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Italy

Left fails to win its referendums in Italy

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These referendums were promoted by the main trade union confederation and the official left of centre opposition parties to limit some of the more repressive anti-trade union laws and to improve the citizenship process for immigrants

Results

Referendum	Yes	No
Stopping sacking without justifiable cause	89.06	11.94
Legal compensation for workers in workplaces with less than 15 workers	87.60	13.40
Making short term contracts more difficult to impose	89.04	11.96
On subcontracting/Health and safety	87.35	12.65
On halving 10 year process for citizenship	65.49	34.51

Turnout: 14.07 million (registered electorate is 45.99 million) 30.59%

All five referendums were lost because none reached the quorum of 50% of the electorate. Around 88-89% who voted supported the progressive changes to the labour laws but this went down by 33 percentage points for the change to the citizenship process for immigrants.

Over the last thirty years only one out of nine referendums reached the quorum – in 2011 to defend water as a public good. Even then the government maneuvered to not implement the change demanded by the broad left and a vast grassroots campaign. As a democratic mechanism for change it worked effectively to legalise divorce and abortion rights in the seventies and eighties when Italy was a different country with a turnout of over ninety percent for many elections.

A more individualized country

I remember how different civil society was even in a town of 60,000 in the South near Naples. The local branch offices of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) were a hub not just for party members but anyone on the left. Then the piazza still was politically vibrant and the big well-organised factories more prevalent. The gains of the seventies had not been rolled back and neoliberal austerity was still ahead of us. Today, everything is more individualized and commodified.

Local fetes of the PCI (or of anybody) hardly happen now. Culture no longer has much of a budget from public bodies and is just a consumer spectacle controlled by big business. Walking around looking for a photo of referendum campaign posters for this article, I could not even easily find any. Voting in all elections has declined massively. People do not join political parties, unions or even civil society associations like they used to. The disconnect with the political process has helped the rise of hard right populist politics exemplified by the present government.

Meloni's government coalition revels in the defeat of the referendums. The anti-working class labour laws implemented by a previous left of centre government (led by Matteo Renzi) will continue. The post-fascist premier and her ally Salvini are particularly exultant on the much smaller number of people who voted to support immigrants gaining citizenship faster. It will encourage them to reinforce their racist anti-migrant policies. Representatives of capital are happy their freedom to exploit working people continues without added restrictions.

The bosses are happy

Watching the post results TV coverage one comment from a so-called independent journalist stood out. He said this result shows you that all that old-style confrontation in the workplace the CGIL wants to stir up again with this referendum is over, we need to move on, focus on wages and productivity rather than all that stuff that is historically finished. This is the narrative the government and bosses want. Keep politics out of the workplace, let us discuss it as a technical matter, the people have shown they are not interested in resurrecting outdated talk about class struggle.

The government actively encouraged people to go to the seaside or for a walk in the mountains rather than to participate in the democratic process. Meloni herself was shown on the media going to a polling station and refusing to take a ballot paper. Legally it is a legitimate tactic and governments with different politics have done the same thing when the right wing have organised referendums. Still it reflects a refusal to engage in any discussion about these big workplace issues. One minister when questioned on TV could not even accurately say what the referendums were about.

The government denounced these referendums as a manoeuvre to challenge it and as an internal faction fight within the PD. The left of centre opposition were accused of being led by the main trade union confederation, the CGIL, which has strong links with the main opposition party, the social liberal, PD (Partito Democratico, Democratic Party).

Landini, CGIL leader, was the main promoter of the referendum. He mobilized the union structures to get the half million signatures and then crisscrossed Italy in the last months to get out the vote. The government and rightwing forces are falling over themselves in using these results to discredit him. Even though he has failed to really lead national strike action to defend workers living standards, they want to neutralize even the small possibility he will lead the unions in any confrontation with the government over the wage contracts in dispute.

