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Italy

New faces, same austerity

- IV Online magazine - 2014 - IV469 - February 2014 -

Publication date: Sunday 16 February 2014

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Matteo Renzi is poised to take the baton from fellow Democratic Party (PD) leader Enrico Letta. He will be the third Italian prime minister in a row to be installed without personally being elected. Italian president, Napolitano, also from the PD, will go through the motions of a parliamentary consultation about the transition but everyone knows this is a done deal once the PD national leadership voted overwhelmingly to dump Letta and put the youngest ever prime minister into power.

Renzi, who openly sees himself as the Italian Tony Blair, will renew the coalition government with the different wings of the right - Alfano's New Centre Right (NCD) which split from Berlusconi, who has since refounded his Forza Italia (FI) party, and Monti's small Civic Choice (SC) group.

Renzi talks a lot of rhetoric about a new phase, decisiveness and a constituent legislature until 2018 that will reshape Italy and bring it out of the crisis. However a key element in his decision to move now, when only weeks ago he was telling Letta publicly to relax and carry on, was the convivial and very old-style 'Euros' bosses' meeting he held with Berlusconi to stitch up a new electoral law. Renzi had no complexes about validating the political importance of a man who is a convicted criminal and banned from public office. This means that a Renzi government will benefit from a non-aggression pact from the Berlusconi MPs and so will retain a majority. Napolitano, as always expertly representing the interests of the dominant sectors of the Italian ruling class, does not want elections but rather a continuity that will allow the austerity programme to continue without any democratic accountability. Despite benefiting from the adulation of the media and having an inflated belief in his own electoral attractiveness, Renzi is clever enough to know that elections now are a risky business after the earthquake that put 120 M5S (Five Star Movement - Beppe Grillo's supporters) MPs into parliament last time. Of course he also needs the legislative time to make sure the new electoral law is implemented. That will make it much harder for parties like M5S or any other more left wing or critical current to get represented. It aims to establish a more stable two party alternating political system.

On the other hand leading a government in the present crisis is not necessarily going to increase his electoral appeal - look what happened to both Monti and Letta. Renzi cannot completely rely on Berlusconi or other right of centre forces sticking to their side of the bargain until 2018. Social struggles may erupt. Then there is the unknown trajectory of support for Grillo and the M5S movement. He has deliberately adopted some similar rhetoric as the latter when he emphasises the need to scrap all the older political generation who have 'Euros' put Italy into such a mess'. His nickname is indeed the 'Euros' scrap merchant'. Renzi believes he can appeal to the younger demographic that is supporting Grillo.

In the real world beneath all the machiavellian manoeuvring the harsh consequences of the cross party coalition are there for everyone to see. Official unemployment is 5 percentage points worse than in Britain at 14% with youth unemployment at around 40%. Despite all the cuts in public spending, pensions and wages the deficit is still £1.6 trillion. Every friend I talked to last week in Italy had a younger son, daughter or relative who was desperately seeking something, anything to get a start in the world of work. Many were leaving the country. Teachers have forgotten the last time they actually had a pay rise and several old friends were lamenting the extra years they were having to work to get their reduced pensions. If my relative's shop is anything to go by most small businesses which do not go bankrupt are just surviving with growing debts and through not paying a wage to themselves. It was announced that Electrolux in Italy had given an ultimatum to their workers to accept a near halving of their salaries if they wanted to keep their jobs. There are over 120 workplaces that are threatened with closure where the government, bosses and unions are in negotiations - normally over the 'Euros' cassa integrazione' (around 75% of basic rate wages paid for a year or more) deals that can be won but which are being increasingly restricted. Italy is experiencing the sort of

de-industrialisation that Britain saw under Thatcher with the similar negative fall out on the combativity of the unions.

Given the union leaderships' close links with government parties, particularly the PD, we have seen very little organised resistance to austerity - the odd orchestrated demonstration. Worst there has been a concerted attempt to limit and control which unions and which policies workers can freely vote for in the workplaces. The CGIL union, which is the biggest and is closest to the PD, did a deal 6 months ago with the government, bosses and other unions to ensure all negotiations go through their alliance making it hard for dissident, more combative union branches particularly in the FIOM metalworkers union to represent workers. The model for this was in FIAT where massive restructuring, accepted by the CGIL and others, has been achieved and the FIOM sections have been regularly excluded from the right to represent groups of workers. Debate inside the CGIL at recent congresses has become very heated and Stalinist reflexes are back in town as left activists like Cremaschi who head up an opposition to Camusso's moderate CGIL leadership have been prevented physically, at times physically, from speaking or intervening in meetings. A left wing CGIL NEC member, Fabrizio Burattini, is being currently witch hunted by the Camusso leadership for expressing dissent. Ironically the reward for agreeing to FIAT's restructuring has been the usual tax avoidance set up where the headquarters have been transferred to Holland where corporation tax is lower. The government is happy to allow FIAT to avoid taxes while increasing the tax burden on the ordinary voter.

