



Italy says No to anti-democratic constitutional reform

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Italian voters have rejected premier Matteo Renzi's proposed amendments to the constitution with an impressive 59 percent in the referendum sponsored by his government. Last night, a small spontaneous demo by the Cobas teachers' union formed outside the PM's official residence, Palazzo Chigi, cheering the outcome and shouting to him, "A casa?" (go home).

The aim of the referendum was, according to the government, to simplify and streamline the procedures for making laws. The main change was to be an end to the Italian system of bicameralism. The two chambers, the Camera dei Deputati and the Senato, have basically equal attributions and powers, and each law needs to be approved by both of them. This does, indeed, make the process of approving new laws rather long and subject to parliamentary filibustering.

Having pushed through two major "reforms" (the Jobs Act regarding the labour market and Buona Scuola on the education system) Renzi felt confident he could now put the finishing touch to his "rottamazione" (scrapping) of the Italian political system, with changes that would not only change procedures but lead to the removal of the old parties and leading political figures. In the proposed new constitution, only the Camera dei Deputati would have retained the legislative power, while the Senate, elected by regional councils and mayors, was to become a more consultative body. Thanks to the "majority premium", by which the first party in an election is guaranteed a majority in parliament, Renzi was able to tailor the new constitution to his personal ambitions. Indeed, he was so confident that, at the beginning of 2016, he promised to resign if the referendum were not approved.

However, the political establishment fought back. Practically all the parties allied against Renzi and his referendum, including the far right (Fratelli d'Italia and Lega Nord), Berlusconi, Cinque Stelle and the left (or what is left of it!), CGIL, the largest union, and even several leading figures of Renzi's own Partito Democratico. So, when the result came, it was not surprising. While most of these parties were against the referendum for their own petty reasons, mainly getting rid of Renzi and keeping their own privileges, the mass support for the No vote was an expression of the general and widespread feeling of discontent against the government.

Since coming to power, Renzi has continued the policy of the previous governments, and has imposed new sacrifices and reforms on the working class. For instance, with the "Jobs Act" reform, he destroyed a major gain of the Italian workers, namely Article 18 of the Statuto dei Lavoratori (labour regulating laws), which provided for the reinstatement of workers who had been unlawfully sacked (and recognised as such by special judges). Today, workers can only obtain limited compensation. This reform was of course greeted by bosses, banks, and EU officials, as it allows the capitalists to impose their will on the working class with little restriction. Renzi claimed that making firing easier would also make hiring easier. However, now, young workers hired on a "permanent" contract find that they can be fired at any time and for whatever reason. So the reform has only increased precariousness and Italy still has a chronically high unemployment rate, especially in the southern regions and among the youth.

The Italian left was not able to mount any serious resistance to Renzi, in fact, at the beginning, he was even supported by sectors of the working class and of the trades unions. The left was shattered by the disastrous participation of Rifondazione Comunista in the pro-boss Prodi government of 2006-2008, and has not recovered since. Instead, a new player has emerged, the Movimento Cinque Stelle (CS), a petty bourgeois populist movement created and led by the comedian, Beppe Grillo. The ideology of this party is based on the total rejection of the established party system and

professional politickers, defined as a political caste.

Certainly, the Italian political system is extremely inefficient and corrupted. Several ministers of the Renzi government had to resign because of corruption and favouring friends and relatives, this is, after all, the country in which the word 'nepotism' was coined! More than 500 regional councillors are under examination for various accusations of corruption. These scandals are widespread and practically no region is unaffected. Major scandals involved Lombardy, Piedmont, Campania, Puglia etc. One of the last scandals involved the whole local administration of Rome, which accumulated an enormous debt of €13 billion and is at the same time totally incapable of running the most basic public services like transport, road repairs and garbage collection. Ten years ago, Cinque Stelle was not even a party but simply a series of anti-system shows by Grillo. Today, it runs two major cities; Rome and Turin, and it won 25 percent of the votes in the last general election, in 2013.