Internal conflict in PD

Elly Schlein, the PD leader, beat the more moderate leadership challenger and the right wing of the party to secure her position two years ago. She has been keen to disown the worst anti-working class policies of a previous PD leader and prime minister, Matteo Renzi. He had proposed and implemented the Jobs Act, a so-called modernizing piece of legislation which was a sweetheart deal with neoliberal capital. It removed some of the progressive labour laws which allowed for limited protection, although in practice the bosses were not particularly restrained.

The riformisti – the PD right wing minority who still support Renzi's position, opposed the party line of 5 yes votes with 3 no votes on the Jobs Act changes. Although a smallish minority among the membership the riformisti has important elected representatives. For example Picerino, vice president of the European parliament, openly campaigned for three No's. So on one level it is true the referendum were also part of an internal debate within the PD. For the PD this sort of institutional campaign, which the whole left supports, is the priority for political action. There was little of the mass campaigning the local committees organised for the 2011 water referendum. Schlein has not changed the

overall social liberal policies of the PD and certainly not mobilized working people against the hard right Meloni government.

I was surprised that even before the referendum was over Schlein was already expectation managing saying that 30% would be a good result. In any sort of sporting contest – let alone a political one – it is hard to mobilize your people if you accept defeat in advance. Landini, to his credit, did not adopt this line. Her target figure of 30% was decided on because she wanted to say that if the referendums had more than 12.5 million voters it would be more than elected the Meloni government. The government opposed the referendums but more people voted in them than for her government so this would be a defeat for Meloni and Salvini. Nobody is buying this line.

Depending on how you add things up there may be about the same number of Yes voters as voted for Meloni. But you cannot toss in all the no votes or ignore the vote on citizenship (only 9 million Yes, and the centrist parties supported this) which is a main plank of the government's programme. On citizenship the Yes vote was certainly less than those who elected Meloni. Migration will be a theme of any future election campaign much more than the Labour laws. Schlein will be facing angry reactions from the right of the party who are saying her referendum strategy and alliance with Landini has had a boomerang effect or gifted Meloni a victory.

Has much changed as a consequence of the votes?

The big question is whether the opposition or the government has gained or lost from the referendums. Clearly these numbers do not give the left of centre parties much hope that they will defeat the right wing coalition any time soon in an election. You cannot translate these results simply into general election, but voting intentions and the citizenship question spells bad news for the opposition.

It is true the campaign to get the referendums and the electoral process has put these issues on the table as Landini has argued since the defeat. However, it shows the limits of the left of centres parties' implantation in the country and ability to mobilize a majority. It also exposed the divisions within the opposition compared to the government's compact unity. Conte leads the Five Star Movement (M5S) and although he personally said he would vote Yes on the citizenship question there was no official party position. As for any broader electoral unity with the centrist parties like Renzi's Italia Viva or Calanda's Azione, both voted No except on citizenship.

Conte's M5S has a lot of electoral support in the South but this is where the turnout was worse (low twenties), whereas in the PD fiefdoms in the North/Centre the turnout was above average (36-9%). As might be expected turnout was best in the big towns and urban areas. Working class areas turned out more for the votes on contracts while the more middle class historic centres voted most for the citizenship change. Small towns with less union structures and smaller influence of the left of centre parties turned out a great deal less than the larger urban areas. Women voted more than men.

Landini, cgil trade union leader in press conference

Are referendums any use any more?

After the results there has been some discussion of the usefulness of the abrogative referendum system. It did bring some positive historic changes like on abortion and the left has generally supported using the process since, as with water one, you can use it to build a big campaign and even win. However with only one quorum since 1997 some people are arguing for reducing the quorum to encourage more participation. On the right there is talk of making it more difficult to hold a referendum by increasing the number of signatures needed.

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These votes have reflected the relationship of class forces in Italy which is still very unfavourable to the working class. The struggle to defend workers rights and living standards will continue through the building of militant currents in the unions and workplaces. This continues through the rank and file unions and inside the CGIL.

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Source: **[Anti*Capitalist Resistance]** <https://anticapitalistresistance.org/italy-left-fails-to-win-its-referendums/>

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