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Italy

What should the class struggle left do?

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“Italy votes next month in a general election. What should the Italian class struggle left do?” This statement from Sinistra Critica’s National Coordinating Committee on the upcoming Italian general election was adopted on 24 January 2013.

The February 24/25 general election is a real anomaly in the political history of our country.

The contest between the three main coalitions [See box below “Short guide to the main Italian political forces involved in the election” – DK] is in fact a gigantic smokescreen attempting to conceal from the electorate that they all supported the Monti government. A government that in its shortlived 14 months led a fierce, uninterrupted attack on the rights and the main gains of working people: destroying key areas of the welfare system (the worst pensions â€˜counter reform’ in the whole of Europe); the abolition of Article 18 and the reintroduction of the â€˜freedom’ to sack workers without legitimate cause; the selling off of state property; privatising public services; massive cuts in local council spending, education and the health service; and increasing taxes on people with modest and low incomes. All these measures, which have resulted in deeper exploitation, increased unemployment and a rise in poverty, have been supported by the parties led by Berlusconi, Bersani, Monti and Casini. ((see below, short guide to main Italian electoral slates))

These parties have also voted for the regulations and treaty agreements that have tied our country into the diktats of the EC Troika, thereby accepting for decades to come that there will be deep cuts in public spending and attacks on basic rights. They all support the fiscal compact and the counter reform that embeds balanced budgets into the constitution.

Obviously even the SEL party, (Socialism, Ecology and Liberty), while not participating in the outgoing legislature, in order to confirm its strategic, electoral alliance with the PD (Democratic Party), has made a commitment to support all the agreements with Europe. In fact the SEL leader, Vendola, has said he is ready to collaborate with Monti on â€˜constitutional reform’, as if this makes it all acceptable.

So what these parties are saying about employment, development, equality or public services is all just so much electoral hypocrisy in order to deceive working people. However, this substantial convergence between the main centre-right and centre-left political coalitions is not something that has just started but is a distinctive feature of the last fifteen years.

Those are the pro-austerity parties. Let us now examine the other electoral slates.

The Movimento 5 Stelle (Five Stars Movement – led by comedian Beppe Grillo) is truly a new phenomenon in the Italian political landscape. It is putting itself forward as the only alternative, hoping to build a solid electoral base through its absolute denunciation of the parasitical and corrupt political caste. Grillo is effectively surfing the wave of deep contempt of broad sectors of people against all politicians.

However this absolutely correct denunciation of the politicians ignores those people who are really responsible for today’s austerity policies: the bankers, big companies and financiers who after benefitting from the connivance of politicians are today taking advantage of mass discontent to dismantle the political system as a place for democratic debate, for involving people or winning mass support. It is not accidental that Grillo has organised â€˜his’ movement in a totally top down way where he has the final say or veto on every policy and on the political line. Again it is

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absolutely logical for him to criticise the trade unions not because of their bureaucratised character but rather because there are supposedly holding back economic development. At the same time he shamelessly tail ends the mood on the street so he has taken ambiguous positions on immigrant rights and is wrong when he makes favourable statements about a fascist organisation like CasaPound.

Faced with this desolate panorama a new movement emerged during the last months of 2012 which aimed to build an electoral coalition that was a transparent and clear alternative to all the other political forces that have been in government in the last decades.

Thousands of political, trade union, ecological and movement activists responded to an appeal to action called *Cambiare si puo* (Yes we can change things). A series of well attended, broadly based meetings were held and there emerged the possibility for an alternative project to see the light of day as a slate in the upcoming elections.

But the internal contradictions of the appeal's promoters and especially the electoralist assault of parties like the PRC, PdCI, the LdV and the Greens who were terrified about the possibility of not regaining some parliamentary seats, led this process into a dead end which has seriously disillusioned many activists. The subsequent selection of candidates – with a striking and embarrassing lack of women – had confirmed the worst methods of these parties. The slate is a result of a haggling session between parties and the ‘promotion’ of representatives from ‘civil society’ directly chosen by Ingroia and his entourage. A huge number of activists and even people thinking just about voting for the slate have been put off by the whole process.

