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Italy

Elections and the future of the left

Fighting workers' organisations urgently needed

Lotta, cwi in Italy

14 March 2008

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Party lists have now been agreed for the national and local elections which are taking place in Italy on 13 and 14 April.

The political landscape is very different from two years ago when two mega-coalitions - the right, led by Silvio Berlusconi, and the 'centre-left', headed by Romano Prodi - battled it out in a heavily polarised election campaign. This time the number of slates standing for the lower house and the Senate runs well into double figures.

Most of the main parties have changed their names, but the outcome of the election will mean no let-up in attacks on working-class people. On the contrary, the extreme weakness of the Italian economy means that those attacks will intensify. The necessity of building fighting workers' organisations becomes more urgent than ever.

There is little enthusiasm for the elections amongst ordinary people. In 2006 many desperately wanted to get rid of Berlusconi and so voted for Prodi's 'Unione' coalition. Now after two years of neo-liberal attacks at the hands of the Unione, there is a widespread feeling that it does not matter who you vote for - "They're all the same". Consequently, the historically high turnout in national elections in Italy is likely to be lower this time, with more people abstaining and others voting 'blank'.

Capitalist parties

Berlusconi's Freedom Party which includes the National Alliance of Gianfranco Fini and is in a 'federation' with Umberto Bossi's right-wing populist Northern League, is still ahead in the opinion polls. However, the Democratic Party led by Walter Veltroni has been closing the gap. Veltroni, the former mayor of Rome, is attempting to model himself on Obama Barak in the US, plagiarising his slogan "We can do it!" and distancing himself from the discredited Prodi and his government.

While a victory for Berlusconi is the most likely outcome, a 'draw', or even a victory for the Democratic

Party, cannot be completely ruled out. 60% of people are still undecided about which list to vote for. While voters are being urged to cast a 'useful vote' - i.e. to vote for either the Freedom Party or the Democratic Party - it is not clear how many votes could go to other slates. The Catholic centre party - the Udc - for example, which has decided to stand a separate list this time rather than joining the Freedom Party, will undoubtedly take some votes away from Berlusconi. Votes could also go to 'Destra' - the extreme-right/fascist slate, or to Giuliano Ferrara's 'pro-life' list. Berlusconi is also more than capable of making serious gaffes such as his idea of putting forward a self-professed fascist as a candidate because he owns lots of newspapers!

In 2006, big business backed Prodi against Berlusconi whose support is strongest amongst the owners of small businesses which make up the bulk of the Italian economy. This time round Confindustria, the main capitalist organisation, has not come out for either the Freedom Party (Pdl) or the Democratic Party (Pd) but put forward its own neo-liberal manifesto of cuts in taxes and spending. It is a programme which both capitalist parties endorse. The Pd list includes Pietro Ichino, an economic journalist who speaks in favour of 'precarious' working (temporary contracts) and wants to abolish Article 18 which gives workers some protection from unfair dismissal. The party is also standing Massimo Calero, a prominent big business leader in the Veneto region and ex-head of Federmeccanica, the organisation uniting bosses in the metal-working sector.

For big business the best result of the election would be a German style grand coalition of the Pdl and the Pd. This is one possible outcome. Berlusconi has said that he would be prepared to enter into a coalition with Veltroni if he does not win a clear majority in the Senate and Veltroni has not ruled out such a possibility. It would probably be presented as a short-term agreement to make changes to the electoral law and the constitution. But of course it would be unlikely to be limited to just that. Both parties are united in advocating tax cuts and support for the capitalist class, less public spending, more privatisation and linking wages to in-

creases in productivity.

Sinistra arcobaleno

The 'radical left' parties, Prc (Party of communist re-foundation), Pdci (Party of Italian communists), Greens and Sd (Democratic left) are standing together on a separate list - the Sinistra arcobaleno (Left rainbow). This is not through choice. They would have preferred to stand together on a united list with the capitalist Pd but Veltroni rejected them!

Fausto Bertinotti, who is heading the Sinistra arcobaleno slate, likes to compare the new organisation with the Left party in Germany. However, both parties have come about in completely different circumstances. The Left party, which is a left reformist party, developed after former SPD Chancellor Schröder's neo-liberal Agenda 2010 policies provoked widespread opposition, including a sharp decline in SPD electoral support and a left wing split from the SPD. With all its weaknesses and limitations, the Left party has picked up a certain electoral support amongst sections of workers and youth who view it as a step forward and a radical alternative to the left of the SPD and is now in the opinion polls currently the third biggest party in Germany.

The Sinistra arcobaleno, on the other hand, is the result of the degeneration of the Prc. Soon after its formation in 1992, the party became a reference point for tens of thousands of Italian workers and youth, advocating a revolutionary transformation of society. Having participated in Prodi's neo-liberal government for two years, the structures of the Prc are now disintegrating. The party is facing electoral meltdown and its links with the working class and social movements are in tatters. In this context, the Sinistra arcobaleno represents a backward step for the Italian working class. It is an organisation bureaucratically and undemocratically formed by the leaders of its constituent parts in a desperate attempt to retain some of their parliamentary seats. It is coming into being at a time of gloom and pessimism on the left and lack of confidence amongst many workers to struggle precisely because of the absence of political leadership from these parties and the main trade union federations.

