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Italy

Setback for Berlusconi, hope for left

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The European Parliamentary elections in Italy were a defeat for the government of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. They also marked a setback, albeit a minor one, for European Commission president Romano Prodi's plans to unite the centre-left and a success for Rifondazione comunista (the Party of Communist Refoundation, PRC).

Before going into the details we should recall the context of defeat and loss of credibility of the European unification project shown in the June vote. The very low turnout (in Italy, limited only by the local elections which were held concurrently) and the success of populist and nationalist forces confirm that the European process is perceived as contrary to ordinary people's interests and no answer to workers' needs. This failure also affects the European commission presided over by Prodi, an advocate of free trade policies and fiscal restraint. The losers are all governments that have overseen capitalist globalization policies, whether of the right or the "left", conservative or social-democratic. Following the European elections EU governments decided to push the European Constitution project, further broadening the gap between the oligarchy governing Europe and its peoples. A gap that risks a crisis of democratic legitimacy. The forces of the so-called alternative left held their positions overall, with ups and downs, but remain hard-put to represent a credible alternative. From this standpoint, the alternative left and the European Left Party still have a long road to travel, and the outcome depends on at least two factors. Firstly, to what extent they can build Europe-wide mobilizations, co-ordinated among themselves and with concrete aims, especially on the class struggle front. Secondly, a solid alternative in terms of programme to the current "consensus" between moderates and reformers guiding the destiny of the EU.

Berlusconi's defeat

In Italy, Berlusconi met with a stunning defeat: from 29 down to 21% (i.e., four million fewer votes) as compared to the 2001 political elections, and a fall from 25 to 21% compared to the last European elections. The government's allies come out the winners here, especially the Northern League, with 5% of the votes and the former Christian Democrats in the UDC, rising to 6% (from 3.9%). As for the ex-fascists in the National Alliance, they maintained a stable electoral share around 11%. Thus the defeat hit Berlusconi hardest. This means he must satisfy his allies' ambitions for greater powers and finds himself relatively isolated, especially with respect to the Italian bourgeoisie. This class seems to have suspended their trust in him, if not withdrawn it. The loss of Milan, stronghold of Berlusconian power and culture, is a striking example.

Yet this defeat does not yet represent a collapse of the majority's social representativeness. Of course, Berlusconi's legitimacy crisis is feeding contradictions and centrifugal pressures, very obvious these days. Confindustria [1] has taken its distances, reflecting the President of the Council's loss of credibility. However this does not yet mean a social defeat and a definitive break. Reformist Ulivo ("Olive Tree") policies also have an impact in this respect. They present themselves merely as an alternative to Berlusconi, especially in relation to Confindustria, (this seems to also have a negative influence on CGIL [2] policies) and not as an alternative front, above all in terms of social policies.

The Olive Tree's attitude has not paid off in electoral terms, as evidenced by the scores of the "Prodi slate". With 31.1%, it did not equal the sum total of the parties that founded it (Ds, Margherita, Sdi) which added up to approximately 33% and a million and a half votes more in the 2001 elections. In terms of the European elections, it is nearly impossible to make a comparison, as Rutelli's Margherita party did not exist.

Rifondazione's success

The PRC increased its votes both as a percentage and in absolute numbers. These have risen from 4.3% in the 1999 European elections and 5% in the 2001 political elections to 6.1% and 1,926,000 votes. It is a gain of approximately 500,000 votes with respect to 1999 and 60,000 with respect to 2001. There is no doubt as to the reasons for this vote. Rifondazione is benefiting from the long wave of social movements that have begun to build political links and extend their trust to parties. After many years, a process of condensation is taking place on the electoral level. This is the outcome of a major cycle of struggles starting out with Genoa and the metalworker' strike in 2001 and continuing with the large-scale anti-Berlusconi demonstrations, the peace marches and the new workers' mobilisations over the last year (Terni, Genoa, Melfi, building sites and so on). These have called a new, militant and determined generation of workers into motion.

This is an outcome also visible in the good showing of other political forces (Cossutta's Pdc, the Greens, Occhetto and Di Pietro's new grouping) which have also backed social movements, in particular the anti-war movement, to a more limited extent. All of these forces make up an electoral force of 13% opposed to war and neoliberalism, an important new factor in politics. Rifondazione's role in this space is central. Three years after Genoa and four and a half after Seattle, we can finally say that the choice at the origin of our "New Rifondazione" - the break with the Prodi government and the centrality of social struggle - has borne its first electoral fruits.

