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Italy

Crisis of “Berlusconism” with a left that’s out of the game

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Although the Italian political crisis is obviously interlaced with the international economic crisis, which has already gone on for two years, this fact is completely absent from the political debate, which focuses on the unexpected appearance of the crisis of Berlusconism and its centre-right alliance. Unforeseen, of course by all those who have made Berlusconi the spectre to hide the reality of relations between classes and the drift to the right of our country. Thus one of Berlusconi's most loyal allies, the President of the Chamber of Deputies, Gianfranco Fini, has abandoned him and his party to found a new organization, Futuro e Libert  (Future and Freedom). For the Italian right this is a shock, because the infallibility of the leader is thus questioned and a serious crisis - even if it is not, yet, a governmental crisis - announces the end of a cycle, that opened by Berlusconi himself with his entry on the political stage in 1994.

The analyses of this shock and crisis by the Italian press stress especially the "characters" of these two individuals and their personal conflict, concealing the structural aspects. Yet the ubiquitous and structural economic crisis has had a heavy impact on the political equilibria, transforming itself into a political crisis, and sometimes even into an institutional crisis. Just look at the difficulties of President Obama who, after an electoral triumph two years ago, risks losing the majority in Congress. Or again the French case with a similar evolution: triumphantly elected in 2007, Nicolas Sarkozy is now at his lowest level of popularity. For sure, economic crisis gives rise to political crises.

The Berlusconi Government won the elections of 2008 primarily due to the bankruptcy of the centre-left. In absolute terms its score in 2008 could not be compared to that of 2001, the highest point reached by Berlusconism. But, thanks to the fraudulent electoral law, Berlusconi enjoys a large parliamentary majority that he has used effectively to attack the workers' movement at its roots, by undermining its fundamental victories (the Labour Code), reducing real wages (reform of public employment contracts), and redistributing resources in favour of sectors favourable to the centre-right (small and medium-sized businesses, liberal professions, tax fraudsters, big wealth, banks and finance) and by launching, with fiscal federalism, a policy of subversion of the social pact that has dominated the country since the end of the war. The crisis has put this project in question, emphasizing the differences in projects, different interests and political conflicts. The distancing of Fini from Berlusconi is not about questions of justice, but the economy. Fini has defended the civil service (in particular the security forces and education), the South of Italy and an industrial policy based on the compromise between “capital and labour”, criticizing the manoeuvres of the Minister for the Economy, Giulio Tremonti. The analysis of the crisis and the way to exit from it constitute the background of the battle.

In this battle the centre-right has revealed its limits and unveiled its crisis. If, in his fifteen years in politics, Berlusconi has managed to compose a kind of “social bloc” - small and medium-sized enterprises in the North, the illegal economy in the South, traders, the liberal professions, tax fraudsters, but also the assisted lumpenproletariat, youth in temporary work and the old electorate - he has not done so around a common social, and economic vision but by juxtaposing different interests and different sectors in a perimeter bound only by rhetoric and propaganda, i.e. by the ideological strength of the media personality. Eroded by the crisis, Berlusconism - this glue which is keeping the social bloc together – strips this propaganda and rhetoric bare. Today, Fini is the candidate to represent a part of these sectors around a political project going beyond Berlusconi and aimed at redefining a new centre-right political project. The hypothesis of the third pole, more than a strategic project, is a passage towards rebuilding a conservative force, a neoliberal alternative to the centre-left, which is adapted to the needs of the dominant classes.

The crisis weighs obviously even on the dominant classes, the Confindustria (the Italian employers' federation) and on the banks and financial capital. Today they no longer know whether to bet again on the Berlusconi government,

which offers its determination to shred the labour movement - as shown in the conflict at Fiat - or begin the construction of a different equilibrium. If Emma Marcegaglia, the current President of Confindustria, continues to play on the current equilibria, the former President, Luca Cordero di Montezemolo, seeks a new solution. The difference between two is emblematic of this uncertainty. The problem is that despite its crisis and erosion - and the crisis highlights the fact that Berlusconism actually has nothing to offer - Berlusconi still enjoys a strong social consensus and his alliance with the Northern League preserves for him the possibility of victory. All this makes for a very uncertain situation. In any case, despite this uncertainty, the offensive against workers has continued without hesitation. Fiat thus benefitted from this phase of the crisis and the fears of workers to end national collective agreements and the need to negotiate conditions of employment with the unions. The Government supports this policy and is considering reform of the Statute of Workers while the attack on the civil service – particularly in public education - continues. This sheds light on the political situation: the crisis of the government, which can only be welcomed, is not accompanied by a crisis of the dominant layers which, instead, tend to strengthen.

