

<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article133>



Italy

Defeat of the referendum

- IV Online magazine - 2003 - IV353 - September 2003 -

Publication date: Friday 19 September 2003

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

On June 15 and 16, 2003 Italian electors voted on two referendums originating from popular initiatives. The first proposed that article 18 of a statute protecting workers from dismissal without just cause should be enlarged to cover companies employing less than 16 workers. More than three million workers were directly affected. The second referendum concerned the uncontrolled construction of electricity networks.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/21roma.jpg>]

A vast front was formed against these two proposals and particularly the first - all the employers' organizations, the ruling coalition government, the great majority of the centre-left, including the majority of the Left Democrats (DS), two trade union confederations, the CISL and UIL, the League of Cooperatives and the organizations of traders and artisans.

This front, corresponding to 92% of votes cast at the last parliamentary elections, did not call for a 'No' vote, but rather non-participation in the vote - to stop the necessary quorum of 50%+1 of voters being attained (in Italy now the 'normal' abstention is around 35%).

Campaigners for a 'Yes' vote included the Party of Communist Refoundation (PRC), which had gathered the majority of the necessary signatures, the Greens, the FIOM and the rank and file unions, the Party of Italian Communists (a split from the PRC, led by Armando Cossutta), the ARCI [1] and the main trade union confederation, the CGIL - although it did not campaign excessively.

The campaign ended in defeat: only 25.7% of the registered electorate voted. Among them 10,322,598 (87.3%) were favourable to the broadening of article 18 and 1,648,142 (12.7%) against.

The balance sheet

The results led to lively discussions in the PRC leadership bodies. Finally, broad agreement emerged - a defeat had been suffered, but despite all more than ten million voters voted in favour of extending workers' rights, after years in which not extension but defence of these rights has been on the agenda.

A commentary by comrades from the Bandiera Rossa current states that in the last analysis the referendum reflected the general relationship of forces at the current stage. Even recently the working class has suffered setbacks, despite combative struggles and big mobilizations: the metalworkers did not win the renewal of their national contract; FIAT dismissed thousands of workers; the government got Parliament to adopt laws increasing the precarious status of workers; mobilizations in the civil service have begun to subside (although a demonstration of 200,000 people took place in Rome after this commentary was written). More generally we still suffer the consequences of a long phase of setbacks, defeats and difficulties stemming from the neoliberal framework.

In such a context it is important that more than 10 million people voted 'Yes'. It is an urgent task to analyze the results of the vote more closely to understand who they were and decide whether the defeat suffered is the last in a fairly long series or if something new is emerging.

Moreover, we need to consider the role of the movement against capitalist globalization and the other movements which have emerged over the last two years and the results of the effort to combine unity and radicalism. We would repeat here what we have said in the past; the movement is based on an ethical critique of what exists, forming itself around events, but without translating itself into an everyday movement with mechanisms of rooting itself, capable of leading battles around well defined demands. This was the case at Genoa and then Porto Alegre and Florence. During the referendum the 'people of the social forum' were part of the ten million who said 'Yes' as shown by the vote in the big cities, but it was not enough to establish strong and durable links in the neighbourhoods and workplaces, and effectively influence the population as a whole.

Also the peace movement had taken on unprecedented dimensions in Italy, but the war broke out anyway - we have still not grasped the effects of this reality on the movement and its different components. It is true that peace flags still remain on houses, but the war seems to have fallen off the political agenda.

Refounding unity

On perspectives, it is the responsibility of the Olive Tree and the DS to have deliberately separated social demands and political dimension. They subordinate social struggles to the demands of a bipolar political framework that they will never question. That is why they rejected a referendum that did not fit into the bipolar logic.

For us it is clear that priority should be given to social opposition, the only way to favourably change the relationship of forces in the country.

We have no doubts on the nature and projects of the centre-left. But we cannot ignore the desire for unity to beat Berlusconi, which is very widespread at a mass level. The only way to approach this problem without falling into political manoeuvres is to build on the social opposition, challenging the centre-left precisely on this terrain. Such an approach should pose the problem of an alliance to overthrow the ruling coalition. The point of departure should be the utilization of the potential of more than 10 million 'Yes' votes at this referendum.

This problematic has been at the centre of the debates on the PRC national political committed at the end of June. The resolution approved by a large majority proposed the construction for the autumn of a "campaign of mobilization which links the social questions to the defence and enlargement of democratic spaces. Those who have mobilized in the battle for the referendum... represent the point of departure... The expectations of struggle at a mass level against the policy of the centre-right and the concretely alternative practice sketched by the movements allow us to go forward and approach the phase which is opening and the demands for an alternative in posing the problematic of a new relation between the PRC and what has until now been the Olive Tree, projecting a programmatic alternative around content emerging from the reality of conflict and social opposition. This is not a programmatic relation between two subjects, but a relation between numerous partners, open to the movements in the forms that the movements themselves will decide to choose".

It is obviously easier to express such demands in a resolution than concretize them in real mobilizations. The outcome depends above all on the socio-political dynamic in the coming months and years. But that will depend also on the role the PRC can effectively play, in showing itself capable of profoundly renewing its organizational conceptions, structures and mode of functioning.

[1] ARCI (Associazione ricreativa culturale italiana, Cultural Association of Italian Leisure) emerged in the 1950s under the hegemony of the PCI and linked to the Houses of the People. Currently the DS maintains a certain influence but the association operates in an increasingly autonomous manner.