Reading the Sinistra arcobaleno's election manifesto (decided by the leaders themselves) feels like Groundhog Day. They oppose precarious working but when they were in government they voted through a protocol on welfare which entrenches it! They oppose the building of a US base in Vicenza but voted in favour of it in Parliament!

In the Prc, the main component of the Sinistra arcobaleno, there has been no democratic discussion, no debate or balance sheet drawn about the experience

of two years in a capitalist government. The party is in uproar over the lack of democracy and the subsuming of the Prc's identity within the new electoral formation.

It is clear that sections of the Prc leadership, including Bertinotti, want to go even further and completely dissolve the Prc into the Sinistra arcobaleno and for the latter to prepare for a future coalition with the Pd. He says his aim is to use the elections to build a large left political formation which can then define a new "field of alliances". "The left", he says, "is strategically decisive for influencing the course of the Pd". At local level the Sinistra arcobaleno is continuing to stand in alliance with the Pd, including in the campaign for mayor of Rome where it is supporting Rutelli who is on the extreme right of the Democratic Party.

The polls put support for the Sinistra arcobaleno at between 5% and 8%. At the last elections in April 2006, the Prc alone won 5.8%. Because it is standing separately from the Pd, it is possible that the new formation could pick up the support of some workers and youth who want to vote for a radical alternative and think mistakenly that the party has turned its back on alliances with the Pd at a national level. But there will be many others who voted for the 'radical left' in the past and will not do so again because of the experience of these parties in government. It is possible that the Sinistra arcobaleno could end up with no representatives in the Senate where parties have to get at least 8% of the vote to win a seat. There are virtually no local structures of the new organisation and many Prc members are so disillusioned with the current state of the party that they are refusing to campaign in the elections.

Future of the Prc

What will happen to the Sinistra arcobaleno after the elections is not clear; much will depend on the election results. It is possible that the organisation could fragment. The Sd has already experienced splits and could split further if the outcome of the election is particularly bad. It is also likely that the Greens could split with one section going into the Pd. The Pdci, whose leadership has been verbally more radical than that of the Prc, could even decide to opt out of the Sinistra arcobaleno altogether. Even if the Sinistra arcobaleno survives beyond the elections, it's emphasis on government rather than struggle and its continuing policy of coalitions with capitalist parties means that it is unlikely to develop into a significant force with roots in the workplaces and communities, even in opposition to a Berlusconi government.

The post-election period will also be decisive for the future of the Prc, which has itself experienced a series of split-offs as well as a general exodus of indi-

vidual members from the party. Having undemocratically postponed the national congress until the end of the year, the 'majority' leadership around Bertinotti has used the appointing of election candidates in the new formation as a way of removing opposition supporters and 'undesirables'. Whereas the Prc now has around 80 representatives in Parliament this is likely to be drastically cut because of a fall in votes and because seats are being divided between four parties. Even 'majority' supporters are up in arms because candidates have been parachuted in to top lists in regions where they have no connections and pushing local candidates further down the list where they have no chance of being elected. One party official even went on hunger strike in protest!

New splits from the Prc are likely but it is not yet clear whether the embryo of a new anti-capitalist workers' party could emerge from the turmoil, linking up with social and community movements, the 'unions of the base' and other forces outside of the Prc. The formation of a united left opposition inside the party, which 'Lotta' (Cwi in Italy) is supporting, including l'Ernesto, Controcorrente and others (but not the FalceMartello group) could possibly represent a step in this direction but its success is not guaranteed.

The necessity of a new class struggle party, however, is clear. The growing world economic crisis will severely impact on Italy and workers' need fighting organisations which can defend their interests and put forward a revolutionary, anti-capitalist alternative.

Anti-capitalist left

Two anti-capitalist lists are standing in the elections to the left of the Sinistra arcobaleno - one around 'Sinistra critica' (the Italian section of the United Secretariat of the Fourth International) who recently left the Prc, and the other around the Pcl (Party of communist workers) formed after the Progetto group left the Prc following the election of the Prodi government. 'Lotta' group in Italy, is supporting an anti-capitalist vote in the elections while understanding that some workers and youth who are looking for a radical alternative might still choose to vote Sinistra arcobaleno. However, it is unlikely that either Sinistra critica or the Pcl will be the catalyst for the development of an anti-capitalist workers' party capable of sinking deep roots in the working class and growing into a mass force.

Sinistra critica claims to want to build a new broad anti-capitalist alternative but has been unable to attract forces beyond its own small group. Although their senator, Franco Turigliatto, has a certain renown because of his expulsion from the Prc for voting against the war in Afghanistan, he does not have the standing that Olivier Besancenot has in the LCR in

France, for example. Sinistra critica is much smaller even than the LCR with weaker roots in the working class and would find it much more difficult to launch a new broad organisation as the LCR is planning.

However, like the LCR, Sinistra critica would propose to dissolve its own organisation into a broader formation, rejecting the need for maintaining a revolutionary party. The Pcl, on the other hand, has rejected a united anti-capitalist list with Sinistra critica in favour of standing alone and declared its task to be that of building a 'vanguard' revolutionary party. Although the Pcl might pick up some votes from ex-Prc voters, if it continues its sectarian approach its role in the formation of a new mass party is likely to be negligible.

Clearly, the building of a new mass party in Italy will not be a straightforward process. Whatever the result of the election, the post-election period will continue to be complicated. The changing world economic situation, however, will give rise to new struggles and fresh forces from which such a party could be built.