

Italian election tsunami by Balazs Nagy May 2013

There is no point simply repeating the results of the latest Italian elections. Everybody knows them. We also know the astonishment, apprehension and barely-disguised fear they caused among the bourgeoisie and its European satraps and propagandists. Even most of those who are genuinely against these were completely gobsmacked. So pretty much nobody understands what is going on. To penetrate the mystery of it all, you obviously need to go a bit further, to look behind the contestants' political badges and the voting figures. Those colours and facades are only the superficial, immediate and direct reflections of a deeper-going relationship of forces between social classes. Of course this means looking at the political actors and the votes they get. But it also means, unlike all the – sincere or partisan, merely superficial or frankly cosmetic – commentators, looking a little more closely behind the candidates' branding and costumes, especially if you hope to derive useful lessons of general interest beyond the borders of Italy.

To do that, we need first of all to clarify the historical and political conditions which have left their indelible mark on these elections.

The break-up of bourgeois democracy

Important political developments are usually explained, discussed and analysed using the generally prevailing method, i.e. in themselves, separated from their social and historical context. This short-sighted approach is characteristic of various sets of bourgeois analysts. Sadly, it also influences a number of political currents which in other respects oppose capital. But in imposing this narrow view on the Italian elections, the great mass of reports, once they had expressed their dismayed – or indeed satisfied – stupefaction, have been content merely to describe the results. They did not look for

any deeper cause of this veritable upheaval beyond pointing out that the Italian people had massively rejected the destructive bourgeois offensive, before wandering off into conjecture and subjective and even fantastic speculation. But the internal motive forces behind this readjustment of political lines remained beyond their reach.

One of the most fundamental things to bear in mind about our epoch, what makes it different from the 19th century, is that from World War I onwards capitalism visibly entered into the phase of its decline and death-agony. To avoid overloading this article, I shall spare the reader the very complete analysis Lenin provides of this imperialist stage of capital compared to the preceding phase, nor shall I polemicise against the dogmatic perception of this decline which mechanically imposes it on reality as if it were a constant uniform downward motion. On the contrary, it must be emphasised that this decadence is not a static given, an immutable element suspended like some external threat over a constant and unchanging society. Far from it, since it is bound up with this economy's and this society's organism, it is part and parcel of it, just as ageing and physical decrepitude are a result of the declining phase of a human body. And just as a human being declines, so too imperialism is declining to the point of exhaustion. Since Lenin's essential analysis of imperialism's anatomy (including the damnation of its soul) in 1916, the system has continued to trace a generally downward curve. Of course it has not been an uninterrupted linear fall, but nevertheless a flagrant, notorious and necessary descent, despite occasionally stopping or even starting to rise again, as Trotsky describes it like the brief periods of lucidity in a being in its death agony, interludes which bring neither respite nor cure.

Keeping a constant eye on this decline and refreshing our analysis of it (as indeed of other manifestations of imperialism) has been and remains an important task for the workers' movement. Understanding it is an indispensable tool for all those who struggle for working people's emancipation.

After Lenin's death, his companion in arms, Trotsky took on the responsibility for constantly improving this valuable and necessary compass, a task made all the more difficult and arduous by the way in which the Stalinist bureaucracy perverted and rendered gangrenous the USSR and the Communist Parties, altering and falsifying the teachings of Marx and Lenin and persecuting Trotsky and his comrades even to the point of assassination.

Concretely and constantly examining this decadence, in particular the incessant deterioration in the democratic system of the bourgeoisie's political regime as an intimately-linked product of it, was one of Trotsky's most important preoccupations. All his analyses of the processes involved in the decay of petty-bourgeois democracy deserve our attention, since this degradation has not only not stopped, but country by country and period by period it has got worse and assumed a variety of forms depending on the mutual positioning of the classes and the intensity of the struggle between them, and also on specific national circumstances.

One undeniable symptom of imperialist decadence is the noticeable shift in the physiognomy of economic crises. Once again it suffices, without going into details, to mention their much greater frequency and the appearance of great general crises of a new type. These are world-wide in scope, spreading from one economic sector to another (finance, production, distribution), becoming infinite in duration and, inevitably, leading to a re-modelling of political life. These crises of a new type drastically reveal the total bankruptcy of capitalism-imperialism and call imperatively for its overthrow. Thus they openly pose the question of power.

The first such crisis lasted from 1929 to 1945, since World War II was an integral part of it, both as its ineluctable outcome and as its "solution". We are currently living through the second, whose depth and duration are also starting to disturb a good number of even bourgeois economists. In France, only Hollande and his people retain, for public consumption, as it were, any illusions over the approaching end of a

“cyclical” crisis. So this “normal” president hopes for a “normal” crisis.

But at the height of the crisis of the 1930s Trotsky provided a galaxy of magisterial analyses of political upheavals that were the worm-eaten and toxic fruit of imperialist decline. The most important, he showed, arose from classical democracy’s inability to contain the violence of class contradictions produced by imperialism. Hence the bourgeoisie’s orientation towards more authoritarian political systems. This is why democracy degrades and rots and is abolished.

How Trotsky examined fascism, what he called for and proposed and what he warned against, are more or less well-known. But these have become separated from the theoretical basis of his investigation and reflections i.e. imperialist decadence and the sharpening of class contradictions, which are pushed into the background or frankly ignored. So, as Trotsky himself had occasion to comment, an examination of concrete reality has been replaced by the abstract categories of “democracy” and “fascism”.

This is how Trotsky presented this problem (just after Hitler’s tragic seizure of power).

“The Stalinist theory of fascism ... represents one of the most tragic examples of the injurious ... consequences that can follow from the substitution of the dialectical analysis of reality ... by abstract categories formulated upon the basis of a partial and insufficient historical experience ... The Stalinists adopted the idea that in the contemporary period, finance capital cannot accommodate itself to parliamentary democracy and is obliged to resort to fascism. From this idea, absolutely correct within certain limits, they draw in a purely deductive, formally logical manner the same conclusions for all the countries and for all stages of development.” (“Bonapartism and Fascism” in Writings of Leon Trotsky (1934-35), New York, 1974, p. 51)

Among the Stalinists’ generalisations, Trotsky then notes, they worryingly “forgot” that “between parliamentary democracy

and the fascist regime a series of transitional forms, one after another, inevitably interposes itself, now 'peaceably,' now by civil war". With many comrades today in danger of sliding into the schematic method of the Stalinists, this advice is irreplaceable. How important it is, is emphasised by the fact that over that decade of the 1930s, Trotsky never stopped stripping down and analysing bonapartism as one of the intermediate forms between parliamentary democracy condemned to disappear and its replacement by fascism – or the proletarian revolution.

