

INTERVIEW

# Italy - Before the general elections, Potere al popolo: Fighting Hopelessness

Sunday 4 March 2018, by [CAROFALO Viola](#), [PREZIOSO Stéfanie](#) (Date first published: 16 February 2018).

**Italy's left is struggling to present an alternative in an election where abstention is expected to hit record levels.**



*Potere al Popolo holds its first national assembly in Rome on December 17, 2017.*

As Italy builds up to its general election on Sunday, the country's right is ascendant. Disgraced former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi is at the forefront of politics again, with the most likely results being either a right-wing government or grand coalition involving Matteo Renzi's centrist Democrats.

Social discontent from years of high unemployment, stagnant wages, and regional inequalities is being directed toward the hard-right Lega and Fratelli d'Italia as well as the amorphous populists of the Five Star Movement, who are increasingly adopting their anti-immigrant talking points.

But the election also offers the prospect of the emergence of a new force on the Italian left, albeit in a more minor role. Potere al Popolo (PaP, Power to the People), formed late last year, is aiming to resist the anti-labor and anti-migrant onslaught and rebuild a socially rooted Italian left.

PaP is emerging into a political landscape where the lack of hope for change is expressed in abstention, which is expected to reach record heights in this contest. Stéfanie Prezioso of Switzerland's solidaritéS speaks to PaP's spokesperson Viola Carofalo about how the party aims to appeal to the millions of Italians unrepresented by the current political order, its opinions on the broader Italian left, and the inspiration it has taken from other radical movements internationally.

**Stefanie Prezioso (SP)**

**One of the running themes of Italian life in recent years has been how alienated young people are from politics. What is PaP doing to address this?**

**Viola Carofalo (VC)**

It is young people who have suffered most from the crisis. Earlier this year, an IMF report was published which said that young people are most at risk of falling into poverty, resulting from the

precaritization of the labor market, which particularly affects those entering the labor market, as well as the cuts to social welfare and the particular forms this has taken. Moreover, as we have mentioned, Italian society has traditionally been composed of a strict hierarchy based on age, which means that young people have always been excluded from politics.

The lack of interest in formal politics shown by young people has a variety of causes, many of which apply across Europe. One thing that does not help is the way that prominent politicians and government representatives speak about young people. Government ministers have called us “choosy,” “big babies,” and “losers”; the current labor minister, a member of the Democratic Party, famously told a journalist that more young people emigrating means not having to worry about them “getting under our feet.” Young people are thus blamed for their situation, even though in fact it owes to economic crisis and political decisions taken by others.

Our movement is made for the most part of young people. We know how to speak to young people simply because many of us are young people. We are maximizing our use of social media, for example, because we know that it is effective for communicating with this demographic (and because it allows us to bypass the mainstream media). But most of all, we want to create not just a movement but a community, and for this reason creating the spaces for socializing and recreation, like we have done here in the Ex-OPG, is just as important as anything else we do. This allows us to break down the barriers of isolation that have become stronger with the progressive closing off of public spaces and with the increasing pressures of life under crisis and austerity.

To imagine an alternative, we need to create space for creativity and to involve people in ways that are totally different to procedural politics. If real change is to take place in this country it will be driven by young people, by those who have no interest in preserving the status quo. Our political program calls for radical change and renewal. Politics should be an instrument you use to transform your life and your community, not something dirty and ugly that we want nothing to do with.

## **SP**

**The Italian left has historically been associated with the country's north. Why was Potere al Popolo born in the south of Italy?**

## **VC**

This is an interesting question, to which we could respond in many ways. To start with, we can refer to the Naples's recent experience under mayor Luigi De Magistris. In many ways left-leaning, De Magistris is independent of any party and also very critical of the Democrats. His administration has opened channels of communication with the social movements (for instance, protecting us from eviction); we are independent of De Magistris, but our dialogue with him is ongoing. We can also refer again to our own organization, Ex-OPG Je So' Pazzo, which, though being a social center based in one city, has gained a national reputation due to what we have been able to create over the last couple of years.

But to mention only such examples would not give a full picture, and they are of course restricted to the case of Naples. The truth lies elsewhere: it lies in the fact that the stereotypes of a backward, traditional, and conservative agricultural South are misleading. We don't deny that the difference between the North and the South exists, what is referred to in Italy as “the southern question.” The southern economy has very different characteristics to that of the north and the center; this is undeniable. Agriculture has always been, and still is, the main sector. The South has never been really industrialized, though there are a few big industries like the ILVA in Taranto. Poverty and unemployment have always been a problem in the South; this is one aspect of the stereotype which is true. It is worth mentioning here that in some regions of the South the greatest source of income is currently the industry created around the emergency reception system for migrants. . . However,

and this shouldn't be surprising, such a critical situation, in which the dominating facts of life are emigration, unemployment, lack of infrastructure and public services, can easily turn into a powder keg.