As a result of our negative evaluation of these events and, despite being fully involved in the two national meetings and in dozens of the local ones in order to support a radical alternative, Sinistra Critica decided on December 28 2012 to not participate in this electoral project and therefore has not been involved in any ‘negotiations’ over the candidates, nor have we proposed any candidates.

In the December 28 resolution we stated “ our eventual position on whether to call for a vote for the emerging slate would depend on the final list of candidates and the definitive political profile of the coalition.”

Today the political profile of the ‘Ingroia-Rivoluzione civile’ slate has been substantially defined and although it has taken on some of the points put forward by ‘Cambiare di puo’ it is still very ambiguous politically without any clear class position and an exaggerated over-emphasis on the fight against organised crime as if this was the force responsible for anti-working class austerity policies.

Furthermore Ingroia’s coalition maintains a fundamentally ambiguous position in relation to the PD, seeking a discussion with it about possible programmatic agreements. This political approach is also shown in the clumsy attempt to open a negotiation with Bersani for some sort of electoral agreement between the slates for the Senate elections.

Looking at how the candidates were selected, this was done without any rank and file involvement in back room meetings between the parties and some of the well-known personalities associated with the coalition. The fact is that at the top of the slates (and therefore more likely to get elected if they get through the threshold -Tr) are three ex-ministers from the previous centre-left government, which had followed a social-liberal economic policy and made a military intervention in Afghanistan. These politicians are joined by whole range of other dubious personalities who are cloaked in the banner of ‘civil society’ representatives. All this practically eliminates the political impact of a significant number of candidates who do come from the political and social movements.

Consequently Sinistra Critica will neither directly nor indirectly support the Ingroia-Rivoluzione civile slate.

So in this election Sinistra Critica will not support any slate nor call even for a critical vote for any of them nor will it get involved in any abstentionist campaign. We will not be presenting our own slate. Today the political and organisational conditions do not exist for our own slate nor for an effective, broad-based anti-capitalist electoral coalition. Such a coalition more than ever is going to be built through struggles and the social movements – that is the only way we can produce a strong enough response to ruling class attacks.

The organisation will use all the means at its disposal to explain the reasoning behind our political stance to supporters and all the people we come into contact with.

In any case we are certain (unfortunately) that the government which emerges from the February elections whatever its precise political colours, will unleash a new phase of austerity in line with the diktats of the Troika and Confindustria (employers body – Tr.). Sinistra Critica will therefore continue wherever it exists to build a movement of struggle and resistance to these policies. It will be our main task in the coming period.

Rome, 24 January 2013

translated by Dave Kellaway

Short guide to the main Italian political forces involved in the election

Berlusconi Partito della Liberta/ Lega Nord

Berlusconi, who precipitated the end of the Monti government by withdrawing his support, has managed to get an agreement with the Lega Nord which is a rightist populist force in favour of independence of most of Northern Italy – Padania. The latter had been in a big crisis due to falling electoral support and corruption scandals involving the historic leader Bossi and his entourage. Berlusconi's manoeuvres have resulted in a fragmentation of his party, the PDL (the party of liberty). He has been omnipresent on all his TV networks and is demagogically opposing some of the austerity measures that he had formerly supported as well as taking a more anti-European stance. He has even stated that he would be happy not to be the prime minister again. He realises he is very unlikely to defeat Bersani so is interested above all to be a 'player' in the post-election manoeuvres, he is talking about a wide pact including the PD. Of course he has ulterior motives, it helps his legal situation and his business empire if he is in parliament with a group. His latest outrageous statement made on Holocaust memorial day (!) is that Mussolini did some good things apart from the racial laws.

