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Italy

Turn the page, write a new book

- Debate - Building new parties of the left -

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In discussions about building anti-capitalist parties the Italian example is frequently quoted particularly in relation to Rifondazione Comunista [RC or PRC (Communist Refoundation Party)] and the eventual failure of its political project. For a fuller discussion and a more precise approach to the situation it would be good to also consider the present crisis of the Italian section. There is a crisis of its leadership and of its political perspectives. This short document aims to be a contribution to a better understanding of these events especially at an international level and has no pretension at absolute truth.

The crisis of the political project

The impasse of Sinistra Critica (SC – Critical Left) is a product of a number of factors coming together at the time we left RC: the failure of the alternative anti-capitalist left project; the lack of material and financial resources; the weakening of the leadership group and the more generalised crisis of the Italian workers movement. However fundamentally what went wrong was the non-development of a new anti-capitalist left in the wake of the rise of the NPA in France. SC has certainly established itself and continues to exist with a bank of activism and ideas but its attempt to build up a broader political project has not been successful and its influence in Italian society is negligible. In fact the hypothesis it had formulated at the time of its break with RC was false. We thought we had time to consolidate SC at the end of 2007 but instead within a few months Italy was thrown into an early general election. After these elections the specific problem that came to the surface was the material difficulty of the leadership group which up to then had been full timers but now had to return to their previous jobs or find work. Above all, given these difficult perspectives different positions and attitudes emerged that had built up for years but up to then had been managed within a collective project. The weakening of the latter transformed the differences into divergences. It was difficult to put the leadership back together.

The failure of Rifondazione

The failure of Rifondazione was not predestined at the moment of its birth. At the beginning of the nineties the PRC represented a clear response to the attempt of Italian reformism in the form of the PCI (Italian Communist Party) to break with class struggle and to present itself as the new liberal left - the vanguard of European social democracy's retreat as a whole. The people who formed RC were doing nothing else than keeping alive a class perspective in Italy. This was the historical merit of the PRC and is why we were right – and I still think so today - to make the choice we made at the time to join in this project.

The fundamental basis of the refoundation project however was a traditional left reformist one and it is not an accident, given its essential political culture, that the PRC joined both the Prodi governments. In 1998 nevertheless Bertinotti [PRC leader] broke with the rest of the reformist left, a split which lasted until 2003/2004 and which linked up with the development of the anti-globalisation movement (Genoa, Porto Alegre). We invested a great deal in this split, we went into an alliance with the PRC leadership and we also led some areas of the party. In this phase we believed that the rebuilding of an anti-capitalist force was possible despite having clarified the programmatic differences we had with that leadership. We had no illusions on the path the PRC leadership would take but we were willing to gamble on the real potential of a project pushed by the movement of the class struggle. We believed in that hypothesis and went full steam ahead with a political intervention based on strengthening the best sectors of the PRC. The rightward turn of Bertinotti pulverised all our efforts and from that moment on we threw ourselves into

gathering the maximum of resistance to this retreat to more moderate policies. It should be noted that in 2012 Bertinotti â€˜regretted' the turn he made, publicly admitting to having illusions in the potential of the ... Prodi government and in particular accepting that between 2001 and 2003 it would have been possible to dissolve the PRC in order to build a new political force of the anti-capitalist left - change of heart that came too late unfortunately.

However, the opposition to the PRC's rightist turn was not strong enough in practice to develop an alternative political project or at least to hold back the rightwards drift of the party. There just was not enough support for this in the party and we did not learn any initial, general lessons from what happened.

The end of the workers movement

Above all we have not thought through the main issue – “the end of the workers movement” as we knew it in the second half of the 20th century. The crisis of that "class for itself" which is today light years away from the glorious historical periods in proletarian struggle. What do I mean by the â€˜end of the workers movement'? It is about the withering away of solidarity, the absolute crisis of class culture, the exhaustion of that synergic totality which made â€˜workers movement' a term we could use. It was a term which signified a network of relationships between trade unions, parties, newspapers and cultural, social and cooperative structures. This crisis is deepgoing and has an aspect which we have paid far too little attention to, also at a European level – the decline in cultural and theoretical discussion, the loss of a cultural capital which had provided the premise in the 1960s for the great upsurge of 1968 and the 1970s. Rebuilding a class struggle left while the class as a whole was suffering repeated defeats was very difficult. To have tried to do so without coming to grips with the new reality was a crucial mistake.