The South also has its own story of militancy, though it takes a different character to the North. It is centered not around the traditional factory worker but the unemployed, the underemployed, and the community. (There is a long history of self-organization of the unemployed in Naples, for example, both on the left and the right.) So there are many associations and groups here in the South that carry out the same practices of mutual aid as we do here at the Ex-OPG. These practices are now becoming the backbone of Potere al Popolo. And this is because they have come to have relevance across the whole country. Years of deindustrialization, economic crisis, and austerity governments have resulted in what we could describe as a "Southernization" of the North. The militancy of the northern factory workers has been in decline for decades, essentially from the '80s onwards; you could cite the beginning of this decline, in fact, as the defeat at FIAT in 1980. Many big factories have either been offshored or drastically restructured. And though there are pockets of the North that still have a relatively thriving economy, Lombardy and Emilia Romagna, for example, much of this is composed of smaller, more specialist production plants.

Furthermore, the main industry in Italy is now the service sector. The service sector is notoriously difficult to organize, and working conditions are likely to be precarious with people moving from job to job frequently. This of course is a trend we see across postindustrial Europe and the United States; Italy is no different in this regard. Yet this kind of precarious work or unstable work is not new to the South. The Neapolitan economy, for example, has always largely been based on artisan businesses and services. Irregular forms of work have always been commonplace, the norm even. So perhaps it is the case that the practices that militants in the South have traditionally used due to these particular conditions have now become relevant also to other parts of the country.

## **SP**

**What do you say to people who would accuse you of splitting the Left, or specifically of taking votes away from Liberi e Uguali, which many understand to be a Left alternative?**

## **VC**

First of all, we would say that we don't view these elections as a kind of competition. We are trying to focus on our long term goals, and, as we have said, our aims, as we have outlined above, are different. We are not trying to get votes at all costs.

In terms of where we come from and our objectives, therefore, we are very different to Liberi e Uguali. We are the outsider in this election. Liberi e Uguali, on the other hand, is led by figures like Massimo D'Alema and Pierluigi Bersani, who are embedded in the institutions. They were part of the government which passed the Jobs Act, the pension reform, the school reform, and the TAV rail line. Their chosen leader, Pietro Grasso, is someone who cannot exactly be described as having a background in left-wing politics [he started out as an anti-mafia judge and prosecutor, coming to politics essentially through a liberal commitment to the fight against the mafia, he even praised the 2012 Berlusconi government for its anti-mafia policies] and who supported Matteo Renzi unconditionally until the end of October 2017, so less than four months ago. It is difficult, then, not to view the creation of Liberi e Uguali as opportunistic: it was founded after the resounding failure of the PD's referendum on constitutional change, at a point when it became clear that the PD was losing its grip on power. They could come out with the most radical program conceivable, but it wouldn't change the fact that these men have personal responsibility for the antisocial legislation that has incited the disillusionment with, and rage against, the ruling PD. The problem with Liberi e Uguali concerns credibility. What we desperately need in Italy is a political renewal, and this necessarily means a politics led by the young, by women, by people of color, by diversely abled

people, by people who are in politics because they believe in change and not because it has become a career.

There are people who criticize us for being a mere reconstitution of an identitarian left, restricted to a subculture and incapable of appealing to the masses. To them we say, we do come from a culture of the Left because we are people who have never given up the fight, who have never stopped struggling against injustice, against racism, sexism, against capitalism. If what we say and how we say it is of course important, what makes us credible is where we come from, what we've done so far. We come from struggle.

Our priority is not electing someone but rather getting people to participate in politics and in rebuilding communities, in rebuilding solidarity within our society. Our priority is meeting needs and creating a new political praxis adapted to our current reality, connecting people and organizations in order to share and spread knowledge and skills. This is not something we have only just begun to do, though in times of crisis it has expanded immensely, and these elections for us are simply a means of expanding it further. If we do elect representatives then this is a positive, but we are not fixated on this. Potere al Popolo came into being only two months ago. We have no big donors (we are surviving on crowd funding), we don't have big names, and we have to contend with a total blackout in the mainstream media. So it really will be difficult for us to achieve a result in these elections; we have no illusions about that. But how we do on March 4 will not alter our real objectives.

**SP**

**What are your "sister" movements in other countries?**

**VC**

We are interested in forging links with left-wing parties across Europe. We have made links with France Insoumise. Jean Luc Mélenchon came here to visit the OPG last week, and he spoke of his support for the movement and of the importance of combining efforts across Europe. We held a press release in the European Parliament and have connections with parties from the GUE/NGL group, such as the PTB in Belgium, Die Linke, and the Portuguese Communist Party. At our last national meeting we had representatives from Podemos and France Insoumise, and, at our first meeting in London, the national coordinator of Momentum came to discuss strategies for movement building and campaigning.