From this rich literature, which is particularly relevant to an understanding of our present problems, we should also quote his article "Whither France?" written three months later. His words in this study resonate today even louder and with particular acuteness:

"Capitalism not only cannot give the toilers new social reforms, nor even petty alms. It is forced to take back what it once gave. All of Europe has entered an era of economic and political counter-reforms. The policy of despoiling and suffocating the masses stems not from the caprices of the reaction but from the decomposition of the capitalist system. That is the fundamental fact which must be assimilated by every worker if he is not to be duped by hollow phrases. That is precisely why the democratic reformist parties are disintegrating and losing their forces one after another throughout Europe".

(<http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1936/whitherfrance/ch00.htm>)

Just like now, as if he had just written these words today, although it was actually almost 80 years ago! And of course it raises the question: Where are we now?

The bourgeoisie's European con-trick

Trotsky's teachings and advice help us to grasp today's situation. Using this Marxist method we can get an understanding of the recent elections in Italy and bring out the main political lessons they offer. But it would be quite wrong to see the current crisis as a mere copy of the previous

one, even though they share the same formal basis – i.e. the decline of imperialism – and the current crisis does resemble its forebear in the 1930s.

The great crisis is not a simple repetition of its ancestor in the last century. In the intervening period the prolonged death-agony of capitalism-imperialism has weakened the system to the point where most, if not all, its traditional reserves are exhausted. The shift of its centre of gravity to Asia is a significant symptom of this exhaustion which in turn has made the retrogression faster and worse. Faced with continual depletion of its normal internal resources and threatened with complete exhaustion, anaemic world capitalism relies entirely on the artificial intravenous drip-feed of finance and the illusory nutrients it brings. At the same time, its most enfeebled European branch has decided to risk all on a death-defying “European” feat of acrobatics which flies in the very face of the continent’s eminently national character. And paradoxically, it has found a lifeline by developing and generalising this survival therapy.

Conveniently screened behind the claim to be “building Europe”, it has brought together and concentrated the last measures (before fascism!) for regenerating capitalism and has imposed them on every country. These stewards of European capital have gained some space to impose the bitter doses by presenting them as necessary steps towards European integration. There is no way national parliaments would have simply swallowed them without provoking severe crises and the inevitable risk of mobilising working people into tumultuous resistance. In any case, they do not have much room for moving towards the kind of bonapartist regime that Trotsky described in the 1930s as one of the intermediate regimes between parliamentary democracy and fascism. The sort of (even pretend) wheeling and dealing between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat which is a typical feature of bonapartism would be very difficult given the anaemic state the bourgeoisie is in. It is unable to offer even the shadow of a reform and is in urgent need of resurrection, which has turned out to be

impossible without tackling head-on all the gains the working class has made; there is hardly any room left for any kind of balancing act between the classes, even an illusory one. Nevertheless, bonapartism is very tempting, especially in France, where Sarkozy recently tried to put it into practice – although that too rested on the “European” fiction. That remains the basis and framework of all efforts to turn towards bonapartism, elements of which, especially the authoritarian side, are present in every country.

Nevertheless, this Europe remains indispensable for the bourgeoisie, first of all because it allows them to be sparing in the use of fascism, which is not only a costly adventure but also very risky and dangerous for them because European workers have not forgotten its horrors. However, it would be seriously wrong to dismiss it completely because it is still the bourgeoisie’s final resort. So as their declines leads to more and more problems accumulate, fascist parties are gaining strength across Europe and biding their time. This can be seen everywhere, from Greece to the Netherlands. For the time being, however, the bourgeoisie is more inclined to rely on the supposed European unification which they have shaped to their own requirements, i.e. to a considerable extent perverted.

First of all, the mongrel edifice which they and their supporters call Europe is admirably adapted to fill the space between democracy and fascism that used to be occupied by national bonapartism. It has the immense advantage of neutralising and shrugging aside democracy and its useless, “dangerous” institutions while maintaining their empty husks or rather, to be precise, degrading them into transmission belts for their own purposes. The crying lack of democracy that is a distinctive mark of the whole of this European edifice, and the obviously authoritarian and profoundly anti-democratic way it functions, are not mistakes arising from miscalculation, chance or caprice. They reveal its essence, express its nature and indicate its vocation to compel, impose and assert the will of the bourgeoisie while side-lining

democratic procedures with which it is incompatible. The sole and invariable aim of all their "recommendations" is to set up projects to save and shore up capital which is on the ropes and a bourgeoisie which is adrift without a rudder. They are handed down like decrees to docile national "parliaments". (Strangely not a single one of these measures aims to improve the lives of working people!) This being the case, those who, however sincerely, ask this Europe to apply the most elementary democratic principles, or even its own social regulations, have got the wrong address and simply make themselves look stupid. Instead of begging for these things you have to win them in struggle. The mission of this Europe is precisely to dictate what capital requires, side-lining democracy that gets in the way. The present great crisis powerfully exposes this and testifies to it in the most striking way.

The current crisis and the role of debt

This great crisis did not explode simply as a consequence of contradictions of the capitalist-imperialist system already familiar from the 1929-1945 crisis. It was fed and bloated on top of that by all the extra costs arising from the long-drawn-out decadence and deterioration of imperialism and efforts to contain it.

Public debt requires particular attention in this regard because it plays a special role and is important, concentrating within itself the whole extra weight of capitalist retrogression and the vain efforts to overcome it. I cannot deal with it fully here, but it would be wrong to leave it out entirely, since it has a central place in the world – and particularly European – bourgeoisie's arrangements.

