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Italy

Italian Elections - some initial comments

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This comment was published on the Sinistra Critica website on 25 February as the results were still coming in. However, underlying trends in the results seemed clear.

The results have contradicted all the forecasts and expectations: Bersani's well-oiled electoral machine failed in its objectives and once again the PD project of winning the elections by exploiting the so-called split between the main components of the ruling class and the Berlusconi's right wing political leadership has come to nothing. The big beasts of politics have also been disappointed: the EU's and ECB's "markets" and technocrats who are terrorized by the perspective of the significant ungovernability of a big, crucial country like Italy. Clearly their point man in Italy was Monti and they were all banking on "Supermario" playing an important support and constraining role in a future Bersani government. Instead the new parliament will be marked above all not only by the success of Grillo but above all by their defeat and the shrinking of the centrist project.

The breakthrough of the Five Star Movement (M5S), although to some degree predictable, was nevertheless stunning and devastating for the political equilibrium of the traditional Italian institutional parties. It was certainly the single most important fact of these elections: The success of Grillo's slate shows very powerfully the growing popular rejection of the politics of corruption and austerity. This rejection is particularly strong among the youth as can be seen in the different percentage of the vote won by the M5S in the parliamentary poll compared with the vote for the senate [where you have to be 25 to vote]. The M5S is the biggest political party and regions [indeed it just beat the PD on the national vote – Trans.]. This vote is a challenge that voters have made to all the old politics of the centre left; of the right, of the centre and even of the far left – they were all hit by the massive support for Grillo as well as by the increased abstention rate.

The level of abstention is significant, it is now 25%, an increase of 5% from the last election. 10.8 million voters did not vote (1,800,000 more than in 2008), they obviously were not inspired by politicians to bother to vote.

(...) What we are seeing is perhaps a mortal blow to the political system established by the so-called "second republic" – the alternating of centre right and centre left governments over the last twenty years.

The absolutely disappointing results of Monti and his centrist coalition puts an end at least for the time being to the attempt of the Italian bourgeoisie supported by the EU potentates to build an alternative to their dependence on the PD/PDL two party system which was too conflictual and unreliable. In any case the results for the former premier's Civic Choice slate express a drastic condemnation of his government's policies – of the counter-reforms, cuts, abolition of laws protecting workers, tax increases, unemployment and useless, grandiose public works.

The revived support for Berlusconi and his populist demagoguery was also due to his skilful withdrawal from the 'big coalition' that he had supported up to two months ago and to his promise to pay back the tax on people's houses (IMU). Along with his victory in the senate seats of Lombardy, Veneto and Sicily, this all makes the formation of the government that up to last week all commentators were certain would be led by Bersani with varying forms of support by Monti and Casini, extremely difficult. So Berlusconi's resurrection combined with the big success of M5S, presents us with a deadlocked parliament.

Having said this the two party system has been significantly weakened. The PDL has seen its votes halved between the 2008 elections and 2013 – from 12.5 million to less than 7 (Senate votes). The Lega Nord has not recovered its former glory – declining from 2.6 to 1.3.

The biggest loser of this election seems to be the one that was the favourite – the PD, its coalition and the hypothesis of a Bersani government. These forces are paying for the decisive political support they gave to the unpopular and anti-working class government policies of the last 13 months and clearly lost votes to the M5S and as a result of increased abstention. In the Senate vote the PD lost more than 2.5 million votes with respect to 2008 without any compensatory score from its ally, Vendola's SEL. The latter, despite its optimistic forecasts, only won 900,000 votes and therefore did not even match the disastrous votes for the Rainbow Coalition of 2008, although thanks to its alliance with the PD it will manage to have a proportionate number of parliamentary representatives.

There was also defeat for the Civic Revolution slate that had hoped to bring into parliament a small group of MPs from the parties who did not make it in 2008 and who had not been accepted into the PD coalition (PRC; PdCI; IDV and Greens). Ingroia's slate did not get a single representative elected in either house. This disaster leaves only political debris and fragmentation and is the direct result of the way the leadership of the operation refused to take up a less conservative but more ambitious longterm political project.

Will the defeat of the austerity parties and the general political disorientation (at least temporarily including the most powerful capitalist interests) facilitate or not the resurgence of the social movements? The fragility of the institutional framework and the fear of "Hannibal at the gates" symbolised by the M5S will probably push the CGIL apparatus and its accomplices towards an even greater moderation of its policies and support for actual struggles even if the economic situation and the line of the ruling class imposes further aggressive attacks on the rights and conditions of working people.

Consequently the building of the movements and struggles is as important as ever. After the failure of any illusory electoral short cuts this approach must become the central political axis of any fight back for all those opposed to austerity and its terrible social devastation:

Parliament in percentages

Partito Democratico (PD - Democratic Party): 25.4

Sinistra Ecologia Libert  (SEL - Left Ecology Freedom): 3.2

Total Centre left coalition: 29.5

Popolo della Libert  (PDL - People of Freedom): 21.6

Lega Nord (Northern League): 4.1

Fratelli di Italia (Brothers of Italy): 2

Total Centre Right coalition: 29.1

Monti coalition: 10.5

M5S (Grillo): 25.5

Ingroia: 2.2

Senate results in percentages

PD: 27.5

SEL: 3

Total Centre left coalition: 31.6

PDL: 22.3

Lega Nord: 4.3

Fratelli di Italia: 1.9

Total Centre Right coalition 30.7

Monti coalition: 9.1

M5S (Grillo): 23.8

Ingroia: 1.8

Note: the way the senate seats are calculated is on a regional basis so the biggest coalition in a region gets a bonus; this is why the % results in the Senate do not show the strength in seats of the PDL coalition.