Yet Rifondazione's unitary spirit is also recognised, as its usefulness in the fight against Berlusconi. The movements' practices have also expressed such a unitary spirit - and now these can be seen on the general political level as well. The PRC is seen as a useful instrument to change the outlook of the reformist forces and with an influence in intransigent opposition to Berlusconi. Rifondazione's leadership interprets this attitude towards it as the proof that it should swiftly reach a governing agreement with the Olive Tree. This is why Rifondazione Secretary Bertinotti has proposed a "programmatic constituent assembly" of all oppositions, to hammer out a common programme. This outlook has not won over those opposed to the "governmental" turn, giving rise to an internal debate in the party.

Within this overall positive judgement, we must bear in mind certain problems. The electoral campaign did show up the PRC's difficulties establishing a foothold in local situations, to form a broad leadership group with roots throughout the country, and to build a organisation with its own network, able to compete on the electoral front. In Italy, voters were also electing many local administrations. Overall, the PRC lost 140,00 votes between the European and local administrative elections, proof of its organizational fragility and shallow local roots. Moreover, the increase in absolute terms as compared to the 2001 political elections - elections during which Rifondazione stood alone, with no centre-left alliance, hence in a much more difficult situation - amounts to only 60,000 votes. This is not a very strong increase, and it amounts to an "opinion" vote, merely "lent" to Rifondazione - and dependent on choices made in the future.

Yet this unitary spirit is needed because the broad popular masses are calling for it; in particular workers in struggle. This means difficult discussions, perhaps the same ones facing other European forces. It calls for intelligence and tactical ability. There is no doubt that as it goes through this process, the PRC is playing the card of its political autonomy towards the centre-left and its ability to relate to social movements.

Our proposals

At the National Political committee meeting held on July 3-4, 2004, the Bandiera Rossa comrades (supporters of the Fourth International in the PRC) proposed their own political document based on three levels of proposals.

The first concerns opposition to the Berlusconi government. To build a broad process that can inflict a social defeat on the Berlusconi government - not yet achieved - it will be essential to start out from struggles and movements, with a special orientation towards the "new workers' movement", which has started to turn the tide of defeats. Instead of a "Programmatic constituent assembly of oppositions", that is, an instrument in which social movements would sit at Prodi's table for common talks on a future government, start out from the movement's own decision-making bodies, from arenas of social conflict, to arrive at a common platform to establish the scope of unity possible against the government.

The second level, that of programme, poses the problem of an alternative society. In the European elections, the disapproval of neoliberal governments, on the right or the left, in the presence of a systemic crisis of neoliberal Europe expresses demands for change. It gives voice to a general need for content, ideas and proposals for a different society. There is a demand for alternatives to right-wing policies, and we must take these into account. But if there is no disagreement among us on the need to beat the Berlusconi government, governing is another matter. Beyond favourable social conditions, it takes solid programmatic radicalism. This is not to be found in the Olive Tree's positions.

Without such coherence, without the capacity to make difficult choices or swim against the current, there is the risk of opening up the road to populist, reactionary anti-politics. This remains a factor on European soil as once again shown by the June 13 vote. In Italy and Europe alike, an alternative is needed to the reformist projects of social-democratic and centre-left governments. The issues are clear: a coherent stand against war, with or without the UN, the need to reduce military forces and spending, to say no to the European Constitution. Secondly, economic policies that promote the public sector, starting from outright nationalization and reversing the trend to precarious employment, and the concept of a welfare state against twenty years of neoliberal doctrine. They include institutional reforms re-establishing the primacy of proportional and participatory democracy, in the workplace as well. And a concept of universal citizenship without discrimination or humiliation of workers of different colour skin. The challenge facing an opposition to right-wing forces and for a societal alternative requires a radical programme, coherently against neoliberalism and clearly anti-war, that does not give in or compromise. If not, we are merely discussing a pallid change of guard.

The third level concerns the alternative left. It would be an error for Rifondazione to see itself as the "left of the centre-left" within an unlikely Constituent Assembly of oppositions. It would be far more useful to continue along the alternative left road understood as a political and social coalition. This would continue to facilitate convergence among the political forces of the anti-capitalist left and the new generation in struggle. Beyond summits or endless conferences, it is important to identify the places and instruments to undertake discussions, of a programmatic nature but also linked to an immediate social initiatives and hence able to offer full status to the many social forces, associations and movements that must constitute an essential component of the alternative left. It means drawing upon movements' experience to establish the perimeters of an anti-neoliberal pole distinct from the reformist front, and able to follow up on decisions made by movements without trying to take their place, thus, respecting their autonomy. An anti-neoliberal pole that would test its capacity for initiatives directly in the heat of social confrontations, starting with an Autumn Campaign against Berlusconi. As an alternative to the Olive Tree's reformist project, it could lay the groundwork for a real societal alternative.

Article translated by Maria Gatti.

[1] The association representing Italian industrialists.

[2] The General Italian Labour Confederation, the largest and most influential union confederation, of Communist origin.