Briefly, then: this high level of public indebtedness has its origins in the more and more marked deficiency in capitalist accumulation which from more or less the middle of the twentieth century was decreasingly able to play the role of stimulating constantly expanding extended reproduction. This inadequacy, which is the main basis and organic reason for the

capitalist-imperialist system running out of steam and falling into marked decline over a long period, inexorably drove it under the domination of its financial component. The poor returns on production – profit – was no longer enough to secure it vigorous renewal. As indicated above, it needed an artificial and total intravenous drip of finance. To put it another way, finance went from being a partner to a hegemonic position. One consequence was a serious drop in state income, already reduced by the cuts politicians like to make to the taxation of the bourgeoisie. This happened just as state expenditure was rising. This process as a whole necessarily culminated in all bourgeois states being massively in debt, especially in the economically most advanced countries.

A feature of a general crisis is that it exposes weaknesses and problems of the system for all to see, and so it was with this catastrophe. The real weight and extent of current debt far surpasses the normal and necessary role of money-capital loans in the production-cycle of capital and the classic debt-levels which go with them. Still lacking the space to deal with it properly, here, I can mention only what seems absolutely essential to understanding the situation.

As we saw above, finance capital has gained the upper hand and become a monster whose tentacles tightly embrace the whole of social life. Of course it is not the mythical monster that bourgeois politicians and journalists try to portray it as, lurking inaccessibly behind the enigmatic domination of “market forces”. It is certainly flesh and blood, sheltering in the banks and similar institutions and personified in the cohorts of shareholders, small-time speculators and other parasites.

What really is strangely new about this situation and at the same time represents a deepening of the “decay” Lenin spoke about, is the fact that this finance capital has managed to turn all the countries of Europe (not to mention others) into permanent debtors bound to yield up their regular feudal dues like medieval serfs. The most fundamental role of this thing they call Europe and its institutions is to tie these modern

serfs to their financial masters and make sure they pay the many and various exactions upon them. The previously independent national leaders and their parliaments unquestioningly carry out orders and instructions prescribing how they are to fulfil their role of collecting the cash. Their main activity is to raise, amass and guarantee the considerable sums owed to the sacrosanct "markets" as they suppress and destroy all social gains previously achieved. It is a fully-worked-out system where astronomic debt levels make any hope of final payment vain and utopian, especially since, while countries and workers bled white in this way find they are completely unable to reproduce the necessary wealth, their governments still keep turning up regularly at the banks to borrow further billions. So the debts grow and this whole edifice of abject exploitation is set to go on and on for ever.

This problem as a whole is the concrete expression of Lenin's overall characterisation of imperialism as an epoch of "wars and revolutions" or "as capitalism in transition, or, more precisely, as moribund capitalism" disintegrating under the weight of its contradictions. By 1934 Trotsky was talking about the "capitalist system decomposing". Now, the essential meaning of the current situation which the above analysis reveals is a growing inability on the part of the bourgeoisie to preserve and guarantee its domination using the old means to which it has become accustomed and its chaotic search for a way out. Lenin clearly described this as one of the necessary conditions for revolution. Despite all fairy stories, there is no doubt that we are in a period in which revolution is maturing, and in which the main job of all those who take seriously the emancipation of working people is preparing for it. The facts clearly pose the choices: workers' revolution or a descent into barbarism (of which war is one of the components).

Displacement of class forces – key to the election results

The Italian election results were unexpected and astonished everybody. They express the fact that, on the rotten basis of

capitalism-imperialism, there has been a veritable general political re-alignment in Italy, a social re-positioning that has brutally redrawn the political map. In reality we are at the end of a series of enormous whirlwinds, of dislocations and regroupings involving political parties in Italy since the 1990s. These have been years of real cataclysm which have shaken political life from top to bottom, radically changing the traditional spectrum of parties. These twenty short years have wiped the two main opposing parties off the map: the one, Stalinist and the other, bourgeois Christian Democracy.

Their collapse reflected their inability to hold back and channel workers' and peasants' struggles using their old, outdated methods and means, an impotence which was accentuated by the way these struggles intensified on the basis of the worsening decadence of capitalism and attempts to deal with it on a "European" level. Their political re-composition in a new configuration was obviously motivated by their abiding desire to shore up the rickety bourgeoisie and thus bar the way to the masses of working people. They only differed – sometimes acutely – over how to do it. The recent elections provide us with the first materials assessing the outcome of this metamorphosis, which no doubt will exert a strong influence on national – and European – political life.

The potential impact across the continent will be very deep because what was directly at stake in the political contest in Italy itself was the way the European project expressed itself in that country. It was in relation to this central axis that the political actors and their organisations defined their programmes. Their national views and topics were merely derived from these commitments. Moreover, this same transformation or mutation of purely national programmes into European stances had already marked previous elections, in Greece or France, for example.

The main issue in the Italian elections is the outstanding fact that, following their Greek brothers, the Italian proletariat inflicted a stinging defeat on the bourgeoisie's concentrated offensive. They swept aside its nefarious

objectives and measures and its anti-democratic methods, thus crushing the political line of their Italian personification and direct proxy of Brussels and Frankfurt, Mario Monti, along with the shattered remnants of bourgeois parties who clung to him. This proletarian drive was expressed directly in the votes, but also in the pressure exerted upon all other classes and their parties.

First of all, the elections exposed and set the seal on a fault line in the Italian bourgeoisie, breaking apart under the heavy burden of re-structuring its forms of rule. One significant wing realised the difficulties involved in applying in Italy the European offensive aimed at taming and subjecting the proletariat and rejected this path. It chose a different route to weakening and dominating working people, the route of adventurist demagogy and runaway nationalism. The fact that this coalition led by Silvio Berlusconi did very well at the polls underlines how important this orientation on the part of the bourgeoisie is. The two parts making it up arose not so long since out of the decomposition of the traditional political parties of the bourgeoisie. They testify to a significant political re-composition on the part of one section of it. Side by side with the adventurist party of the bourgeois wheeler-dealer Berlusconi, the Northern League expresses a clear orientation towards an authoritarian nationalist regime, thus straddling the tendency towards a rupture in national unity. The League openly espouses the desire to drive ahead with the super-exploitation of the south of the country, the famous Mezzogiorno, and even to cut all state aid to this traditional "internal colony" of the Italian bourgeoisie. Even now the average income per head of the population in the Mezzogiorno is 40 per cent less than in the north of the country. Between 2007 and 2010, gross domestic product (GDP) in the south fell by 6.1 per cent, while in the centre-north the reduction was "only" 4.1 per cent, and since 2008, 70 per cent of job losses have been in the Mezzogiorno (Le Monde, 22 February 2013).

