, a party of Franco supporters, as well as to Hungary's right-wing leader Viktor Orbán. She is also chairwoman of the European Conservatives and Reformers party, which includes the Polish PiS, the far-right Sweden Democrats and the Spanish Vox, as well as the British Tories.

Politically, Meloni represents a mixture of right-wing nationalism, aggressive xenophobia, and Christian fundamentalism. She rages against the "mass invasion of immigrants," the "Islamization of our Christian identity," the "LGBT lobby" and the "bureaucrats from Brussels." She describes herself as a mother, a Christian and an Italian and sees these identities threatened by mass migration, by gender politics and by the European Union.

In April 1945, the fascist dictator Mussolini was executed by Italian partisans and his body publicly displayed in Milan hanging. How is it possible that 77 years later, one of his political heirs again has serious prospects of taking power in Italy? And this in a country that has a long anti-fascist tradition and a militant working class, and where social antagonisms are tense to the breaking point?

The answer to these questions lies not so much with Meloni and her party as with the so-called centre-left parties, the trade unions, and their pseudo-left appendages. The latter have long played a key role in rehabilitating far-right and fascist forces and have recently adopted their program—social attacks, war, stepping up the power of the state, and policies allowing the coronavirus to run wild in the pandemic—more and more openly, imposing them against growing resistance.

When the Italian economy was in free fall in early 2021 and the pandemic claimed tens of thousands of lives in Italy, all parties—from the Democrats (PD) and their various spin-offs to the Five Star Movement to Berlusconi's Forza Italia and the far-right Lega, whose leader Matteo Salvini himself admires Mussolini—joined forces to form a government of "national unity" under former European Central Bank chief Mario Draghi.

A confidante of international finance capital, Draghi shifted the burden of the crisis onto the working class and brought Italy, which had previously maintained close political and economic ties with Russia, onto NATO's war course. The Democrats and the trade unions suppressed any opposition to this and supported Draghi even more resolutely the more obvious the anti-working class character of his policies became.

They would also have readily included Meloni in their government of "national unity," but the Fratelli, which received only 4.4 percent of the vote in the 2018 general election, preferred to remain the only party in opposition—and grew rapidly.

The current election campaign being conducted by the Democrats under their leader Enrico Letta is on the basis of an

extreme right-wing program. In late July, when Italian daily *La Stampa* reported on alleged close ties between Salvini and the Russian Embassy in Rome, Letta declared, “Today’s findings about the links between Salvini and Putin’s Russia are disturbing, the election campaign is starting in the worst way, with a big stain. We want to know if it was Putin who brought down Draghi’s government.”

In other words, Letta criticizes Salvini and his far-right Lega not primarily for their fascist tirades against immigrants and praise of Mussolini, but for not supporting the war course against Russia aggressively enough. On the other hand, as soon as the fascists swung behind NATO’s offensive, he was full of praise. When Meloni, during a joint appearance in the Italian Senate, made known her support for Western arms supplies to Ukraine and the NATO proxy war against Russia, Letta spoke of an “idyllic moment” with the fascist leader.

The Democrats are themselves working on establishing a coalition to tighten Draghi’s anti-working class stance. Earlier this month, Letta announced the formation of an alliance with former Economy Minister Carlo Calenda’s Azione party and former European Commissioner Emma Bonino’s Più Europa party, two right-wing liberal outfits that both support the European Union. When he then included the Greens and the Italian Left Party (Sinistra Italiana) in the alliance a few days later, however, Azione jumped ship again. According to political experts, this has “reduced to a minimum” the centre-left alliance’s chance of winning the election.

Sinistra Italiana plays a particularly foul role in these manoeuvres, whose main task is to strengthen the right-wing offensive and prevent any social mobilization against it. Founded in 2015, the party is a catch-all for shipwrecked former pseudo-left parties like Rifondazione Comunista and Sinistra Ecologia Libertà (SEL), each of whose policies ended in disaster. Between 2005 and 2008, Rifondazione was part of the “centre-left” government under Romano Prodi (PD), whose pro-war and austerity policies opened the door to Meloni’s entry into government.

Even defectors from the Democrats and the Five Star Movement, which governed with Salvini for 15 months from 2018 to 2019, have found shelter in Sinistra Italiana. The party’s role models are Greece’s Syriza and Spain’s Podemos, both of which carried out massive attacks on the working class as governing parties—in Syriza’s case, in alliance with the far-right Independent Greeks (Anel). Significantly, at EU level, Anel belongs to the same political grouping as Meloni’s Fratelli.

Italy is a social powder keg. Decades of attacks on the working class have driven social inequality, poverty and unemployment to record highs. Strikes and protests are mounting. The far-right is needed to intimidate the working class, channel social tensions along racist lines, build a police state and strip the security forces of their last scruples.

Salvini, whose far-right party has sat at the cabinet table with Letta & Co. for the past year and a half, already sees himself as a future interior minister again—though he has not yet given up hope of becoming head of government. A few days ago, during a campaign appearance at an immigration centre on Lampedusa, he promised to once again stop accepting refugees in Italian ports

altogether.

Meloni went even further, proposing to impose a naval blockade on the North African Mediterranean coast, which, under international law, would be an act of war. She also made it clear that as head of government she would continue the social attacks of her predecessors. The next legislative period will be a difficult one, she said in an interview with US broadcaster Fox News. “We have to tell Italians the truth in the election campaign. We can’t promise something we can’t deliver.”

For all these reasons, Europe’s ruling circles are also looking forward to Meloni’s possible takeover of the government somewhat sympathetically, despite her anti-EU rhetoric. The European media paint an extremely flattering picture of the neo-fascist.

She also enjoys a lot of support in European capitals and in Washington because she is unreservedly on NATO’s side in the Ukraine war. “This conflict is the tip of the iceberg in a process aimed at realigning the world order,” she told Fox News. “If the West loses, Putin’s Russia and Xi’s China are the winners—and in the West, it’s the Europeans who pay the highest price.”

There is no doubt that if Meloni does indeed win the election, European leaders will welcome her into their ranks with open arms. Italy is not an isolated case. The ruling class is responding to growing social tensions and class struggles everywhere with a sharp shift to the right. Far-right parties like Spain’s Vox, Marine Le Pen’s Rassemblement National in France, and Germany’s Alternative for Germany (AfD) are preparing to take over the government or—as in refugee policy—are setting the political line being followed by governments.

The working class must not allow this to happen. It must stop the danger of fascism, which, as in the 1920s and 1930s, is a response of the ruling class to the deep crisis of capitalism and the explosive development of the class struggle. This cannot be done by voting for the very parties that have prepared the way for the far right and advocate the same anti-working class policies as they do. The struggle against the right-wing requires an independent mass movement from below.

The struggle against social and political attacks, against the murderous “profits before lives” policies in the pandemic, and against dictatorship and war must be linked to a socialist program to overthrow capitalism. At the heart of this struggle must be the building of a tightly linked network of rank-and-file action committees in workplaces and neighbourhoods to wrest control of the class struggle from the union bureaucracy. Above all, it requires the unification of the working classes in all countries against the common enemy, and the building of a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International in Italy.



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