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Italy

Italian voters reject authoritarian proposal

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The Italian electorate has resoundingly said “no” to Prime Minister Matteo Renzi’s referendum hopes, despite the crushing unanimity of support from the TV stations, the press, all the employers’ organisations, the world of finance and almost all “opinion makers”. A large majority of Italian voters rejected the threats, the politics of fear and the spectre of a “leap into the dark”.

The constitutional law with which Renzi wanted to reform article 47 of the Italian constitution, has been comprehensively scuppered. It was a shift of the constitution in an authoritarian direction, which a government imposed by President Napolitano managed to get approved by an illegitimate parliament, to make the institutions of the state more pliable to neo-liberal politics.

In fact, the result of the referendum is, above all, the clearest evidence of the crisis of consent in the face of the government’s anti working class politics. The very high voter turnout (just under 70%, which drops to 65.5% when people abroad eligible to vote are taken into account) is the highest of the consultation referenda of the last twenty years. The No vote (almost 60% of the just under 20 million voters) is strikingly similar to the 1974 referendum on divorce and was consistent across every region in the country (except in South Tyrol and, strictly speaking in Tuscany and Emilia Romagna) shows that the electorate rejected both the government’s project and its most prominent leader. By contrast the Yes vote was broadly similar in scale to that of Renzi’s Partito Democratico (PD) and its allies in the government.

The loose coalition which won the No vote is obviously not in a position to exploit its success. The right is still divided and fortunately lacks a clear leadership. The Five Star Movement doesn’t seem to have a clear strategy or programme other than electoral success. The “left” of the PD will most probably get sucked into the internal battle that will open up in the party following the defeat. The “radical” left still has a lot of political unclarity that the discussion opening up in the PD will only amplify. The CGIL union federation, despite the timidity of its No position will gain from the referendum result, but has decided to surrender to the bosses’ demands by signing a terrible contract on behalf of its engineering members. This will have a detrimental impact on public sector workers’ negotiations.

The prime minister’s exuberance is now making the government pay a heavy political price and his prominence in the campaign made it inevitable that he would be forced to resign.

Renzi’s resignation must be followed by the dissolution of parliament and the scheduling of new elections. This parliament already lacks legitimacy due to the legal basis on which it was elected and after this referendum it is now completely unrepresentative and doesn’t reflect the wishes of the people. New elections must be called immediately in accordance with the Constitutional Court’s 2014 ruling.

But, more than anything else, the democratic victory in the referendum and the resignation of the government have to be the signal for a resumption of the big social movement mobilisations and struggles in the workplaces, schools and universities for the defence of our rights, the environment and for an improvement in our living and working conditions.