This coalition kept afloat by Berlusconi's demagogic

adventurism and the Northern League's threadbare local patriotism clearly forms the antechamber to a second edition of fascism. Rather than unifying the country, bourgeois Europe's aggressive policy of ravaging it and imposing authoritarian centralisation have heightened the contradictions and inequalities between provinces, dividing them and pushing them towards separation. A considerable part of the "national" bourgeoisie straddle this drive – this is very clear and far-reaching in Italy – and, dragging along a good proportion of the petty bourgeoisie, adopt a no less retrograde and reactionary nationalist orientation, going so far as to repudiate the unity of the country.

(It should be noted in passing that this phenomenon is not confined to Italy. Besides the visibly nationalist parties in many countries, one can also see several movements for national dismemberment. That is concretely on the agenda not only in Italy, but also in Belgium and Spain for example. Of course such a turn on the part of a section of the bourgeoisie in this or that country cannot at all be a path to national emancipation, even in cases as legitimate as the Catalan and Basque nations in Spain. For working class activists to take this nationalist path would mean them being swallowed up in the process by which the façade of bourgeois national unity breaks apart, which would weaken the desirable unity of the country's proletariat. The nationalist turn, even under apparently positive slogans, is precisely the other variant of bourgeois politics, through which it seeks to maintain its leadership and hegemony by trying to channel the revolt against bourgeois Europe into a nationalist dead-end pointing straight at fascism. The bourgeois "independence" adventure would only add to the already immense burdens Catalan [or Basque] working people have to bear and certainly not bring any "national" advantages. Real independence for Catalonia will only be obtained in the course and within the framework of a struggle for socialism throughout the whole of Spain. Now the indispensable condition for such a struggle, and especially for a successful outcome, is the fighting unity of

all Spanish working people. The Asturian miners realised that recently when they marched to Madrid to unite their struggles with other working people against bourgeois Europe's anti-working class measures.)

The other significant section of the bourgeoisie lines up behind the so-called "left" coalition of Pier-Luigi Bersani. The dominant segment of this coalition is the Democrat Party which also, but only partly, came out of the break-up of the old political apparatus (party) of the bourgeoisie and its re-composition during the 1990s. But unlike the parties of the opposing coalition of Berlusconi, the birth of this Democrat Party follows a different fracture line and also a sticking-together of ill-matched pieces. The new bourgeois parties, particularly Berlusconi's "People of Liberty" and the Northern League, are bourgeois formations of a distinctly DIY character, but their class origins are homogenous. The Democrat Party, on the other hand, has its roots in the dissolution of the once-powerful Stalinist party of Togliatti. Since this party dissolved itself in 1990, its majority have undergone a period of decomposition punctuated by various break-aways and re-compositions. This opportunist mutation, accompanied by alliances and ruptures, culminated in the current Democrat Party founded in 2007. But it also contains the fusion of this Stalinist rump with the "left" vestiges of Christian Democracy.

It should be noted straight away that the sudden degeneration of the CP and its amalgamation with a piece of the bourgeois Christian Democrat party, although written into the DNA of Stalinism – as one saw in the USSR – was treated with obstinate silence by the European and world press, which modestly abstained from stirring the stink of this rottenness in its reports on the elections. This Democrat Party draws its strength from its implantation in the various workings of the state and municipal machinery and among the trade union bureaucracy. President of the Republic Giorgio Napolitano, formerly Togliatti's crafty opportunist henchman, was one of the bosses of this party which simply installed the government

of the bankers' agent Mario Monti in power – without elections – in 2011 because their European Union told them to.

Besides this Democrat Party, Bersani's coalition also involves two small and obscure parties which eke out an existence in the shade of this "big party" as independent "socialist" and ecological survivals of the great political upheaval.

All in all, these two coalitions are separated not only by their programmes but also by their antecedents and class backgrounds. They express the two divergent projects through which the bourgeoisie is trying to discipline and dominate the working class and get a grip on its crisis: one of them by getting together with Europe, the other by retreating into nationalism. This fracture has laid bare the perplexity this perdition-bound class is in over how to secure its domination. And that is how this conflict between the two variants in Italy led temporarily to a no-score draw.

One unusual feature of these elections and this conflict is the appearance of Giuseppe (Beppe) Grillo's formation, which played a significant role. Their high share of the vote (25.5 per cent in the elections to the lower chamber, 23.7 per cent for the Senate) reveals how far the bourgeoisie's decomposition and its contradictions have gone. This "Five Star Movement" is not even an actual structured organisation but, is described by its chief ideologue Gianroberto Casaleggio as a vague community whose members are linked by internet (according to *Le Monde*, 14 March 2013). But working class activists need to characterise this unstable and little-known nebula according its social composition and political content and orientations. (Information on this is taken from the well-documented article by Marc Wells and Peter Schwarz on *World Socialist Website*, 13 March 2013).

The spokesperson for this Movement, Beppe Grillo, is one of the richest men in Italy, with an annual income of up to 4.3 million euros in 2005. But the real head of his political network is Casaleggio, the prosperous founder of Milan ITC firm, "Casaleggio Associates". One of his close supporters, Enrico Sassou, is currently taking a back seat to disarm

possible criticism, since he is the director of the American Chamber of Commerce in Italy and editor of "Harvard Business Review Italia". But "Casaleggio Associates" itself is linked by partnerships to several powerful American and British firms.

This on its own provided a serious indication of the class nature and direction of this movement. So it was quite understandable that the millionaire Leonardo Del Vecchio, owner of a firm called "Luxottica", and the steelmaker Francesco Biasion of Vicenza supported Grillo. Explaining his support, Biasion said he wanted to encourage the Movement because "nowadays business is in the grip of the bureaucracy and the unions".