What we did not know how to do was in fact to look at things more strategically, beyond the everyday, event-driven tactics which dominated PRC party life. We were good at opposing government retreats but much worse at developing political-theoretical thinking, we trained ourselves mainly in the day to day of politics. We did not miss out on the anti-globalisation movement but we failed to take in account the changes taking place in the make-up of the working class. We rushed into an analysis of the new international situation (for example on the theory of the empire we struggled to build a counter position without really studying the question seriously enough). Above all we trained for a race that would not have taken place anymore for at least some time: the building of a small left party as if the objective conditions of the workers movement were the same as always. As if the old twentieth century framework of social democracy, the trade unions and the â€˜reformists and revolutionaries' was still intact. At the time we broke with the PRC we thought we could continue on this path – fortified with the NPA experience. However social relations are more complicated, the dividing lines less clear and the ups and downs of the class struggle are very uneven and confused. When we tried to compete on this level we lost out (see the crisis of the NPA). In this way we prolonged a dangerous situation – a period when we realised it was difficult to obtain results and frustration was slowly increasing. The difficulties of the NPA in France reflect a much wider problem, at least in Europe.

Is the objective potential to build and go forward to a socialist alternative the same today?

Nevertheless the problem does remain of how to develop an anti-capitalist political project in a context in which the political forces are few but people's anger is getting stronger. The answers are not simple. We see this with the impasse in Europe. The class struggle continues but is led forward by the ruling class who is winning. It is getting ever more brutal and tough with working people coming up against the direct violence of an enemy who does indeed have various â€˜intermediary bodies' and structures of cultural, social and political hegemony. Working people are

having to respond to these attacks on the hoof and in experimental ways. This is how we have to understand the experience of Occupy or that of the Indignados or even the Arab revolution – at least in their initial phases. These are elemental forms of resistance that are rewriting the alphabet of protest from the roots up, going through an experience that can seem ingenuous or insignificant to those who have had a history of militancy in the class struggle and the movements. However these forms of resistance remain necessary.

Reconstruction is in fact a political project whose potential and difficulty we have not properly examined or evaluated. Consequently we are living with a political intervention that is out of synch with the times, focussed on a reality which is no longer what it was. We build a political ‘propaganda’ initiative without a receptive audience in front of us. When we do have some idea of political implantation we do not have an analysis of the terrain in which we are trying to embed ourselves. We overestimate the rest of the class struggle left which in fact does not have a social weight or political resonance in the ongoing conflicts.

During our discussion two very different positions developed. The comrades who put forward the amendments had a ‘traditionalist’ line and in my view a consolatory one. I think you can summarize it in this way: “We place ourselves in the struggles, we work to try and build movements and in the meantime we develop a political force (subject) which is based on our own programme while we wait for a ‘spark’ that shakes up the mass movements and the convergence of these and a proto-party – small but solid – will lead to the development of a new revolutionary party.” This was the hypothesis that I was presented with when I joined the Fourth International in 1985. In this framework nothing substantially new has taken place since then; our difficulties are linked to the general crisis of the workers movement where we need to carry out honest propaganda activity, seeking to grow gradually, just as we have always done, within its trade unions and structures. This strategy has been tried to the point of exhaustion and has in fact historically worn us down. Furthermore this line has also created an illusion about the possibility of ‘recomposing’ what has remained of the self-proclaimed ‘communist’ vanguards, those from the PRC in the first instance, and that strongly invest their forces on electoral perspectives. In a congress where this was presented as the only realistic way forward this line is actually quite devoid of content or possible application to reality.

