

Extreme-right Italian government takes shape

By Marianne Arens
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In Italy, the new government of the Lega (The League) and the Five Star Movement (M5S) is due to take power following a final vote of confidence in parliament on Wednesday. The “government of change” led by Giuseppe Conte is the most right-wing Italian government since Benito Mussolini.

Despite all of the demagogic pledges made in the course of the recent election campaign, the cabinet which presented itself yesterday to the Senate and on Wednesday to the House of Representatives will attack the working class head-on and seek to divert social resistance by persecuting refugees. This is clear both from the ministers chosen as well as their first measures and statements.

The council of ministers has 20 members: Prime Minister Conte, 53, the secretary of the cabinet and 18 ministers (including five women). Of the 20, eight are from M5S, six from the Lega and six are non-party, including the head of government.

Although both coalition parties, the Lega and M5S, have put up a vice premier, it is obvious that the Lega is in the driving seat. Unlike M5S, the Lega is no newcomer to government. It was involved in government several times under Silvio Berlusconi. In addition, the leader of the Lega, Matteo Salvini, has elevated his confidant Giancarlo Giorgetti to the post of secretary of the council of ministers, where he can exercise direct influence on Conte. Giorgetti is a long-time Lega politician and was chairman of the parliamentary budget committee for five years.

Salvini, 45, will undertake a right-wing, anti-refugee, pro-business course in his role as interior minister. The right-wing extremist Lega works inside the European Union with other far-right extremist parties such as the German Alternative for Germany (AfD), the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) and the French Front National, and draws its support mainly from small-scale businesses and self-employed in northern Italy.

Luigi Di Maio, 32, will be the new minister of labour and economic development. His party, M5S, has

promised young people, the unemployed and the poor a kind of unconditional basic income known as *reddito di cittadinanza* (citizen’s income). In addition, the country’s despised pension reform is to be abolished again.

Claiming to be “neither left nor right,” M5S has a broader electoral base than the Lega, particularly in the south of the country. The party has the largest number of deputies and essentially serves to give the government headed by the Lega a majority in parliament.

Two ministers come from the military apparatus, and both are nominated by M5S: Defence Minister Elisabetta Trenta and Environment Minister Sergio Costa, 59, a Carabinieri general. Di Maio nominated Costa because he was involved in combating a mafia clan in connection with illegal waste dumps.

Trenta, who takes over at the Ministry of Defence, most closely represents the imperialist interests of Italy. She is a professor of foreign and security policy and a captain in the reserve army. She served as a military adviser in Iraq and along the Lebanese coast. Most recently, she led the SuggestAid group, which received research contracts from the army and was said to have recruited mercenaries for Libya and the Middle East.

Two particularly important ministers are the economic and foreign ministers; both are nonaligned “technocrats.” In plain language, this term means nothing else than that they are fully committed to the interests of the banks, the Italian and European authorities and the state apparatus.

The appointment of Enzo Moavero Milanesi, 64, as secretary of state is obviously aimed at appeasing the money markets and the EU. The nonaligned Moavero Milanesi is considered to be in the pocket of Mario Monti, a long-time EU commissioner, who as Italian prime minister introduced a drastic austerity program from 2011 to 2013. Moavero Milanesi was Monti’s chief of staff in the EU competition agency. He was then appointed European minister, a post he retained in the subsequent government of Enrico Letta (Democratic Party, PD). Moavero Milanesi also completed a military

career in the Guardia di Finanza.

A special role is played by Giovanni Tria, 69, the minister of economy and finance. He replaces the controversial first nominee for this post, the eurosceptic Paolo Savona, 81. Savona has been made Ministry of European Affairs without portfolio, while Tria takes over his place as the one responsible for the budget of the heavily indebted country.

This choice of personnel was able to immediately appease the financial markets somewhat. Tria is not an unknown figure; he was involved in implementing the economic program of Forza Italia led by Berlusconi. He is the dean in the faculty of economics at the University of Rome Tor Vergata and has worked for the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and the UN's International Labour Organization. He is also a member of the international think tank Teneo, which advises investment banks. Tria will have the primary responsibility for ensuring that the new government further reduces its debt burden and adheres to EU criteria.

Tria published a harsh criticism of the coalition's plans on his website even before its controversial promises had become public. His appointment therefore is a clear signal of reconciliation to the European financial markets.

In one critique, Tria wrote: "With all due respect for the competent persons gathered around the political negotiating table ... Given the reality of the numbers, the visions generally appear smaller." He writes that it is "unlikely" that the EU will change its rules and that it is completely unclear where the money for the promised projects should come from. This applies above all to the suspension of the pension reform. He then ridicules the "citizen's income" as unworkable, describing it as a "system in which one part of the population produces and the other consumes."

On the other hand, Tria is quite prepared to contemplate the introduction of a flat tax, which would make a much bigger hole in the Italian budget than the "citizen's income" and the withdrawal of the pension reform together. Tria explains that such a minimum tax of 15 percent could be useful for businesses and wants to finance the measure by raising VAT (Value-Added Tax), hitting working-class pockets hardest through greatly increased prices.

On Monday evening, a state secretary of the Ministry of Economics announced that from next year, the flat tax will be implemented for businesses, but not for families and individuals. Representatives of M5S immediately denied this statement in order not to jeopardize the vote of

confidence in parliament. This already makes clear that the new government will work to further the interests of Italian and European big business and this has been understood by European heads of state.

The major heads of government have already stated they were hoping for good cooperation with the Conte administration. German Chancellor Angela Merkel invited Conte to Berlin and said she was looking forward to meeting him soon in Canada. The British head of government, Theresa May, and French President Emmanuel Macron also congratulated Conte by telephone. European Commissioner for Economic and Financial affairs Pierre Moscovici said: "The decisions are made in Rome, not in Paris or Brussels," adding that the EU was "not the opponent of Italy."

However, recent events show that the new government is wracked by conflict. Shortly before the election on March 4, Roberto Fico (M5S), the new president of the House of Representatives, loudly asserted: "I guarantee we will never ally with the Lega." The Lega is "genetically different" from Five Star, he claimed. Now they sit together with the Lega in government to secure a parliamentary majority for a right-wing extremist cabinet.

This also explains what lies behind the aggressive policy against refugees. The head of the Lega, Salvini, has viciously campaigned against refugees during the past few days calling for the immediate construction of internment camps in each region. When reports of dozens of people drowning in the Mediterranean appeared over the weekend, he provocatively claimed on that Tunisia was exporting its convicts across the sea.

The main reason for the assertion of nationalism, according to the motto "The Italians first!", is obvious. The government is trying to divide and paralyze the working class. It realizes that the "government of change" could lose support very quickly. It will be unable to fulfil its populist projects of a citizen's income, a reintroduction of pensions and low taxes for all. Instead, it will attack workers more brutally than ever, quickly provoking mass resistance.

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