However, the Movement is far from being directly an association of well-to-do bourgeois. The great majority of its supporters, especially those who front it up and form the vast majority of its 163 new members of parliament, are young graduates and students, IT workers, accountants, teachers, surveyors and others, the same *déclassé* intellectuals pauperised by the crisis in a "casualised generation" that exists in every country. This impoverished and completely disorientated stratum shares many points in common with those who Mussolini's movement recruited, or Hitler's Nazis. Their aimless wanderings express the sad lack of a genuine revolutionary movement. What we have here really is a petty-bourgeois setup which has drawn in a great number of working-class voters because of its virulent opposition to bourgeois austerity and those who serve it.

According to the Demos Institute (quoted in *Le Monde*, 16 March 2013), the Grillo Movement received 49 per cent of working-class votes, while Bersani's Democrat Party only won 21 per cent of workers! Among the unemployed and jobless, these figures were 42 per cent for Grillo against 20 per cent for the Democrat Party. The "Five Star Movement" also garnered 40 per cent of the vote among artisans, peasants and small business-people, more than Berlusconi's party at 32.5 per cent.

So while they threw out their immediate enemy, the Monti government, working class votes were dispersed between two political blind alleys. The fact that they were politically derailed to this extent is distressing and requires fuller explanation. Further on, we will examine in a little more detail the absence of a real workers' movement and its politics, which is the main reason for this temporary loss of direction. Let us just note for the moment that the relatively low proportion of working-class votes cast for Bersani's coalition is also explained, above and beyond their distrust of this formation's politics, by its announcement that it was going to maintain Monti's anti-working class measures. Working-class revulsion over this policy, however, was not enough to eliminate all illusions in this "left". Nevertheless, it was strong enough to channel a mass of working class votes towards Grillo's petty-bourgeois Movement. But this formation's ideology and political line are not just completely foreign to the working class, they are even diametrically opposed to workers' reality-based conception of the world and, above all, their political aims. Casaleggio, considered to be the spiritual guide of this setup, is one of the illuminati, his visions motivated by virtual online information which he confuses with reality. In his video clips he predicts the imminent disappearance of social classes, ideologies, political parties and – of course – trade unions, leaving behind a "community" with "generalised participation" through the internet. This is a fantasy world which smells strongly of fascism, with its characteristic elimination of any democratic organisations acting as intermediate connections in society, replacing them with direct links between the individual and the boss. But it is the comedian Grillo who translates these crypto-fascist hallucinations into a political language laced with demands that are very often as shrill as they are demagogic.

This political position categorically denies the existence of social classes, replacing them with "two social blocs". In bloc A, Grillo places "millions of young people who have no

future" vegetating in "casual jobs", very often unemployed and "the excluded" who "themselves want to become institutions ... and create a new Italy out of the ruins". Here, too, he puts "small and medium businesspeople who ... are forced to shut up shop or kill themselves out of despair". How easily one can discern in these summary and simplistic descriptions the contours of an alliance between the upper layers of the petty-bourgeoisie and various elements of the Lumpenproletariat, essential components of the fascist shock battalions.

In bloc B, on the other hand, he places "those who are surviving the crisis" who, he says, "often have a decent current account and a good pension, or the security of a public sector job". He indulges in a demagogic amalgam by putting workers and working people in state and municipal employment alongside the parasitic bourgeoisie in one bag in his bloc B. By doing this, Grillo is trying to divide the working class and working people by setting up young and impoverished layers against older workers and those who work in the public sector.

He keeps insisting that the struggle between these two blocs has replaced the class struggle, which he hold up to public ridicule. In this way he hides what is really at stake in the struggle, carefully protecting the bourgeoisie while driving a wedge between working people, so that the sharp edge of his demagoguery tends to be directed against these working people. For example, it is not so easy to see through it when he claims that we face "a generational conflict in what is at stake is age and not class", whereas things are a lot clearer when he writes that "every month the state has to spend 19 million on pensions and 4 million on civil service salaries. This burden is no longer sustainable".

It is hardly surprising that certain bourgeois commentators are drawn towards Grillo's programme even if in general they condemn his demagoguery. In any case, the vast majority of them do not say a word about the fascist overtones in what he says, or simply treat it as vague, indefinable political adventurism. Fortunately this movement remains very instable

and its disparate elements could easily break up along class lines.

But where is the party of the working class?

These elections were marked by a noteworthy – and at first sight surprising – apparent contradiction between on the one hand the immense pressure the proletariat exerted on the majority of political actors to reject the bourgeoisie's European offense and on the other the obvious absence of any genuinely working class organisation and policy. In this sense they differ considerably from the elections in Greece and France, where coalitions like Syriza and Front de Gauche were able to embody the first and certainly limited but already effective steps towards rebuilding the working class's political weapon, its party, without falling into sterile sectarianism.

Now nothing of the sort has emerged in Italy, despite the powerful workers' movement, rich in long-standing and once-flourishing revolutionary traditions. It is also the country of Antonio Gramsci, the great Marxist organiser and educator of Italy's communist movement in the 20th century. So it is absolutely essential to understand this tragic discrepancy between the working class's history and basic instincts and the flagrant and deplorable lack of its own party. To grasp the content of this and the main reason for it, we need to broaden the scope of our analysis.

Gramsci's original theoretical heritage was already falsified and perverted by Togliatti's Stalinist party so they could use it as a theoretical cover for its opportunist move to so-called "Euro-communism", the antechamber to its own liquidation and suicide. From another side, faced with this shameless deceit, young intellectuals undertook the necessary work to theoretically cleanse this heritage. However, one fraction of these intellectuals, Antonio Negri and his ilk, chose to act on the ultra-left opposite pole to the Stalinists' right deviation (but just as alien to Gramsci's thought), falling into the black hole and blind alley of terrorism, while another group of these intellectuals turned

their backs on political action, converting this heritage into academic canons of a "political philosophy".

As for the political development of Italian communism, that too followed a twisting path. During the bourgeois transformation of the Italian Communist Party into the Democratic Party of the Left in 1989-1990 (later they even dropped the word "Left"!), a minority rejected this road, shortly afterwards setting up the "Rifondazione Comunista" (Communist Re-foundation). Now you might have thought it was going to return to its revolutionary roots, but this rebel party, which remained faithful only to the worst opportunist moments of its Stalinist hey-day, degenerated along the same class-collaborationist itinerary, while formally insisting on the name "communist" more or less in the same way that François Hollande's party clings to the word "socialist". We cannot go into the whole trajectory of this "Rifondazione" here.