Obviously in this situation the parliamentary – but also extra-parliamentary - opposition appears completely inadequate. The confusion and uncertainty in the Democratic Party are not only the expression of its irreversible internal divisions, but the fruit of its complete integration in the framework of the crisis. It should not be forgotten that at the time of the vote in parliament on the European plan of “rescue” of Greece – the most severe attack ever experienced by workers in this country - the Democratic Party was the party most committed to it. A pro-European, pro-austerity and pro-employer stance which is now included in its DNA and allows us to understand why, despite the difficulties of Berlusconi, this party does not find a voice and has no propulsive role in the country.

To the inability of the “democratic” opposition we must add the complicity with the employer's offensive of a large part of the trade union movement. Fiat is trying to wriggle out of national collective agreements to disorient the workers' movement, leaving employers with their hands untied by reducing rights at work to the level of before 1968-1969. It does so because its international dimension, since the alliance with Chrysler, imposes on it action to reduce labour costs in the absence of anything else. In this offense it leads all the Italian employers. The government actively supports this policy, but the two minority unions, the ICFTU and the UIL - which, together, have approximately six million members - actively support it. The CGIL, which alone has more than five million members, is opposed to date, but with great hesitation, and its resistance is based on that of the metalworkers' union, the IMF, in which the trade union left is in the majority. And it was the FIOM which took the initiative for the largest mobilization of this autumn, the national demonstration of October 16, which all the radical left supports.

The central issue of the current phase is the construction of resistance to the crisis by unity of struggles and a process of social recomposition: the unification of the struggles against the crisis is our current task. In the months ahead we must work to strengthen and coordinate the struggles, build on the experiences of the constructed mobilizations built from below (“autoconvocate”), build unitary committee against the crisis, facilitate unitary relations between trade union lefts and other social actors, such as students, and precarious workers. The demonstration of October 16 will be a step in this direction.

Unfortunately this potential has no immediate strictly political openings. Once again the centre-left here demonstrates its inadequate and 'residual' character on the political field. The Democratic Party once again offers a “new Olive Tree”, as the motor force of a coalition that would comprise not only the Christian Democratic Union led by Casini, but even Fini's new party. A perspective which is completely defensive and whose social content represents continuity with the disastrous experience of the centre-left government.

However, the majority forces of the radical left have already chosen alliance with the Democratic Party. These are, firstly, Sinistra e LibertÀ (Left and Freedom), whose leader, Nichi Vendola, has become a popular leader, and hopes to win the nomination for the Presidency of the Council, and then what remains of the Party of Communist Refoundation, which seeks an electoral alliance only with the hope of returning to Parliament. This is because the Italian electoral system requires it to support the governmental project of the Democratic Party, i.e. remove its own

political orientation. This could only produce a kind of Democratic Alliance whose contours are still obscure.

In our opinion, the perspective that remains pertinent but fragile is instead a class conscious left which is able to represent an option other than the Democratic Party and the centre-left. An anti-capitalist left defined by a few simple details: being outside the "democratic" coalition under the hegemony of the Democratic Party; a radical program of exit from the crisis; a perspective oriented to the future, resolutely turning its back on conservatism (including that of the "left") and nostalgia (which still characterizes much of the Italian left), but on the contrary, delivers an innovative political solution; with a capacity to attract social movements and committees of struggle, especially among the new generations more open to social resistance and an alternative hypothesis. In the event of early elections but also the local elections next spring, we intend to work on the formation of an anti-capitalist list with these characteristics. We are not interested in planting the flag of the Sinistra Critica or announcing "urbi et orbi" our autonomous electoral presence. We want to build a "process" that can lead to a proposal which is attractive, innovative, useful for the struggles and animated by them and by the younger generations. With this proposal we look to the political and above all social forces available to reaffirm once again that our lives are worth more than their profits.