Though it can be dangerous to make generalizations across different contexts, and we are aware that we must develop our own strategy in relation to the particular context of Italy, we still think it is of great importance to learn from other experiences abroad. We were particularly interested, for example, in the mobilization of young people in the Corbyn campaign, in the early experiences of Syriza and their community organizing (though we see the developments post-referendum as a significant failure), and in France Insoumise's decision-making structures and system of feedback from local groups, as well as its approach to the question of the European Union. We also believe that forging links across Europe is vital, as, if we are to bring about the necessary change to the European institutions, it will be done through a united movement of radical political forces that are prepared to defy the will of EU executive power.

**SP**

**What is your outlook for rebuilding the Left after the elections?**

**VC**

Real change comes from working away within every aspect of society. If you are able to meet material demands but also to construct your own music, theater, cinema. If you are able to develop political practices that can modify the functioning of the institutions. This kind of political work

obviously cannot be done within the space of an electoral campaign: it takes years and years.

What we need to do is to continue to build the grassroots, work that requires time and patience. What we wanted to do with these elections however was to use them as a springboard to reach out to a much wider section of society than we could usually do. Then after the elections we will go back to doing the community work, to building a “social party.”

This is why the practices of mutual aid have a fundamental importance. If the state is not able to resolve our problems because it is held ransom by the interests of the powerful few and was structurally designed to serve them, we must find a political practice which meets needs while also raising consciousness and participation. If you set up a drop-in clinic or an after-school club you can do a lot of things, you can learn about the social dynamics of the community in which you are active, you can come into contact with people who would not normally come near a political organization, and you can start a dialogue; you can learn together and begin to struggle together. These practices can thus construct an embryo of consciousness and of self-governance, the basic elements, in other words, of real democracy. What we do is not charity. We are trying to create a community that can be the agent of change. Mutualism and the practice we call “popular control” allows us to break out of the rhetoric of the eternally defeated: it shows us that if we act in an intelligent and creative manner we can win. We can demonstrate that the institutions are not fulfilling our needs and therefore they can be substituted by us acting in autonomy, that we are capable of organizing ourselves both to meet our needs and to imagine a better future. Who better to intervene to improve the conditions of workers, of people who use services, of people who live in the local area, than the workers, service users, and local inhabitants themselves?

We aim to strengthen this infrastructure and make it permanent. Each outpost must be transformed from an electoral committee to an organizational nucleus that will continue to function after the elections. Our main objective is to create a popular movement that will continue to grow and become long lasting. Our objective is to put power back in the hands of the people and we will not stop until we achieve it. Reaching the 3 percent threshold required to obtain parliamentary seats is therefore by no means the end point of this project.

## **SP**

### **Who are your candidates?**

VC

Our candidates were chosen through the collective decision making of local assemblies. In total, more than 20,000 people have taken part in Potere al Popolo’s 150 local assemblies. Our guiding principle is radical democracy. We try to use decision-making processes based on consensus where possible, though in some cases we use voting with a high majority threshold.

We did have some criteria for who could stand: we wanted to have gender balance in every seat, but we also wanted to have an age balance because young people are almost entirely absent from Italian politics. Italian society is gerontocratic in a way that is perhaps unique in Western Europe. For us it is vital that young people have a central place in the project, to break down this age-based oppression that keeps young people locked out of politics. We also said that candidates needed to have a political background in keeping with our politics and our electoral program.

Our candidates are therefore people with a background in activism, in trade unionism, in community work. This sets us apart from other electoral formations which, having a list of politicians that had to be guaranteed seats, worked on a system of dividing up constituencies for candidates behind closed doors, then basically parachuting them in from on high. We have representatives of affiliated political parties taking part who had been intending to stand separately before Potere al Popolo

came into being. However, in every case the final word was given to the local assembly; they had the power to accept or reject the proposed list for each constituency. We welcome the involvement of political parties, but one thing that was important to us was that space was made for people without a background in party politics.

There is a perception in Italy that the realm of party politics belongs mainly to career politicians, and to predominantly older men, a perception that unfortunately applies even to left-wing parties. This is something we think is vital to remedy, so we gave precedence wherever we could to people with a background in a much broader range of political activism, to young people, or to people like one of our candidates here in Naples called Lina who is a housewife and has been a community and housing activist for many years but never involved in party politics. Many of our candidates come from similar backgrounds, and their details are all available on our website.

---

## **P.S.**

\* Jacobin. 03.03.2018:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2018/03/macedonia-greece-balkans-nationalism-nato>

### \* ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Viola Carofalo is a researcher and activist at Naples's ex-OPJ social center. She is Potere al Popolo's lead spokesperson for the Italian election.

### ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

Stefanie Prezioso is associate professor at Lausanne University and author of numerous works on European anti-fascism.