Nevertheless it should be said that in 2006 it, too, entered Romano Prodi's bourgeois government (2006-2008) and with 41 MPs furnished a substantial part of its parliamentary base (having already supported the first Prodi government from 1996 onwards). It supported not only that government's attack on pensioners (also labelled a "reform") and its deep budget cuts, but also sent troops to occupy Lebanon and later Afghanistan. No surprise, then, that in the 2008 elections it lost all its MPs and the Prodi government had to give way to Berlusconi! "Rifondazione" stayed outside Bersani's coalition in the latest elections, but it linked up with a sort of alliance of various groups, including the bourgeois anti-mafia judges, which in the end got 2 per cent of the vote, which was not enough to have even a single MP!

This sombre itinerary is highly instructive, especially just now, when it is so highly important for the working class to achieve the kind of political re-grouping that is bearing the first promising fruits with Syriza in Greece and Front de Gauche in France (having already seen the appearance of Die Linke in Germany). The collapse of "Rifondazione Comunista" in

Italy forcefully reminds us that nothing is guaranteed, that even the most promising fruits can easily go bad and rot. The repellent example of "Rifondazione" is all the more edifying in that it embodies the final degradation of the Italian section of the so-called Fourth International formerly led by Michel Pablo, Ernest Mandel and Pierre Frank.

Indeed, "Rifondazione" accepted various political groups into its ranks as organised factions, including "Sinistra Critica" ("Critical Left"), the Italian section of this Pabloite pseudo-international led by Livio Maitan (who remained a wise and devoted supporter of this International right up until his death in 2004). Of course, an entry of this sort is entirely justified as long, and only as long, as you use it to help advance the independent position of the working class in preparation for its revolution. But from the outset there were serious grounds for doubting that this would happen, since Pablo and his companions have long since been severely criticised for bartering revolutionary proletarian politics against illusory hopes of a revolutionary development on the part of the Stalinist bureaucracy. So they adapted to this bureaucracy and as a consequence revised the teachings of Marxism. Maitan and his Italian friends were faithful and active supporters of this orientation.

The inevitable happened. Instead of putting forward a revolutionary opening against the politics of "Rifondazione Comunista", the "Sinistra Critica" group, motivated by its Pabloite origins and training, simply adapted to the "Rifondazione" mould to the extent of becoming its strike force in a typically popular front policy (joining up with the "progressive" wing of the bourgeoisie).

The source of this profoundly wrong and mistaken policy lay in their emollient appreciation of the situation and moderate view of the tasks that flowed from it. In those elections, as they have long since, the vestiges of the Stalinist bureaucracy swear by all that is holy that these tasks consist purely and simply in improving and correcting aspects of the capitalist system, and that that is all that it needs. In this

they join hands with the old Social Democratic reformists and they are indeed renewing co-operation with them. On the way they jointly influence a whole range of new petty bourgeois movements. Moreover, they also contaminate several of those who claim some allegiance to the working class.

But the crisis brutally exposed the fact that, confronted with complete bankruptcy when it comes to carrying out the most basic functions of its decomposing and anachronistic system, the bourgeoisie turned naturally to destroying the great advances made by humanity represented by the working class and its achievements. It is happening to everything, from the many and varied conditions for a materially and culturally decent life to democratic rights and the framework in which they operate. The bourgeois social class was once an active participant in this historic progress, if not its actual promoter, but it has become its ruthless gravedigger. The crisis reveals, brings out and accentuates these profound tendencies in the capitalist-imperialist system in its death-agony, acting as such since its formation described by Lenin. Past and recent history prove there is no magic remedy or miracle cure which can soothe the pain caused by this bedridden system or patch up its open sores. Capitalism-imperialism has to be eliminated and its power overthrown. That not only does not exclude participation in elections – it often makes it absolutely necessary.

But “Rifondazione”, including its “Critica Sociale” component, did not stand in elections in order to express this essential demand on the special terrain offered by elections, nor to open a clear path to this revolutionary solution. Far from it, they confined themselves to offering their own recipe for improving that same system of exploitation. Their insignificant results prove that, in the role of improvers of the system, they could only be a minor assistant, as it were a poor relation of proper, established bourgeois families. On the other hand, we have seen, as was only to be expected, a large number of working-class voters were misled by Grillo’s vociferous demagoguery which – in the absence of any

revolutionary opening – they took to offer such a hope. But this role of minor assistant rescuing the system which “Rifondazione” and its ilk fulfil in Italy is not new, nor specifically Italian. They have even more important fellows, not just in Europe, who urge workers to repair broken pots instead of showing them how to get rid of the noxious bosses and their malign stewards. They are the main obstacle to a revolutionary development, so it is essential to reject their false, deceptive conceptions.

Therefore a theoretical clarification is just as badly needed as the elaboration of a political line. They will both develop in an implacable struggle not only against the ideological poisons of the bourgeoisie but also against wrong ideas which divert the class struggle and park it in other sets of opposites. The restricted framework offered by this article make a detailed examination of them impossible, but it is nevertheless important to cast a glance at the some immediate effects of the Italian elections and sketch a way out of the present blind alley.

The immediate impact: Bourgeois Europe drifting rudderless

Voting patterns in the Italian election results provoked general anxiety and consternation throughout bourgeois Europe, noisily expressed by its politicians and journalists. Let us leave aside this panicky, thunderstruck moaning and their grotesque and yet significant warnings. For example, the puppet president of the Council of Europe, Van Rompuy, hopes to be “convinced that the new Italian government will continue on the path of its predecessors”. Clearly this is one towering intellect with not a clue what is going on (we shall see later how his prayers were answered). In any case, they all “discreetly did homage to the great loser, Mario Monti” (Le Monde, 28 February 2013). In other words, whatever a great European people massively and unequivocally voted for, these unblushing democrats lost not one whit of their determination to smash working people in order to save the bourgeoisie. Anybody who thinks you can budge these ferocious defenders of capital should ponder these words.

