

Milan, Italy: 200,000 march against racism

By Marianne Arens
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Around 200,000 people demonstrated last Saturday in Milan, Italy against the policies of the right-wing coalition government of Lega and the Five Star Movement (M5S) that close ports to immigrant vessels, let people drown in the Mediterranean and, with new laws, drive tens of thousands of immigrants into illegality.

The protest organizers estimate that nearly a quarter-million participants assembled in front of Milan Cathedral. Demands and slogans on colourful, hand-painted signs and banners read: “We all have the same blood,” “The world belongs to all,” “Stop racism” and: “Protect the people, not the borders.” Migrants who have to work as harvesters in Calabria carried posters with the inscription: “Stop exploitation.”

Many participants came in carnivalesque costumes, some in Matteo Salvini and Luigi Di Maio (M5S leader) masks. There were also several floats depicting migrants dying in the Mediterranean Sea. The motto of the demonstration, “First the people,” was directed against the battle cry of Minister of the Interior and Lega boss Matteo Salvini, “Prima gli Italiani” (Italians first). The protest was organised by an association of six social organisations and NGOs and supported by the mayor of Milan, Giuseppe Sala.

Sala is part of a network of mayors who reject the racist Salvini decree because they consider it unenforceable in their municipalities (Palermo, Naples, Florence, Milan and other major cities). In these Italian cities, opposition to the government is growing, and around 1,200 initiatives, NGOs, district groups, etc., publicised the Milan demonstration on the internet.

The organisers avoided any speeches at the demonstration, instead inviting singers, musicians and DJs to perform. At the end of the rally, they played Patti Smith’s “People Have the Power.”

Nevertheless, several prominent politicians from the

so-called “centre-left camp” appeared on the sidelines of the rally to give interviews to the media in which they tried to present themselves as spokesmen for a “new left.”

“This is where the reconstruction of the Left begins,” claimed Mayor Giovanni Sala, himself an “independent” member of the political camp of former Democratic Party (PD) leader Matteo Renzi.

Also present at the rally were Maurizio Landini, head of Italy’s largest trade union, CGIL; governor of Tuscany, Enrico Rossi; and the previous and the new PD chairmen, Maurizio Martina and Nicola Zingaretti.

Zingaretti, who is also president of the Lazio region, was elected as the new leader of the PD after winning 70 percent of the over 1.5 million votes, and several journalists have already celebrated him as “the face of the other Italy,” who, they claim, will lead the resistance from below against the right-wing government.

In reality, Zingaretti is nothing of the sort. The 54-year-old has been a professional politician since he was 20 years old and stands for the PD wing that grew out of the Stalinist Partito Comunista Italiano (PCI). At the age of 17, he joined their youth organization, of which he became chairman, and since then he has participated in all the transformations and mergers of the PCI after the collapse of the Soviet Union: at the end of 1991 it was the Democratic Left Party (PDS), in 1998 the Left Democrats (DS) and in 2007, by merging with a Christian Democratic faction, the Democratic Party (PD).

Until last year, the PD held the leadership position in government under then-leader Matteo Renzi. It was Renzi’s interior minister, Marco Minniti (PD), who initiated the current racist course in Italy. Under Renzi and Minniti, the Mediterranean was completely sealed off and a deal was made with the Libyan Coast Guard to return migrants against their will, back to Libya

where they are subjected to inhumane conditions, beatings, rape and starvation. It was also the Renzi government that began to put pressure on the sea rescue NGOs to illegalise rescue missions.

As a result of its social attacks on the working population, the Renzi government was so discredited in the end that the ultra-right Lega, supported by Beppe Grillo's Five-Star Movement, was able to take power last June.

Significantly, Zingaretti owes part of his popularity as an opposition leader to the fact that his older brother, who looks like him, is the popular TV star Luca Zingaretti in the TV series "Commissario Montalbano." This suggests that the current prestige of the new PD chairman is based on a misunderstanding and has little depth.

In fact, Italy is a deeply divided country, and the PD is just as responsible for this as the right-wing parties that now run the government.

Five million Italians live in total poverty, three times as many as 11 years ago, before the recession that began in 2008. At the same time, Forbes figures released on Tuesday have revealed the gigantic fortunes of the five richest Italians: Nutella king Giovanni Ferrero (US\$22.4 billion), Luxottica founder Leonardo Del Vecchio (\$19.8 billion), pharmaceutical entrepreneur Stefano Pessina (\$12.4 billion), fashion designer Giorgio Armani (\$8.5 billion) and the former head of government and media entrepreneur, Silvio Berlusconi (\$6.3 billion).

"We have abolished poverty," boasted Social Affairs Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Luigi Di Maio, who is also head of the Five Star Movement, last Wednesday. The reason for this was the introduction of the *Reddito di Cittadinanza* (citizen's income). As of March 6, Italians may apply for the promised €780 a month.

However, this step will quickly lead to disillusionment among the needy. People will soon find out that the citizen's income is nothing more than a bad version of the hated German Hartz IV system. Only Italians who declare themselves immediately available for work and who meet the impossibly strict examination of their income and assets will be entitled to receive the wage, while non-Italians are excluded.

Recipients of citizen's income must accept one of three job offers, even if the offer forces them to travel

50 kilometres to work. The citizen's income is booked on a special cheque card, which can only be used for cash withdrawals of up to €100 at a time and is limited to a maximum of 18 months. In addition, only those who are prepared to do at least eight hours of community service a week receive money. In the case of "abuse" of the benefit, they face severe punishment with up to six years imprisonment.

The most recent demonstration in Milan—like the one in Rome on February 9, in which workers, pensioners and school children demonstrated on a grand scale—shows that in Italy, as in the rest of the world, resistance is growing and the class struggle is reawakening.

However, it can only develop in a progressive way if it breaks with the bourgeois PD camp and its pseudo-left environment and advocates an international, socialist perspective. This requires the establishment of an Italian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

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