

Five Lessons from the Italian referendum - “The only certainty is the likelihood of prolonged political crisis”

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Ivan Crivellaro - Unblock our future, Unblock our rights. Dump Renzi.

1. A thumping defeat for Renzi’s anti-democratic and pro-capitalist project.

Renzi wanted to change the constitution to remove the senate and to centralise more power in his hands as prime minister in order to achieve the ‘governability’ his masters in the capitalist class require. The consequences of the long downturn and popular anger has meant the existing political systems do not always function efficiently for the ruling class to ensure their continuing austerity policies and attacks on labour and democratic rights.

It was poetic justice that the young moderniser, who had come in to put the old political guard of his own party and others on the scrap heap, has himself been dumped by a huge majority. He lost by nearly 20 percentage points, a bigger margin than anyone expected. The ex -boy scout who quoted that great imperialist Baden Powell in his resignation speech was reported to have plaintively wailed “ I never realised they hated me so much” (Corriere delle Sera, Dec 5). Renzi had tried to dress in the Five Star Movement’s clothes with his attacks on the political caste and the need to reform Italy. But he had relied on some very old fashioned back room manoeuvring by the wily former president Napolitano and a pact with the devil himself, Berlusconi, in order to get the premiership in the first place. After pledging support to premier Letta he stabbed him in the front and became prime minister without being elected on any sort of programme.

Right up to this defeat he was the darling of the key capitalist sectors as he set about changing the labour laws, attacking ‘analogue’ social democratic values and giving handouts to business. Most of the press, the bosses’ representatives and the European Union leadership totally backed him. He monopolised the state TV studios, spent a fortune on the campaign hiring American specialists, sent out a letter to all Italian expat voters and made sure there were some giveaways in the latest budget. An Italian version of Project Fear was organised to suggest a No vote would result in a run on the banks. Renzi even made the original Cameron error of staking his whole political future on the vote. He said in January of this year that he would leave politics if he lost the vote. His arrogance meant he overplayed his hand since people saw a chance to reject him as much as reject the anti-democratic constitutional changes.

2. Working people took the opportunity to reject Renzi’s attack on democratic gains and to

oppose his government's policies.

People voted no in all but three regions and the percentages in the poorest areas of the south and the islands reached 60 to 70%. This was the referendum with the highest number of voters since the Divorce one in the 1970s. Working people saw an opportunity to not just defend what they considered were legitimate limits on politicians appropriating too much power but also to reject the policies associated with Renzi. The recession has meant there is still officially 12% unemployment which rises to over 20% for young people. Huge numbers have emigrated to London or elsewhere to find some work. Teachers have been denigrated and put under undue pressure with the so-called 'Buona Scuola' reforms and salaries have been frozen or cut both in the public and private sector. Pensions have been cut back so you have to work longer and get less. At the same time the government has stepped in to bail out several struggling banks, some of which have had close ties to the PD. It is hardly surprising that people under 34 voted nearly 80% for No.

3, Although it is a defeat for ruling class interests it is not an unambiguous victory for working people. There is no clear left alternative project.

Local No committees were dominated by the left and progressive forces. They operated independently of Beppe Grillo's populist Five Star Movement or Salvini's hard right Northern League. There were several national days of mobilisation for a NO vote in which rank and file trade unions participated. The main trade union federation the CGIL finally came out for No vote but hardly mobilised. However, undeniably the extreme weakness and disunity of the left and the labour movement in Italy at the moment provides a lot of space for the M5S and to a lesser extent for the Northern League. Following the success of their mayoral candidates in Rome and Turin this has boosted the popularity of the Grillo movement. Opinion polls have placed it ahead of Renzi's PD. Ironically if the current electoral laws are not changed this may give the bonus to Grillo and allow his movement to form a government if it becomes the first party.

Despite leading an honourable battle against politicians' privileges, against corrupt big building projects and in favour of action on the environment this movement does not provide a real alternative for working people. It claims all the problems of Italian society are to do with the corrupt political caste, once they are replaced by a legion of Grillini, armed with the intelligent use of the internet then real change will happen.

Rarely do they attempt to build campaigns on the ground with other political forces or offer government coalitions since all the other parties are part of the caste that need replacing. They may criticise the banks and some multinationals at times but they have no analysis that links the caste to any economic interests.

Since they do not accept any notion of class exploitation they have no particular interest in defending workers' rights or wages and have even placed trade unions somewhere in the caste.

Nevertheless despite some wrong or racist statements from Grillo and some leaders on migrants it is not the same as UKIP or the Northern League - there is no systematic racist campaigning. Indeed despite Salvini's best efforts the referendum campaign did not have the dominant racist underpinning of the Brexit one. Consequently the victorious forces of the No campaign do not express even a potential political alternative for working people.

4. How the British media and even some on the left have misunderstood this referendum.

Unsurprisingly the *Guardian* came out unequivocally for the Italian Blair in this campaign. All the mainstream media also failed to see any progressive forces involved in the No campaign. They

merely dumped these forces crudely into the so called anti-establishment, anti-liberal insurgency of Brexit and Trump's victory. While Salvini's Liga Norde is operating within a similar framework this is not essentially the case for the Grillo movement or for the substantial opposition to Renzi inside the PD and for the progressive and left forces independent of the PD. Racism and migration were not significant issues in the campaign.

Renzi was portrayed as somebody who was trying to make Italy governable, efficient and modern. A pro and anti-EU division was overlaid onto the debate in an artificial way by the British media. This does not mean that racism and anti-EU feeling will not feature in current or future Italian politics and could well be important in the next election. Some people on the left have become despairing about the obvious shift to the right in world politics and deny any polarisation on the left. The fact that left and progressive forces were mobilised and active against Renzi is a small but significant gain for the future.

Even the coming ructions in the PD could provide some openings although an opposition headed up by former pro-austerity leaders like Bersani and D'Alema does not augur much. Will Renzi embark on some new realignment if he is defeated or walks away from the PD? People thought Berlusconi was dead and buried politically after his sentencing in court but here he is still calling the shots to some extent.

5. While there is a huge crisis in the leadership of a left alternative things are not easy for the ruling class either. It has tried at least three different options since the fall of Berlusconi and Italy in many ways still remains the sick man of Europe.

Both Salvini and Grillo are calling for a general election as soon as possible but the next moves are with Mattarella, the Italian President, who is from the PD. He will see if there is any combination of political forces that can form a new government. Someone like Padoa-Schioppa, the finance minister could be called on supposedly to reassure the markets.

There might be another Monti-style technical solution with Draghi roped in from his EU role. We may have an all-party agreement to work out an electoral law within a certain time and then have elections. Planning for a general election beyond 2017 might cause an even bigger political crisis. The problem at the moment is that the electoral law is not supported by all the mainstream parties so there is reluctance from Berlusconi's Forza Italia to go to elections before there is a change.

All this is taking place within a perilous economic context with Italy's crisis having a negative impact on the Euro and rumours of bad debts with certain Italian banks. Big business is concerned about the uncertainty. At the moment a credible political coalition that can guarantee certainty, manage the crisis in their interests and sustain political consent is proving difficult to achieve. The only certainty is the likelihood of prolonged political crisis.

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P.S.

* December 6, 2016:

<http://socialistresistance.org/five-lessons-from-the-italian-referendum/9364>