

The Italian election alliance *Potere al Popolo*: A repackaging of pseudo-left politics

By Marianne Arens and Peter Schwarz
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“The pseudo-left denotes political parties, organizations and theoretical/ideological tendencies, which utilize populist slogans and democratic phrases to promote the socioeconomic interests of privileged and affluent strata of the middle class,” wrote David North in his book *The Frankfurt School, Postmodernism and the Politics of the Pseudo-Left*. The pseudo-left is “anti-Marxist” and “anti-socialist.”

The electoral alliance *Potere al Popolo* (Power to the People, PaP), which is contesting Sunday’s election in Italy, provides a graphic illustration of these observations.

The alliance’s manifesto consists of a collection of vague, populist phrases. They intend to “build a genuine democracy by means of daily practice, the experience of self-administration, the socialisation of knowledge, and the participation of the people,” the manifesto states. To this end, they want to develop “a movement of workers, youth, the unemployed, pensioners, of competencies at the disposal of the community, of people involved in associations, local committees and fighting for citizens’ interests, of activists and militants,” which “comprises parties, networks and organisations of the social and political, anti-liberal and anti-capitalist, communist, socialist, environmentalist, feminist, laicist [secular] and Mediterranean left.”

One searches in vain for a concrete programmatic statement in the manifesto. The concept “socialism” and demands for the nationalisation of the banks and major corporations are all absent. Instead, there is a lot of talk about grassroots democracy, solidarity and civil rights, and the struggle against speculation, the mafia and corruption. The capitalist order is not to be abolished but made a little more pleasant.

PaP explicitly defends the Italian constitution, which has formed the basis for bourgeois rule over the past 70 years. “Against the distortion of the Constitution, which emerged out of the Resistenza [Resistance movement during World War II], and for its realisation,” the manifesto states.

PaP initially concealed itself behind the autonomist youth centre “Je so’ pazzo” (I am crazy), which is based in an occupied psychiatric hospital in Naples. The 37-year-old philosophy tutor Viola Carofalo, who worked at the centre, is the alliance’s spokeswoman and lead candidate.

PaP claims it has nominated mainly pensioners, housewives,

unemployed people, local artists, etc., as candidates, none of whom have past political baggage. In fact, the political parties hiding behind the alliance have a track record of betrayals and debacles stretching back over 25 years and more.

The driving force is the *Partito della Rifondazione Comunista* (Party of Communist Refoundation, PRC) in which Carofalo has been active for some time. *Rifondazione* provided the necessary resources to enable the alliance to stand candidates in the election and pulled the strings at its founding congress in Naples. The newspaper *La Stampa* wrote, “Beyond the spontaneous participation, which there certainly is, the backbone comes from the old *Rifondazione Comunista*, which collected 60,000 individual donations for a total of more than €600,000 [US\$736,000].”

Leading members of the PRC, including party chairman Maurizio Acerbo and European Parliament member Eleonora Foreza, are standing as lead candidates on the alliance’s regional lists. There are seven additional parties involved, including the Stalinist Italian Communist Party (PCI) and the *Sinistra Anticapitalista* (Anti-Capitalist Left), as well as several citizens’ initiatives and protest movements.

Sinistra Anticapitalista is the Italian section of the anti-Trotskyist, Pabloite United Secretariat, whose members worked loyally for years within *Rifondazione*. The organisation praised PaP’s programme on the *International Viewpoint* website in the strongest terms. It is “credible, radical, radically reformist,” they wrote. “The ideas for which we fight...are simple, beyond the technical terms of endless programs, and they are the ones that unite us all: work without being exploited, not to be forced to emigrate and to live on lands that are neither exploited nor damaged.”

Rifondazione emerged in 1991 when the old Italian Communist Party broke apart. It brought together old Stalinists and other elements from the PCI who felt the majority’s abandonment of communist symbolism went too far, along with several petty-bourgeois organisations that had previously functioned independently.

