

After the March 4 general election: The meaning of the Italian right's victory

Wednesday 18 April 2018, by [Sinistra Anticapitalista](#) (Date first published: 6 March 2018).

Introduction

Italy's political future is unclear more than a month after general elections that failed to produce a working parliamentary majority for any single electoral coalition or party. Nevertheless, the March 4 election was a triumph for the right-wing coalition of parties led by the xenophobic League and for the populist Five Star Movement, which came in first and second respectively in voting. The incumbent center-left Democratic Party was trounced, losing nearly 300 seats in the two houses of parliament.

Though no new government has been formed yet, the threat of the right on the rise was clear from the March elections. In this statement issued after the election and translated into English by Antonello Zecca, the socialist group Sinistra Anticapitalista explains the social dynamics that led to the result and discusses the tasks ahead for the left.

THE OUTCOME of the March 4 general elections is disheartening and clearly shows how alarming Italy's political and social situation has become. It shows the unfavorable balance of forces between the classes after so many years of austerity policies and repeated setbacks and divisions among the working class and social movements.

1. The Democratic Party (DP) and its Secretary General Matteo Renzi suffered a bad defeat after having implemented neoliberal policies, chiefly against workers' rights and the public education system. The reactionary policies against migrants implemented by incumbent Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni and Interior Minister Marco Minniti with the goal of winning support from rightward-moving voters not only didn't prevent other parties like the right-wing League, which has made racism and xenophobia its trademark, from attracting votes, but it contributed to the division and weakening of the working class, whose suffering has been blamed on migrants.

The DP's defeat dragged down every individual and party that was associated with it, now or in the past. Pier Luigi Bersani, Massimo D'Alema and Pietro Grasso—all leaders of the Democratic and Progressive Movement (DPM), a split to the left from the DP—couldn't possibly be perceived as an alternative to the DP after having supported its policies for so many years. Neither could the Italian Left, a right-wing split from the Party of Communist Refoundation (PCR) play a positive role after governing with the DP in many municipal and local councils and participating in Free and Equal, an electoral coalition in partnership with the DPM. The future may not have anything in store for this political force, which would be undeserved in any event.

As happened with the Romano Prodi government [the center-left government named after its prime minister, in which the PCR participated from 2006 to 2008], the distrust of and revulsion for a party

like the DP, which still calls itself and is still considered to be left wing, had negative consequences for all the forces that define themselves similarly. The rebuilding of a genuine left alternative, which was started in this round of elections with the formation of the Power to the People election list, will take some time.

2. The Five Star Movement (5SM) won a landslide victory that went beyond expectations. The anger, frustration and desire for an alternative to the mainstream parties among voters found an outlet in the party of Beppe Grillo [the Italian comedian and founder of 5SM] and Luigi Di Maio [the current party leader]. Although the 5SM has had a hard time governing in major local councils such as Rome and Milan, it was perceived by a great number of people, particularly in the South, and among various social layers as the best way to achieve rapid political change. This was all the more so because 5SM's contradictory and ill-defined political stances appeal to very different layers of society. The 5SM was and will be a decisive player in what takes place next, with an essential role in managing Italian capitalism.

The advances of the 5SM notwithstanding, voter turnout remained low, close to the level of 2013. More than a quarter of eligible voters didn't find anybody to vote for. Prominent among those who didn't cast a ballot is a large number of the exploited and the marginalized.

3. What is more shocking is the double-digit increase in national support for a reactionary and xenophobic party like the League, whose leader is Matteo Salvini. The poisoning of significant layers of the working class by this demagogue, with his hatred toward migrants, represents a decomposition of solidarity and of collective democratic action that is a serious threat for the future. Within the center-right coalition, Forza Italia was surpassed by the League, with the result that former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi may be eclipsed. It is important to note the success of another nationalist and reactionary party, Brothers of Italy, to recognize how deep the shift to the gone in public opinion and political conventional wisdom.

Importantly, the right-wing coalition fell short of reaching the 40 percent threshold, which would allow it to form a government on its own, but its success shows it will be key political force in the current political circumstances and its success is evidence of the abject failure of previous center-left governments. It should also be noted that Casa Pound and Forza Nuova (New Force), the two main neo-fascist political movements in Italy, both unfortunately managed to escape electoral irrelevance and get new nationwide audiences.

The outcome of these elections sets up a contradictory institutional situation since none of the three coalitions/parties reached an absolute majority, and none seems inclined to participate in any sort of grand coalition. This could lead to an unusual assortment of alliances between heterogeneous and weakened forces, which could be difficult for the ruling class to handle. Also, a political crisis could force new general elections. The situation makes it obvious that the only antidote to a further shift to the right is working class self-activity, which is now more urgent than ever.

4. This election setback for the working-class movement and the disintegration of a working class electoral alternative must be attributed to the leadership of the largest unions, who have subscribed to austerity policies managed by the center-left political leadership and have opposed workers fighting back against them, even when conditions were ripe for it and there was a strong demand from workers. Union leaders are that much more to blame having signed concession agreements in collective bargaining, which bosses have used to take back what they were forced to agree to when the working class movement was stronger. An agreement with the employers and their association (the General Confederation of Italian Industry) at end of February, for example, will act as a straitjacket on workers.

The leaders of CGIL, CISL and UIL—the three main Italian trade union organizations—want to preserve their apparatuses and their political role by negotiating concessions in the name of what’s best for workers. We are facing a twin disaster: on the one hand, the victory of the right in the election, and on the other, the full-fledged class collaboration on the part of major trade union organizations. We can’t build a left that challenges neoliberalism—and, still less so, that challenges capitalism—if we don’t start from the social struggle and trade union organizing on the basis of the immediate demands of the working class. This is why we think it’s necessary to build a united front involving all unionists at the grassroots and the left opposition within CGIL [the most left wing among largest trade union organizations], which will face the challenge of sending its message at the union’s conference this year.

5. The electoral outcome of the left-wing Potere al Popolo (Power to the People, PtP) wasn’t what would have been hoped for under the current political circumstances. But it should not be underestimated. It is a good starting point since the coalition had faced major hurdles. The rebuilding of a strong pole on the left will have to be achieved by resisting the scatter of political organizations and social movements, but this has just begun with the last three months’ hard political work before the election. Positively, this involved the activation of new layers of the left and the reactivation of old layers. If we hope to begin the process of building social resistance and mass movements, this appears to be a meaningful way to do so.

The PtP’s showing was not strong enough to win it representation in parliament—though there were some breakthroughs in local elections—but it is still a good foundation to start from, all the more so given that we are in a political conjuncture that has already swept away diverse forces that called themselves to left wing. It is up to those who support the PtP to progress from election campaigning to daily activity with the aim of rebuilding mobilizations to fight the attacks that the ruling class demands of the government in the interests of the capitalist system and the neoliberal framework of the European Union.

Sinistra Anticapitalista has also been building the PtP from the onset with common activity to support its candidates and its political message. A heartfelt thanks to all the comrades who were engaged in that difficult task and who, despite the complex situation, helped to achieve some political and organizational breakthroughs that will be surely be helpful in the future. Sinistra Anticapitalista renews its commitment to consolidating the convergence and unity actions of the forces that gave founded PTP, with the goal of making it larger and developing political debates, so that it will be up to the task of being one of main political actors in the new period that March 4 certainly opened up.

Sinistra Anticapitalista

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* April 18, 2018:

<https://socialistworker.org/2018/04/18/the-meaning-of-the-italian-rights-victory>