

Italy's Five Star Movement leader seeks to shift course on Europe

By Marianne Arens
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The leader of Italy's Five Star Movement, Beppe Grillo, announced on his return from Christmas holidays that the party's 17 deputies in the European Parliament would leave the euroskeptic group (anti-European Union) and join the pro-European Liberals.

The move, which was evidently agreed to with the leader of the Liberal parliamentary group, Guy Verhofstadt, surprised both allies and opponents of Grillo. The Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD)—to which Grillo's Five Star Movement (M5S) has thus far belonged—is led by the former head of the UK Independence Party Nigel Farage, who played a leading role in the campaign for a British vote to leave the European Union (EU). By contrast, Verhofstadt, a former Belgian prime minister, is an enthusiastic supporter of the EU and chief negotiator for the European Parliament in the Brexit talks.

Verhofstadt's Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) is considered explicitly neo-liberal. It includes the German Free Democratic Party (FDP) and Free Voters, the Liberal Democrats in Britain, the MoDem and Parti Radical/UDI in France and the right-wing Ciudadanos in Spain. ALDE supports international trade agreements like the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), which Grillo allegedly opposes. Former Italian Prime Ministers Romano Prodi and Mario Monti both belonged to ALDE; both have implemented drastic austerity measures in Italy on behalf of the EU.

On January 8, Grillo allowed party members to vote online on the surprising shift, which they approved by 78.5 percent without internal discussion.

In a letter to Farage, Grillo remarked on the change, "You have won the most important struggle for UKIP, Britain's exit from the European Union. An epoch-making result which would not have been possible without your intervention. The Five Star Movement still has to win its struggle." This would be more likely as part of a large parliamentary group rather than the EFDD, which had "lost its dynamic" and which UKIP will soon leave.

There was obviously some backroom horse-trading carried

out with Verhofstadt: the "Grillini" were to have supported Verhofstadt's election as European Parliament president on January 17 and could even have nominated a vice-presidential candidate. In exchange, the ALDE group would have ensured the Five Star Movement deputies continue to enjoy the financing, parliamentary positions and opportunities that are bound up with membership in a parliamentary group.

But the deal came to nothing: Verhofstadt slammed the door in Grillo's face at the last moment. On January 9, the ALDE executive committee refused to give its backing to the agreement. The Grillo deputies reached out to Farage in a Skype discussion, who arranged their reentry into the euroskeptic group, without, however, their group leader David Borrelli. He was compelled to give up his European parliament seat.

On his blog, Grillo denounced the "narrow-minded" Verhofstadt, writing that he ought to be ashamed for bowing to pressure from the establishment. "The establishment decided to block the M5S from joining the third largest parliamentary group in the European Parliament," he wrote demagogically. "All possible forces have united against us. We have shaken the system like never before."

By contrast, the media interpreted Grillo's failed about-face in the European Parliament as an attempt to draw closer to the establishment and portray the "Grillini" as a potential partner in government.

According to the Zürich-based *Tages-Anzeiger*, Grillo wanted "to show that the M5S is not the spectre it is believed to be in many European capitals... Obviously the M5S is no longer to be primarily viewed as a populist, anti-system movement, but as a political force that wishes to jointly influence reasonably and constructively."

Die Presse from Austria wrote, "The Five Star Movement, chiefly characterised to date by its rowdiness, would have gladly adopted a more serious image through the alliance with ALDE. Because the Grillini want to enter government."

Such hopes are based on opinion polls from December

showing support for Grillo's movement on the rise. When the December 4 constitutional referendum backed by the Renzi government failed badly, with close to 60 percent voting against it, observers generally saw the M5S as the main beneficiary. Grillo demanded a snap election and openly speculated about the possibility of defeating Matteo Renzi's Democrats.

The ALDE rejection in Strasbourg is the second setback suffered recently by Grillo. In mid-December, a corruption scandal exploded involving the M5S mayor in Rome, Virginia Raggi.

In Rome, the M5S, which began as a diffuse, petty-bourgeois protest party, has proven itself to be an increasingly right-wing and anti-working class tool of bourgeois rule. The attempt to join a neoliberal parliamentary group in the European Parliament was obviously no accident.

The party has thoroughly exposed its rotten political character in the Italian capital: it has declared a readiness to impose a drastic austerity programme on city employees and residents. Prior to this, Italy's financial controller rejected the city's budgetary proposals. Raggi must now present a new budget by February 28. She must take steps to reduce debt levels, shed obligations, sell city property and save, save, save...

Grillo, commenting on the crisis in the capital, asserted that the Five Star Movement would "fight tooth and nail to change Rome." In this context, this was a direct declaration of war against rubbish collectors, street cleaners, bus and tram drivers, social workers and on Rome's residents, who rely on the infrastructure and social services.

When the Five Star Movement secured a quarter of the vote in the 2013 parliamentary election, the WSWs warned that Grillo's movement stood in opposition to the interests of workers and other employees. "They will quickly recognise how right-wing his politics in fact are... Under the guise of a struggle against corruption, monopolies and bureaucracy, it [the M5S] advocates an historic assault on the working class and the entire framework of the welfare state established in the post-war period."

Grillo already made such policies clear on his blog several years ago: in his offensive against "waste," he demanded an attack on the social achievements of the Italian working class. He sought to pit the unemployed and precariously employed young people against better-paid and state workers. He created a division between two "blocks": block A, made up of "millions of young people without a future, with precarious work or unemployed," and block B, "chiefly dependent upon the state with monthly incomes of more than €5,000 [US\$ 5,315]." Every month, the state had to "pay 19 million pensions and 4 million salaries to them.

This burden is unbearable."

Grillo advances a nationalist programme, agitates against immigrants and supports the repressive state apparatus. On his blog he recently effusively praised the policemen from Milan who shot the suspect in the Berlin Christmas market attack, Anis Amri. In the same blog, he proposed a renegotiation of the Schengen and Dublin agreements, and to establish a European database on immigrants. He compared Italy and Europe to a "sieve," which can be penetrated by any immigrant, demanding, "Now we must act and protect ourselves." He called for all illegal immigrants to be immediately deported.

The right-wing character of the Five Star Movement is becoming ever more apparent. Despite this, it continues to have a base of support in Italy. This is due in no small part to the rightward evolution of Italy's pseudo-left organisations. Many former supporters of Rifondazione are enthused over Grillo's rise. After supporting the bourgeois "left" camp for 25 years, they are now prepared to join Grillo's openly right-wing movement.

Eleonora Forenza, the candidate for the European Left Group (GUE/NGL) for the European Parliament presidency, stated, "The Five Stars are a contradictory phenomenon. It would be wrong for the left not to turn to the people who vote for the Five Star Movement." The left had to "develop political work in this contradiction."

Historian Aldo Giannuli, who formerly commented in pieces for *Il manifesto*, *Liberazione* and *L'Unità*, enthused last September, "Thank heavens that it [the M5S] exists." Although he acknowledged "a large number of errors, stupidity, backwardness and omissions," he claimed that only with the M5S could one combat right-wing populism, meaning France's National Front, the Alternative for Germany, the Finns Party, Donald Trump in the US and the Lega Nord in Italy.

"The M5S is the only party with such a high poll percentage over such a long period of time," Giannuli wrote in September 2016. He noticed that many in M5S originally came from Rifondazione, the SEL (Left Ecology Freedom, led by Nichi Vendola) or the Democrats. Giannuli informed his blog readers that he had voted for M5S.

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