While it has attracted disappointed workers and previously left activists, CS is not a workers' party, nor does it define itself in any way as a left party. It is run almost like a sect in a completely centralised way by Grillo himself and a small circle around him, despite all the talk about digital democracy. While, on some issues, like the protection of the environment, or a minimum state allowance for every person (reddito di cittadinanza), CS resembles a progressive party, it is also strongly against immigrants and against trade unions. Representing also some layers of the petty bourgeoisie and small bosses, it is not surprising that within the European parliament CS sits in the same group as UKIP.

Many Italian workers, and some left parties and groups, voted No to get rid of Renzi and to defend the constitution. There is a widespread perception that the 1948 constitution provides some protection against the misdeeds of capitalism and it is seen as a historic gain of the workers' movement. It contains some progressive aspects obtained under the pressure of the Communist Party, such as a fully proportional electoral system and electoral rights for women and, of course, it replaced the previous monarchic system. Nonetheless, it was, and is, a bourgeois constitution. The bicameral aspect itself is a part of the 'checks and balances' built into the system to ensure that a left government could not make rapid changes in favour of the working class. However, it was correct to vote No in the referendum, because the proposed changes would have deprived voters of the little democratic control they have, such as the Senate, which is still elected directly and on a proportional basis. It is no surprise that the reform was sponsored by most of the capitalist media, the banks, the international financial institutions, Obama, Merkel etc.

In 2013, J.P. Morgan released a note in which the bankers presented a very clear political roadmap for European constitutional change:

'The political systems in the periphery [of the EU] were established in the aftermath of dictatorship, and were defined by that experience. Constitutions tend to show a strong socialist influence, reflecting the political strength that left wing parties gained after the defeat of fascism. Political systems around the periphery typically display several of the following features: weak executives; weak central states relative to regions; constitutional protection of labor rights; consensus building systems which foster political clientalism [sic]; and the right to protest if unwelcome changes are made to the political status quo.

"The shortcomings of this political legacy have been revealed by the crisis. Countries around the periphery have only been partially successful in producing fiscal and economic reform agendas, with governments constrained by constitutions (Portugal), powerful regions (Spain), and the rise of populist parties (Italy and Greece).? A few lines later, the note said, prophetically, 'The key test in the coming year will be in Italy, where the new government clearly has an opportunity to engage in meaningful political reform.' (The Euro area adjustment: about halfway there. 2013)

Today, Italy and, in particular, the Italian banking system, is one of the weakest links in the chain of European financial capital. The background to the change of the constitution is the €360 billion of bad debts in the banks' accounts, dating back to the 2007-2008 financial crisis, that is the equivalent of 20 percent of the country's GDP, as well as the huge public debt, amounting to 133 percent of GDP. Several major banks, including Banco dei Paschi di Siena, are close to bankrupt. This poses a systemic threat to the whole EU, as the weight of the Italian economy and debt makes it vastly more important on a European scale than was the case for Greece or Portugal.

What, then, is the link with the constitution change? Having a strong government would have made possible a solution to the banks' problems by making the workers pay for it, either through more austerity, more privatisations, replacing public debt with bank junk assets or some combination of all these. A stronger government would have had the possibility of imposing all this without too much worry about any possible electoral punishment. Today, the whole EU finance sector is therefore worried about the perspective ahead.

The referendum result will, instead, open a new period of weak and unstable government(s) and even the possibility that CS might win the next general election. However, the defeat of Renzi and his resignation does not at all mean that the perspective of renewed attacks against the working class is gone. Indeed, as the case of Greece has shown, ultimately, the financial powers will be able to impose their will and their 'structural reforms' on the working class as long as that class only fights back within the limits, and with the limited weapons, of bourgeois democracy.

Italian workers should organise on the streets and in the factories to confront the new wave of austerity packages, anti-worker 'reforms' etc that whatever new bourgeois government will adopt. CS represents no solution and, from a populist party, it might develop towards a fully-fledged reactionary, anti-worker, anti-immigrant movement. The Italian workers need to organise to impose another solution to the impending crisis of the banking and economic system, making the bourgeoisie pay for the crisis of their system.

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