

Italian pseudo-left supports Syriza's betrayal

By Marianne Arens
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Syriza's capitulation to the austerity demands of the European Union (EU) is a shattering political exposure of Syriza's co-thinkers across Europe, including the Left Ecology Liberty (SEL) party of Nichi Vendola in Italy.

At a national conference of the SEL in Rome on July 11, Vendola showered the Greek prime minister with praise. He described Alexis Tsipras as a "true European who loves Europe." Vendola said he had a "good feeling" about developments in Greece. "It rarely happens that the agitated masses demand political change. In such moments, the experience of politics is liberating."

As Vendola made these remarks, it was clear that Tsipras planned to trample the vote in the July 5 referendum he had called on EU austerity policies. The press was already full of reports that Tsipras had agreed to €13 billion in social cuts and other austerity measures with French finance ministry officials. Two days later, Tsipras agreed to an even more brutal austerity package under pressure from German Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble.

Vendola hailed Tsipras' austerity policies. "Tsipras returned home with an important result," he said. "Admittedly, it is a very hard compromise for the Greek people. But the reopening of the debt issue is contained within it. This is the most important issue for them as well as us. That is the point."

Vendola also announced that SEL, founded in 2009, would soon be shut down and integrated into to a new "political subject" in October. Vendola proclaimed that it was necessary to choose a "new name and symbol" and to run in the next parliamentary elections.

Vendola had run in the 2014 European elections with the Lista con Tsipras (Tsipras List). Confronted with the latest developments in Greece, Vendola refrained from directly referring to Syriza as the model for his new organisation. However, Syriza's betrayal of its

election promises to end EU austerity has shown what parties of the affluent middle class—like Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain, Germany's Left Party and Vendola's new "political subject"—are capable of.

Vendola's support for Tsipras' austerity policies underscores that, like Tsipras in Greece, he is prepared to sacrifice all the social rights of the working class to defend the interests of European capitalism.

The content of Vendola's politics differs only in nuances from those of the German government or EU Commission. He calls for more freedom for the European Central Bank so it can lend more money to governments in crisis. The bank had to "avoid degenerating in to a profiteer in its dealings with southern European countries as lender of last resort," he said.

At the SEL congress in Rome, Vendola indicated that his new party was a response to deepening social tensions in Italy. He noted that "social demands calling for change and criticising the existing order are building up."

He firmly opposed encouraging oppositional sentiment, however. "We can definitely say goodbye to the era of the left, of rage and resentment," said Vendola. Any kind of "ideological sectarianism" should be avoided.

Vendola, 56, is an experienced political operator in Italian bourgeois politics. He began his political career in the Stalinist youth movement, joining Rifondazione Comunista after the dissolution of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) in 1991.

Over the subsequent fifteen years, Rifondazione supported several bourgeois governments and sought to prevent the emergence of a revolutionary alternative. With the support of a broad coalition of former Christian Democrats, Stalinists, environmental campaigners and pseudo-lefts, Vendola was elected in 2005 as president of the region of Apulia, which he

governed for ten years.

In 2006, Rifondazione joined the government of Romano Prodi, a former manager and Christian Democrat. It agreed to the cutting of pensions, welfare benefits and undermining of basic democratic rights, as well as an aggressive military policy. When Rifondazione failed to make it into parliament at the elections in 2008, Vendola left and founded SEL.

Social and economic conditions for workers in Apulia declined under Vendola. The former president of the employers' organisation ConfIndustria, Emma Marcegaglia, hailed him as "the best governor in southern Italy." He cut unemployment benefits, kindergartens, schools, adult education and sports. The region is among Europe's ten poorest, with a youth unemployment rate of 58 percent and overall unemployment of 22 percent.

In May, Vendola did not take part in regional elections in Apulia. Democratic Party (PD) candidate Michele Emiliano emerged as the frontrunner and SEL did not put up its own candidate. After ten years in power, Vendola left Apulia and returned to Rome.

Vendola originally backed Matteo Renzi in national politics. When Renzi seized control of the PD leadership, Vendola praised him as a "whirlwind" who would resolve all the country's problems. But Renzi has been met with growing opposition as Prime Minister.

The primary reason for the growing dissatisfaction with the government is the catastrophic social conditions which prevail across Italy. At almost 45 percent, youth unemployment in Italy has doubled in ten years. According to a Eurispes survey, nearly half of all Italian residents and two thirds of the youth would prefer to live in another country.

Social conditions are deteriorating sharply. Nearly half of all residents admitted that their income was insufficient to last a full month, 41 percent were not able to pay doctors' bills and almost 70 percent could not pay rent on time. Not even five percent of those questioned expected the situation to improve, while close to 60 percent expected things to get worse.

According to a recent study, southern Italy is threatened with "permanent underdevelopment" and becoming an "industrial desert." One in three families in Mezzogiorno lives in absolute poverty and only one in five young women has a job.

Under these conditions, Vendola is once again distancing himself from Renzi and seeking to operate a regroupment inside the Italian ruling elite. At the SEL congress, he denounced Renzi as "Merkel's servant," accusing him of having "killed the centre-left camp."

Vendola is trying to win over disgruntled PD members to his new project. Several trade union leaders and old cadres from the Italian Communist Party—such as former CGIL union leader Sergio Kofferati, Rome mayor Walter Veltroni and former General Secretary of the Left Democrats, Piero Fassino—are threatening to leave the PD or have already done so.

Already at the May elections, Vendola backed the campaign of former PD member Luca Pastorino as an "alternative" to the PD. Pastorino won close to 10 percent of the vote. Several ex-PD deputies participated in SEL's congress in Rome. Many of these politicians had travelled to Athens for the referendum to support Syriza.

Paolo Ferrero, the leader of the remnants of Rifondazione, was a member of this delegation. Vendola welcomed him at the SEL congress, six years after parting ways with Rifondazione, as a "new fellow-traveller."

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