During the 1990s, *Rifondazione* and its leader, Fausto Bertinotti, were praised by the European pseudo-left as shining examples to be emulated. In fact, the party, which achieved election results of between 5 and 8 percent from 1992 to 2006,

played a crucial role in stabilising the deeply shaken Italian bourgeois order and suppressing the class struggle. The party maintained close ties to extra-parliamentary movements and grassroots trade unions, but always gave its full backing to centre-left governments when they came under social or political pressure and helped them to secure parliamentary majorities.

When social tensions intensified in 2006, *Rifondazione* even entered the government. Paolo Ferrero, *Rifondazione*'s leading member, became Minister for Social Affairs under Romano Prodi. This government's pro-war policies, and its attacks on pensioners and refugees, not only paved the way for the reactionary Silvio Berlusconi to come to power for a third time. It also led to the collapse of *Rifondazione*, which lost three quarters of its vote and all of its parliamentary deputies in the 2008 election.

When another centre-left government offloaded onto working people the burden of the global financial crisis, which hit Italy particularly hard, right-wing parties like the Five Star Movement (M5S) and far-right organisations like *Lega Nord* [Northern League] profited from the opposition within the population.

Rifondazione's attempt to re-enter parliament under the new *Potere al Popolo* banner does nothing to alter its perspective of defending the bourgeois order, suppressing all opposition to it and discrediting a genuinely left-wing, socialist policy. This is not only shown in the manifesto, but also if one considers PaP's European allies. Among the models PaP bases itself on or collaborates with are Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras, the late Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, Jean-Luc Mélenchon of *La France Insoumise* (Unsubmissive France), Spain's *Podemos* and Germany's *Left Party*.

At a meeting of the European Left (EU-NGL) parliamentary group on January 15, Carofalo introduced the new movement. The EU-NGL includes Syriza, Podemos and Mélenchon's Left Party. The meeting was chaired by Gabi Zimmer, a member of Germany's Left Party. The following day, Carofalo held a joint press conference with long-standing PRC activist Forenza, who was elected to the European Parliament on "The Other Europe with Tsipras" list.

In a lengthy interview published in the Italian newspaper *L'Antidiplomatico*, Carofalo defended Tsipras against the accusation that he had betrayed the working class. Tsipras, who was elected Greek prime minister in early 2015 on the promise to end European Union austerity, has in fact intensified the austerity measures since coming to power. Even when the electorate voted by an overwhelming majority against austerity in a referendum he called for, Tsipras ignored the result.

Asked what she thought of many lefts who accused Tsipras of betrayal, Carofalo said, "It is obviously impossible to guarantee that a situation like that in Greece will not be repeated." Tsipras and Syriza could have perhaps taken another decision, "but I don't think I am in a position to make that

tough judgment. I would use the term traitor for others."

Asked whether the left-wing populist governments in power in Latin America over recent years could serve as a model for Europe, Carofalo answered, "For us, Latin America is the inspiration, in capital letters. ... The experience in Venezuela in particular can be seen as our most important source of inspiration."

In fact, the experience of Venezuela, which is in a deep social and economic crisis and where the old reactionary forces are pushing to return to power, demonstrates that a populist officer like Hugo Chavez, who left capitalist private property untouched and financed a few token relief programmes with income generated from oil, is no replacement for an independent political movement of the working class. Chavez and his successor Nicolás Maduro have politically disarmed the working class in the interests of the ruling elite and made Venezuela even more dependent upon US oil corporations.

Mélenchon appeared at a PaP rally in Naples on February 15 to give his support to the alliance. "What we need for our struggle in France and in Europe is precisely a group that breaks with all other political formations and explicitly and uncompromisingly represents the interests of the people," he emptily asserted. For her part, Carofalo explained how much of an inspiration *La France Insoumise* was for her own movement.

Mélenchon, who enjoyed a 30-year career in the French Socialist Party and held ministerial posts under Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, is attempting to direct the opposition to the right-wing government of Emmanuel Macron into a nationalist blind alley. He recently attacked Macron from the right because he was not rearming quickly enough.

Potere al Popolo provides no answer to the social and political crisis confronting the working class in Italy, but is rather one of its causes. The social anger and frustration building up can only find a progressive outlet if the working class takes up a conscious struggle for a socialist and internationalist programme. This requires the building of an Italian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

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