What about the opposition to the government? At least in parliament the M5S has been the main expression of this. They reject Renzi and have denounced the recent taxpayer bail-out of the Italian national bank and the anti-democratic electoral law. Moreover they have taken some direct action in parliament - blocking committee work by occupying corridors and making scenes in the chamber. Their reasonable argument is that the new laws are being rushed through parliament through the guillotine procedure and this is anti-democratic. Nearly everyone has denounced these tactics. PD spokespeople have called them squadist or fascist - conveniently forgetting the similar protests their forebears made in the 1950s against analogous electoral stitchups (*la legge truffa*). Unfortunately the M5S does not help their case when one of their people made unacceptable sexist comments aimed at Boldrini, the female speaker of the house, during the fracas which was amplified by disgusting sexist content (shortly later removed) on their website. This allowed the PD and others to cover up their anti-democratic actions in the house. Most people I talked to, on the days these events happened supported the fuss the M5S were making but did not agree with the sexism - these people included left activists and working class trade unionists. However the actions betray the limits of the M5S who paradoxically increase illusions that politics and the real decisions are made in parliament or that the constitution is some sort of shield against these reactionary governments. The Grillo people really think that the solution to nearly everything is to clear out the old parties from parliament and establish a cleaned up one, with their new majority via a transparent direct internet based link. Hence, despite supporting the No-TAV campaign (anti-high speed train link in Piedmont) and some workers struggles like the recent transport struggle in Genoa, their attitude to the trade unions is to lump them as institutions into the same bag as the corrupt political parties. A further difficulty is the unclear messages they send out on migrant workers. On the one hand the parliamentary group and the online vote went against Grillo's ambiguity on the question and supported rights for migrants born in Italy but on the other hand individual representatives come out with racist statements without being censured. It does not provide a coherent alternative for working people so it could find further progress more difficult, particularly if Renzi can prise away some of its electoral base. Nevertheless the media and mainstream parties' frequent announcements that the M5S is a busted flush is wishful thinking. If Renzi hits trouble they could still benefit from many Italians' extreme alienation from the political caste.

Is there any opposition to Renzi inside the PD? He won the national leadership meeting 136 to 16. Civiati's and Cuperlo's groups opposed him although some walked out or abstained. Renzi does not take prisoner and Cuperlo was recently roundly attacked in a leadership meeting and resigned in protest. It was said that although Renzi won a massive majority in the primary elections where millions of vote he did not win a majority of the activists in branch meetings. However the left inside the PD generally rolls over and takes it so it is unlikely that there will be any split. Individual resignations are taking place - I talked to one whom had been loyal for many, many years who just could not stomach Renzi. The meeting with the criminal Berlusconi was the last straw. In any case Renzi wants an American style party where he is free to make the decisions without an activist base and real party democracy.

As for the left of PD forces there is still much disarray and weakness. Indeed the very success of the M5S is due in part to the implosion of Rifondazione which regrouped nearly all the radical left. Nichi Vendola's SEL (Socialism, Ecology and Liberty) party, which saved its apparatus by hitching itself to the coat tails of the PD in the last elections and winning dozens of MPs, is confronted with a new dilemma. Already it is embarrassed by the fact that the Boldrini, the speaker, responsible for using the anti-democratic guillotine, is a SEL member. Now it has the Renzi problem. They could make a (weak) case that the previous PD leadership at election time was to the left of Renzi although it had fully supported the Monti government. Today it would have to tie itself to the Italian Blair. The first statement from Vendola said that he opposed a Renzi government. Whether he will really lead his party towards links with an independent opposition remains to be seen. The new electoral law will make it even more difficult to get MPs if you are not within a coalition (and even then the threshold has been raised). SEL has blocked with the M5S on some issues in parliament but has all sorts of compromises with the PD and its left in local government and in the CGIL which makes it unlikely that it will really build a left alternative

A group of left intellectuals who were close to the Ingroia slate in the last elections have launched an appeal to support a list in the European elections headed by Syriza's Tsipras which would have an anti-austerity line. The SEL and remainder of Rifondazione are supporting this and there is a good chance that the slate will be made. However just as with Ingroia's previous slate there is still to some degree a sense in which this is still a pressure group on the left of the PD to push it to the left or an abstract campaign in defence of the constitution and democracy rather than something that will lead to the development of a fighting alternative. Nevertheless it may well be that this will be the only way of expressing something of an anti-austerity, anti-government vote.

Apart from this there is the attempt to build a political alternative called Rossa based on the left opposition in the unions, the social movements and other small left currents. Cremaschi is the most well know figure leading this. There has been a national meeting of 600 or so members but it is still early days. Other independent left currents involved in projects such as Communia are more sceptical of this and suggest, given the state of things, that the main priority is to build the independent left networks through the movements rather than recreate another 'Euros' traditional' Rifondazione type regroupment. Last October there was a weekend of national mobilisations bringing together tens of thousands of activists through the COBAS, independent unions and social movements that was organised by both these left currents so there is an audience for a clear political alternative to the PD. To some degree the debate we have in Britain between Left Unity and currents in the Labour Party is similar to discussions between the currents we have discussed above.

The press in the UK have joined in the uncritical acclaim for Italy's next young hope - there is even an admiring editorial in today's Guardian. We should be clear that just like Blair he is the enemy of working people and will pursue even more rapid austerity policies. Unfettered with any traditional links with the trade unions, having come from the Christian Democrat wing of the PD, he has already stated that his policies were not going to be constrained in any way at all by the trade unions.

15th February 2014

First published in [Socialist Resistance](#).