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Italy

Sardines against Salvini

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A few weeks ago four thirty year olds from Bologna were complaining about the victory of Salvini's hard right Lega (League) in the Umbrian regional elections and the danger of him winning their traditionally left of centre region in the January elections. They then did something that is typical of angry thirty year olds. They went onto social media and cooked up the Sardines idea.

Put simply, it was to fill the squares of Italy with people against the Lega. The reference to the sea was twofold. Firstly, small fish group together in massive shoals to defend themselves against predators and secondly Salvini was the notorious interior minister who was happy to let migrants die in the Mediterranean by closing the ports.

As sometimes happens, the whole idea exploded on social media and the squares of Bologna and other places across the region were successfully taken over by huge crowds. A majority were young but people of all ages came too.

On 3 December there were 25,000 in Milan and tens of thousands in Florence and Naples. The weather has been as bad in Italy recently as it has been here. Given that the merest hint of rain on an Italian beach sees them emptied very quickly, this showed the strength of this movement as a sea of umbrellas covered the squares.

Taranto and Padova followed and there are plans all this week for demonstrations in Savon, Ancona, Ravenna, Lecco, Trento, Siena, Siracusa, Vercelli, Catania, Pescara, Foggia, Vicenza, Cagliari, Bari and Latina. This is now a national movement and they want to bring 100,000 to Rome on December 14. Then on December 15 there will be a national meeting to discuss next steps.

This has an impact outside Italy. The other day Salvini was speaking in Antwerp in Belgium and he found Sardines in the streets. Contacts are being developed to plan international mobilisations on December 14.

The formula in Italy itself is very simple. People are mobilised through the local and national coordinators on social media. They come with cut-outs of Sardines in cardboard and other materials. Sometimes slogans or phrases are written on the Sardines placards against the politics of hatred. The central catchy slogan is that the relevant local area isolates the Lega

for example "Napoli sLega la Lega" (untie us from, dump the League – rhymes in Italian)

No political parties or banners are invited or tolerated. No political representatives speak from the platform. The four founders do intervene as do well-known anti-Lega independents like the Gommorah author, Roberto Saviano. Sometimes the first articles of the Italian constitution are read out; probably one of the more progressive constitutions on paper, being the fruit of the successful resistance to fascism. The national anthem and (always) the famous anti-fascist song, Bella Ciao, are sung. Some concrete assistance is also organised for migrants or poor people through these mobilisations.

Salvini tried initially not to be too hostile, even proposing to meet the leaders. The latter to their credit have said there is no point to such a meeting. Salvini's has also joked a bit about the movement, saying the protesters are doing him a favour by publicising his message and increasing his chances of winning the big prize of Emilia Romagna in January.

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This would thereby weaken the recently formed coalition between the Five Star Movement (M5S) and the Democratic Party (PD). At the same time he and right wing parties have suggested the whole sardine thing is a left front, proved by the fact that they sing Bella Ciao each time.

The polls have shown a small decline in Salvini's popularity, although his party is still riding higher in the polls than the two ruling parties. In the summer Salvini gambled that by breaking the M5S/Lega government there would be elections and he would be the big winner. Things did not turn out that way because of the way Conte, the prime minister, played his hand and the willingness of both the new (Zingaretti) and previous leader (Renzi) of the PD to work with the M5S.

In some ways, there are similarities between the success of the Anti-Nazi League in Britain at the end of the 70s and the Sardines. Both were open movements not aligned to any one party and focused on mobilising in the streets. New symbols are used – a red arrow by the ANL, sardines by the new movement. Positive cultural values – often expressed in popular culture – played a prominent role in the ANL and we see glimpses of this in Italy today. Of course the Sardines are fighting a party that is much bigger and more implanted in the institutions than any of the neo-fascist groups in Britain in the 70s.

The emergence of the Sardines in Italy today represents a crisis of political representation in general – just like distrust of all politicians we see here – and in particular of the left as a whole. There would be no political space for such a movement if the left was doing its job effectively.

The main responsibility for this lies with the PD who has failed to challenge the Salvini discourse that migrants are a threat. Under the last Renzi government, the Minniti law set up the appalling migrant camps in Libya and blocked migrants from arriving in Italy. By leading austerity governments, they have facilitated Salvini's ability to draw support from demoralised sectors of the working class. They failed to offer any convincing alternative vision of a fairer, better society, whereas Salvini plays on fear of the migrant, worries about crime and sovereignty against Europe. While it is odious, its dog whistle politics are winning support.

We should, to be fair, include most of the left of the PD in this failure to provide an alternative. Despite a more favourable electoral system than the British first past the post one, the alternative left have repeatedly spent a lot of time haggling over electoral pacts prioritising the stability of their mini-apparatuses rather than developing a united, fighting opposition to austerity and racism. In some places the left of the Catholic Church has been more prominent in facing up to Salvini's politics.

Hopefully some small steps may be taken at a unitary left meeting being held in Rome this coming Saturday. A fair number of left voters and even activists were so relieved to see Salvini dumped from the government that they have developed illusions that the new PD M5S coalition will really build some sort of alternative to austerity or fortress Europe. You just have to read *Il Manifesto*, a left wing daily, to see this confusion. Indeed some commentators in this milieu see the Sardines as a means for the PD to renew itself to the left, particularly since Renzi has split off to form *Italia Viva*.

Some on the radical left in the Facebook posts have taken rather a sectarian view of the Sardines. This is wrong. The radical left needs to join in and build the movement. There will be plenty of opportunities to develop a political dialogue and discuss a more worked out alternative both to Salvini and to the current government.

Italy remains a country with one of the biggest public debts and slowest growth rates with millions living in poverty and working in precarious conditions. The upcoming budget deliberations will not provide any real solutions. The mobilisation of the Sardines movement, if it does not fade away as quickly as it started, as social media led

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campaigns can sometimes do, is something that could contribute to a solution.

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Source [Socialist Resistance](#).

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