My position, accused of being ‘eclectic’ and ‘newness for newness sake’ argued for the fundamental idea of rethinking our political project. In order to pursue a revolutionary line in the absence of revolutionary conditions it is almost essential to have a social base in which to intervene. The concept of the ‘end of the workers movement’ – that is, in its historically defined political role – is the key idea. As Samy Joshua stated (before setting up the Gauche Anticapitaliste – the anti-capitalist left – a mistake in my view) “For the first time we lack a terrain for growth and transformation” – in other words the possibility of having a project where we can intervene to bring about the emergence of a strong, mass political protagonist. During the 1950s, our current put its efforts into entryism as a means to link up with the communist masses hegemonised by the USSR. Then it successfully merged with the revolutionary current thrown up by 1968 perhaps bringing it to the highpoint of its long history. After that it tried the path of ‘recomposition’ seeking to intervene in the break up of the communist parties. Finally it coined the expression of a ‘broad party’ in order to build a house in which diverse layers of activists who were opposed to capitalist rule of the world could coexist. All these periods led to important gains, at times there were gratifying experiences but also there was a great deal of repetition compulsion, to always do the same thing: to build a ‘revolutionary’ party with a mass influence. We cannot say we have succeeded and it is not accidental that the Fourth International itself is in some difficulties. But it was correct to try and it is even more correct to find another way forward to try again. What can be that path today?

Start again from the 19th century

Our orientation has to follow an intuition that has never been really followed through: the present political phase is much more similar to the beginnings of the labour movement than to its phase of growth – more like the end of the

19th Century than the 20th century. We must put the emphasis on the direct construction – even if partial – of new structures for the modern proletariat. Organisational frameworks focussed on the old and new forms of wage labour. In this way we want to build a ‘fraction of the movement’ with the aim of developing a political protagonist (a subject) but knowing that this objective requires pre-conditions and intermediary pathways. These intermediary pathways take time to be constructed and need exemplary victorious experiences but above all experiments. That is why we proposed to work to build an ‘anti-capitalist sector’ based around the structures of the movements that would be able to provide a bedding in which we could propose experimental projects.

The ‘party’ project would therefore take second place but not be abandoned – because we still need a party – but in a dialectical relationship with the first level. It will be in the way the class movement is reformed [if that happens] that the party of tomorrow will be developed. The priority is not the party form, elections or propaganda, but the ‘instruments or structures’ of social self-organisation: places where social anger can be channelled but also where structures of class solidarity, mutual aid or defensive havens in the Gramscian sense can be developed. Hence you have the analogy with the end of the 19th century. If you like we are talking about a ‘strategic retreat’.

We do not think that the ‘party subject’ - that is a political organisation built up around a project – will not re-emerge to play a decisive role. We still need to put forward perspectives regarding the crisis of capitalism, offer an alternative and raise – albeit in original ways – the question of a new democratic system. In this way the ‘anti-capitalist sector’ approach is a ‘Leninist’ one of ‘concentrating’ a political consciousness and not a concession to movementism. However to achieve this end it is important that, while cultivating this organised consciousness, we work to determine the conditions for once again entering into a virtuous circle: mass struggles, autonomous class structures and building a party project through spurts of growth. In this sense we have to get a better grasp of the impact that the question of democracy has in all the new movements. In recent theorizing and in the mass movement’s practices the crucial cornerstone is ‘democracy’ which is intertwined with the latent theme of self-organisation or even better self-determination - as effective decision-making bodies. Democracy as a tool for the emerging of independent social protagonists often in latent opposition to the dominant institutional system, but who are caught up in the anti-politics echo chamber, which we should be able to lead into an anti-system stance. This type of tendency has got stronger while we, coming out of Rifondazione, have concentrated on electoral intervention to give visibility to our political project.

A New International

With this discussion it is impossible to avoid seriously reflecting on our identity. The ‘Trotskyist’ identity has not spared us splits, critiques and opposing views. People who have abandoned it to take on another identity have not achieved any better results. The way forward must include developing a deeper understanding of what we have already done: to clarify that our programmatic references are very broad, that critical Marxist cultures are diverse and that we should recuperate the best of the revolutionary tradition. Consequently also the ‘Fourth International’ label has outlived its usefulness in terms of politics, image and identity. We really do have to ‘add new pages to a book’ that has already faded. Numbering the internationals belongs to another epoch and is no longer pertinent to the present time. It is not just a question of a name, today we need a workers international, a pluralist alliance based around some basic principles like the First International. It would be democratic with full autonomy for its sections and freedom to support its political line. If we want to emerge from an historical crisis, our current should be putting forward an anti-capitalist International based on certain fundamental conditions and building a fightback on an international scale. This time has come, let us hope that it is not too late.