However, much as it is an unpardonable illusion to believe that elections can turn the situation around to the benefit of working people, it would also be a serious mistake to believe that they are no use at all. As for the Italian elections, they have not only radically changed the political terrain in the country, but also inflicted a perceptible shift in the European political scene. This still weak but nevertheless apparent metamorphosis is merely the visible expression of a hardening in the class struggle which, at this stage, is still largely entangled in various intermediate linkages.

What is indirectly reflected in the recent clear fissure splitting the alleged unity of bourgeois Europe is the pressure from workers amplified by the Italian election results. One part, especially in the South where they are more openly exposed to workers' fury, openly questions the so-called unilateral policy of austerity. One should not overestimate this vague desire, which is only a pale echo of the powerful proletarian rumbling. But nor should one underestimate it, but use it and push it further, which, fortunately, the Front de Gauche seems to realise.

But it is also urgent for the Front to use it to extend and consolidate its struggle to generalise it into a European working-class orientation, and within this framework to work for the formation of a political European force alongside Syriza, Die Linke in Germany and other similar organisations – possibly also Italian, so as to bring together opposition to the destructive policies of Brussels.

Now such an opposition could not be limited simply to rejecting the bourgeois offensive. Were to be content simply to say "another policy is possible", this would disarm it and render it ineffective. We need, on a European level, to back this assertion concretely with positive policies for a Europe of Working People. This practical orientation backed by demands leading up to it are what we should be putting forward. One main demand of this sort must be to propose measures to get a grip of finance and its instruments, such as banks, and the use of indebtedness. A programme of that sort

would put some backbone into the preparations for European elections in May 2014.

A rallying call of this sort for a Working Peoples' Europe, without going into detail about the demands which should accompany it, is urgently needed. It would be a genuine political expression of the intensification in working-class mobilisation and radicalisation. Already on 2 March, hundreds of thousands of Portuguese workers, following in the footsteps of their Italian brothers and sisters, organised powerful demonstrations to demand: "Troika Go Away!", and while bourgeois politicians and journalists strive to present these same workers as docile sheep you can keep shearing, they have themselves calmly disproved such self-serving fabrications. And the Portuguese Socialist Party, terrified of losing influence, immediately denounced the very austerity it used to support. Even the right-wing government has caught the spirit of revolt among those who are now openly trying to soften the intransigence of austerity in Europe.

Horse-trading over this was the only agenda item at European meetings (finance ministers on 4 March, then heads of state and heads of government on 14-15 March). At the very heart of a Europe already variously divided, cracks now appeared within the Euro-zone itself. Two opposed camps started to emerge, with France, Spain, Italy and Portugal pitted against inflexible members like Finland and Austria with Germany at the helm, the latter also having a real grip on the European bureaucracy.

The issue they are fighting over is relatively significant; they are arguing about choosing and deciding the best way to secure the bourgeoisie's power in current extremely difficult circumstances. Should they continue and even reinforce the austerity policy, or should they not – without abandoning their goals – slow down the pace and soften their demands to avoid a social explosion?

No sooner had this row started, than the finance ministers came up with their "solution" to Cyprus' debt problem. It's a pity we cannot spend more time on this point which is most

instructive from every angle. Let us just say that they took a series of dictatorial steps which flagrantly breach their own bourgeois rules protecting bank deposits. In their high-handed impatience towards a vulnerable little country left high and dry on the unfathomable mud-banks of the bourgeois offensive, they took money straight out of the Cypriots' own pockets. To "rescue" Cyprus from her debts, they "generously" robbed her of 10 billion euros, and – as if that were not enough – they simply and unblushingly slapped a tax on all bank deposits. When the leaders of the Parti de Gauche used the word "bastards" to describe the 17 finance ministers who decided on this particular act of burglary, the press squealed in scandalised outrage. But it would be difficult indeed, not to say impossible, to find another name for this shameful theft. When, under pressure from the entire population, the Cypriot parliament rejected this theft, Le Monde ("the bourgeoisie made newspaper") talked about "Europe at an impasse" (21 March).

The European puppets and their new, greenhorn, financier had to go back on a decision which was as brutally undemocratic as it was blatantly aimed at people of modest means. But the mask slipped again. Their ever-poorer and more dispossessed Europe has crossed another threshold in its slide towards inglorious general rout. There is no way to know in advance what concrete steps this disintegration will involve, but particularly since the Italian elections the warning signs have become more palpable. The growing tension in the relationship between the anti-democratic executive centre in Brussels and the rubber-stamp European Parliament in Strasburg is more obvious by the day. At the 13 March session, the MEPs by a huge majority rejected the new European budget which had taken 26 hours of painful and angry negotiations between ministers to achieve. It would be wrong to overestimate the significance of this act, which in any case left intact the total set at 960 billion, and failed to discuss the surprising fact that for the first time ever this budget was smaller than the previous one. This astonishing reduction ought itself to have as a

warning to all those who keep crowing about the progress their Europe is making.

This is not the place to go through all the other signs that bourgeois Europe is tending to fall apart gradually, but just note how in a single year (official) unemployment has risen from 10.9 per cent of the active population in the eurozone to 12 percent. It is 26.4 per cent in Greece and Spain, followed by around 12 per cent in Italy and France. And consider the disturbing conclusion of a survey which estimates that 67 per cent of young people under 30 in Spain are thinking about emigrating. This shows up not only the state bourgeois Europe is in but how destructive it is, too.

There has been a hint of a ministerial revolt against austerity in France, too, particularly in the week ending 13 March. That was when fifty or so striking PSA-Citroen workers at the closure-threatened Aulney car plant invaded the building where the National Council of the Socialist Party was meeting. These workers accused the government of betraying them, and the left wingers there, including several ministers, applauded them. An open breach was only avoided because everybody present suddenly started to "talk left". Even prime-minister Ayrault talked about the "European right not listening" and the need to "restore the balance of forces in Europe". As if! ... The paid conciliators had a real job on their hands, as very often, if not always, is the case, one is tempted to say.