Monti has formed his own coalition linking up with traditionally centrist forces like Casini and his UDC (Union of the Democratic centre). Despite being strongly advised by perceptive commentators such as *La Repubblica* editor Scalfaro not to get his hands dirty in party politics because his great political usefulness was that he was not formally a member of the political caste, he has nonetheless allowed his name to be used for this coalition and is currently attacking both left and right of centre forces. He would like to limit the size of any Bersani victory. If Monti picks up a reasonable score (say 10% plus) and Berlusconi manages to reassemble his electoral base to some degree then Bersani will be more constrained. In any case Bersani has consistently said he wants a government of all the progressive forces, all the pro-Europeans.

Partito Democratico/Socialismo, Ecologia e Liberta

Bersani's PD is in alliance with Vendola's SEL. The SEL is one of the remnants of the old Rifondazione Comunista. Like all the other components to the left of the PD it lost its parliamentary representatives in the last general elections in the debacle of the Rainbow coalition. Vendola has a high public visibility as the governor of the Puglia region and as Italy's best known gay politician. His party opposed Monti's austerity but is now in close alliance with one of its main supporters. Bersani went through a two round primary election in which over 3 million people voted. He defeated Renzi, Florence's mayor and the leader of the modernising even more rightist wing of the PD. Vendola also participated getting a respectable 18% on the first round. The candidates on the PD/SEL slate were also mostly selected via primaries. It is also the only slate that does not have a person's name on the ticket which as Bersani has correctly pointed out says something about the state of Italian politics. All the polls currently suggest Bersani will be the winner of the elections. He has already indicated on many occasions that he sees a role for Monti in a future PD led government and has reassured international capital in newspaper interviews that the PD would be guarantor of stability and sensible economic management.

Beppe Grillo - Movimento Cinque Stelle

A few months ago the polls were giving his movement around 18% of the vote. This appears to be reducing to something like a third of that but is likely that he will have representatives in the new parliament. Everything is reduced with Grillo to democratic questions and protocols for preventing a political caste forming. So his programme is all about rules concerning salaries, expenses, the number of periods in office you can have, opposition to slate systems. Alongside that is the modernising myth about how the internet revolutionises politics and breaks up the political castes. For example all his candidates were selected through online votes. However as the movement has grown inevitably the lack of normal political structures has led to bitter internal disputes where elected representatives have been purged and occasionally subjected to misogynist attack – one councillor was accused of wanting to go on the TV a lot because it was like her 'g' spot. The internet organisational system also lends itself very well to his rather authoritarian methods since he controls the website. Undoubtedly there does seem to be a social base for this tendency as the traditional networks of the left workers parties and trade unions have become weaker and the numbers of young people who spend longer and longer trying to get into a stable job grows.

Ingroia – Rivoluzione civile

Ingroia is an investigative judge (a bit like a district attorney in US terms) who has been involved in a struggle against the Sicilian mafia. He is following the example of Di Pietro, the leader of the IdV (Italy of Values) who is also part of this coalition, by going from law into politics. The concerns of the labour movement are consequently put more into the background. The other components of this coalition are another remnant of Rifondazione, the PRC (they kept the name) led by Ferrero who has taken an anti-austerity line although on a local level often governs in PD coalitions. The PdCI led by Diliberto was previously in Rifondazione but left in a split well before the final break up. It was in an electoral federation with Ferrero but had broken with it over the PdCI's willingness to look for an alliance with the PD. Then along came the opportunity with Ingroia and so they are all back together. The Greens are also in this coalition and like the other party components see it as the main way of getting back into parliament. Interestingly the overwhelming majority of the original signatories to the Cambiare si puo appeal voted against the final Ingroia project after it had been taken over by the parties. There was a majority of online votes in favour of it though. Many people think it will break up once the elections are over. It is unclear whether it will pass the 4% threshold and current polls see it oscillating around that figure. Some of the issues involved in trying to set up this coalition are not dissimilar to issues here in the Britain about how to democratically organise such processes and the relationship between even small scale party apparatuses and the non-aligned.

Dave Kellaway