It is surely no coincidence that that dyed-in-the-wool bourgeois politician and Giscard d'Estaing's former right-hand-man, François Bayrou, reacted immediately with quite a significant open letter to President Hollande. This political boss without a following – Bayrou had so clearly anticipated Sarkozy's defeat that he alone among his bourgeois colleagues voted for Hollande – saw the danger immediately. It's a shame we cannot look in more detail at this panicky warning which at the same time was a real apology for the European bourgeoisie's offensive and a profession of faith in sustaining it. That on its own constituted an unequivocal

offer to serve Hollande in a more structured way. To put it broadly, he offered his services as Prime Minister under Hollande in the place of the largely discredited Ayrault. In any case this threat had a certain impact in moderating the mood of revolt in the Socialist Party and the government, since even if it did lead a small number of critics did vote against ratifying in law the anti-working class agreements between the employers' associations and some unions, this time, again, the conflict was blurred and an actual break avoided.

But since the crisis is only going to get worse, sharpening the contradictions, this rebellion has not said its last word and a more trenchant expression of it is still brewing. That is why Mélanchon's tactic of trying to encourage criticism of bourgeois Europe inside the Socialist Party is fully justified, particularly if such criticism can be underpinned with a clear anti-bourgeois European policy that can identify its goal in a Working People's Europe.

Now the bourgeoisie is vigilant and sees the dangers which threaten its plans. Most recently its Brussels janitors opted to slacken the pressure slightly and give and give members states a bit more time to reduce budget deficits below 3 per cent of GDP. But we need to be vigilant, too, because this is a trick. They present this new timetable as if it were a gift, a sign of some supposed change in the rigor of their policy, whereas in reality the budget plans had turned into a fiasco they could not keep up. They are simply displacing the pressure on budgets into a determination to carry out more and greater attacks on employment rights, pensions, social security and all the rest.

For a working class and socialist opening in Italy, too!

Political life has not stood still in Italy, either. The elections were a testimony to the fact that the bourgeoisie has not been able – now its traditional tandem of Christian Democracy and Stalinist CP has broken up – to reorganise a durable political, governmental, expression of its power. The elections testified not only to this, but also to a veritable

political fault-line in the bourgeoisie over programmes and methods for re-constituting this power in some renewed form. Subsequently a series of successive setbacks in forming a government have confirmed the fact – which has dramatic implications for them – that Italy is now radically ungovernable using traditional political means. But on its own this dramatic situation for the bourgeoisie does not imply any relief, never mind a solution, for working people who cruelly lack any theoretical equipment or practice that matches their aspirations.

Under these conditions and in view of the fact that politics, too abhors a vacuum, various dangers start to take shape on the immediate horizon. One of them – and it is real – is that the bourgeoisie will take one of the authoritarian roads leading to fascism in order to overcome its crisis. It will not be held back by any democratic principles or rules, but by the fear that such an upheaval might arouse a massive revolt by working people. However that may be, while they deploy some fascist objectives and slogans, the Italian bourgeoisie, like the rest, is not yet quite ready to institute and operate fascist power.

That is the main reason why the gestation of a new government is so long and painful, and its content so explosive and in such violent contradiction to the verdict of the elections – while in the end somehow maintaining the illusion that nothing has changed. In reality the forced marriage between Berlusconi the groom getting the most out of the prenuptial agreement, and the Democrat Party as reluctant bride, is inevitably heading for a series of conjugal dramas. It will be all the more paralysed in action and unsustainable in the long run for being based on cheating the voters. To put it another way, it has thumbed its nose at the new disposition of class forces, so it has set off on the wrong foot in relation to them. Whatever promises and paltry concessions the new government made when it came in are like plasters and poultices applied to a dying man.

And yet ... condemned as it is the rack, even this government

might just, precisely in order to prolong its existence, tie in with the rising anti-establishment wave across southern Europe for a "softening" of austerity. In fact everything points to the possibility that it will add its voice to Hollande and others who are begging for a respite. Meanwhile, since this new Italian government was first installed, the European bourgeoisie and certain of its factions here and there have cherished the illusion that they might be able to avoid the split in Europe and the threatening political crisis by uniting "left" and right wings in the same governments. In precisely such a "united" government in Italy they see an opportunity to overcome the crisis and prevent an opposition from crystallising through this kind of "grand coalition". But at the moment only a very nervous "left" in the shape of the so-called "socialist" parties would take such a lure seriously and give up the prospect of forming a consistent opposition in the face of such a "threat".

Now in fact such a "grand coalition" is unviable even in Italy, where the bourgeoisie is well aware that it cannot find a satisfactory way out of the crisis, and has finally resigned itself to an improvised lash-up. The more the different components of it cling to their certainties, the more radically and swiftly the worsening social contradictions will tear apart its artificial unity. And that is where the danger of a fascist adventure by a section of the bourgeoisie becomes real. The Northern League could well be biding its time to exploit precisely that situation, using the strength of an enraged and disorientated petty-bourgeoisie and a desperate Lumpenproletariat to try such an adventure.

It is high time for really socialist and communist activists who up to now have been trapped in the bourgeois blind alleys offered by "Rifondazione Comunista" and "Critica Sinistra" to pull themselves together. Not because there might be a danger of fascism, but because the worsening contradictions make necessary a political re-grouping of the working class. In particular they should address the abovementioned organisations because we cannot agree with the American

comrades of David North's World Socialist Web Site who stigmatise them as bourgeois organisations. The more lucid and closest to the working class of their members should make an honest assesement of a conception and a political line hanging on to the extreme left of a bourgeoisie in its dotage. A renewal is possible, and its beginnings lie beyond the national soil. It will have to open up via a clarification of the socialist attitude at a European level, which nowadays is the only way to delimit oneself from every version of bourgeois politics, either nationalist or originating from Brussels.

In this respect, Marxist practice will shrug off the heavy burden of the "Rifondazione" / "Critica Sinistra" combination groaning under the weight of a Stalinist heritage, either completely ossified or somewhat amended, by following in the footsteps of Syriza and the Front de Gauche. This route is also open to Italian comrades. By struggling for a Working People's Europe, they will find a way towards living Marxist and towards the re-appearance of the Italian working class directly on the political scene, a working class long relegated to the background by a Stalinism which, although officially defrocked, never abandoned its political practices.

Balazs Nagy

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