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Italy

The challenge of the anti-capitalist Left

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The proceedings and the conclusions of the Fifth Congress of Italian Communist Refoundation (PRC) in May bring to a close a phase in the life of the party, a phase which was marked, throughout the 1990s, by autonomy and diversity in relation to other political formations.

That a cycle has ended is all the more obvious when we look at the regional elections of the 3rd and 4th April. The polarization between the two blocs of the Centre-right and the Centre-left, with the total absorption of Rifondazione by the latter, has consecrated the victory of bipolarisation in Italy and the logic of a system of alternating governments. With the PRC firmly within the Union (of the Left) and with its ambition to win, as it were, the leadership of it, Rifondazione, in line with the choices made at its congress, has modified its strategic project.

[https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/Fausto_Bertinotti.jpg]

Fausto Bertinotti

This project is no longer to constitute a force alternative to both Centre-Right and Centre-left, but full insertion within the centre-left alliance in order to shift the balance of forces within it and modify its overall profile. What is involved is a substantial change, which prefigures the end of a political anomaly that had nevertheless marked the whole of the 1990s.

The disappointing vote for the PRC

Over and above our opposition to it in the congress, the project has already encountered, only a month after the end of the congress, obvious limits, as shown precisely by the elections. In the recent regional elections, it wasn't just that the moderate project of the Olive Tree was affirmed, with a structural reinforcing of the two parties that are the pivots of the alliance, DS and Margherita (a reinforcing that will not fail to produce its effects in the very structures of the movement, starting with the CGIL). [1] This alliance was portrayed as Prodi being subordinated to the alliance with Rifondazione, but in reality it is the opposite that has happened.

But the lack of growth of Rifondazione is a sign of a more important problem, which cannot be reduced to its relations with the rest of the Union. It poses in fact the question of the party's role and its social implantation, its roots in the masses, its capacity for innovation - very much aspired to but never really practised - its choice of its leading groups, the degree of unitarism and of democratic life within it. That is the big question of "communist refounding" which was set aside at the congress, giving place to a neo-identity debate that was useful for approving the governmental turn. But this is the big question that gave birth to Rifondazione and against which a modern communist force has to be measured. The missing votes for the PRC, especially in the "local" elections where it was essential to be present on the ground, speaks eloquently about the party's real capacity to be present in the social movements and to exist as a party.

It reveals, for example, to what extent the irritating accent that was put on the "broad democratic participation" at the congress was in no way adequate to produce a qualitative leap from an electoral point of view. It tells us, in substance, that the question of the "party" form must again become a central theme of discussions, going beyond the mechanical declarations about the need to innovate. It tells us about the limits that could lead to such an impasse that they would produce an irreversible short-circuit if they were not resolved.

And it also says something more about the real state of the social movements which, certainly, give greater strength and propulsive force to the political presence of the Union - which is in reality regaining a large part of the votes it had lost from 2000 onwards - but which do not succeed in winning concrete results and which at election time, turn towards the parties that are the strongest and the most moderate of the alliance.

This is the main contradiction of the present phase - and it is no accident that we strongly insisted on it at the congress. It greatly complicates relations between the PRC and the other forces of the Left who show themselves willing to build united action on the social level - since they are in any case conscious of being the beneficiaries of popular expectations which will not only find an answer through struggles and conflicts.

Unfortunately the congress completely put off evaluating the relationship of forces between the classes, of making a cool-headed analysis and a balance sheet of the action of the social movements and of the party's role within them, and contented itself with a renewal of its identity, which was, among other things, contradictory as far as party structures were concerned. The elections on the other hand, if we look at them more closely, present a more realistic framework, which we will have to take account of in the coming period, and in which we will have to verify things in real life.

The end of Berlusconi

Above all, the elections showed, and that is something we are very pleased with, the extent of the defeat of the right-wing forces and of Berlusconi in particular. We are profoundly satisfied: the meaning of the fight we conducted at the congress of Rifondazione should create no illusions as to our determination to conduct a merciless struggle against the Right and its policies.

That being the case, we were fully committed to the election campaign and we succeeded in obtaining important results with candidates of our current. The defeat of Berlusconi was decisive, because it was related to the actions of local administrations where the Right had been in power, and to the parliamentary majority as such. The core social base of the Centre-right was undermined by the government's own policies, by a liberalism that didn't succeed in keeping its promises. The problem is not the commitments that Berlusconi didn't respect. It was the "contract with the Italian people", disappointing in its very substance, which let down people's expectations.

The problem is that the promises were kept - with the laws reinforcing insecurity of employment, privatization of services, public assistance instead of the Welfare State, etc. - these laws were rejected because of their effects. The defeat of the Centre-right was above all the sign of the loss of a consensus around neoliberalism, which dominates the whole of international politics, including the politics of centre-left governments.

The popular layers, but also the middle classes and businesses that are victims of the global crisis of neoliberalism - a crisis that the United States has chosen to confront by means of permanent war - are in revolt, and they are turning away from the siren songs of Berlusconi. We should not overestimate this rupture (this taking of distance). In fact, the core social base of the Centre-right is disintegrating, but not collapsing. The right-wing currents maintain an important reservoir of support, as is shown by the results of the Northern League; and the difference between the regional and European elections shows a loss of 372,000 votes, whereas the loss between the European elections and the previous Italian elections was 3 million votes.

It is an inexorable and wrenching crisis, but not yet a defeat. And it manifests itself above all as disaffection towards its own leader, towards his policies, but also towards his strategy of polarization and confrontation with the Centre-left. The epoch of Berlusconi is in part closed and that explains the eagerness to reorganise the Pole 3) [\[2\]](#)

and probably a new leadership, although it is obvious that this solution is not yet on the agenda.

The return of Prodi

But the elections enable us to take a much more realistic look at what the first commentaries had shown about the reality of the Centre-left, of the Union. Prodi is in the process of winning his battle; he is asserting himself as leader of the coalition, basing this supremacy on the success of the core of the alliance that is represented by the axis DS-Margherita. With Rifondazione firmly inside the alliance, the unitary mechanism is being reinforced and structured - and Professor Prodi is the only one in sight who can guarantee it.

[https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/prodi_rutelli.jpg]

Prodi (left) and Rutelli

What is being reaffirmed is the project of the Olive Tree. While changing its name it keeps the same faces - Prodi and Parisi - and the same ambitions: to give Italy a moderate liberal government, where there is room for a minimal dose of social solidarity, linked to a pacifism that is dictated by the multipolar view of foreign policy, capable of guaranteeing the interests of European capital in relation to the United States.

The two main leaders of the coalition, Fassino and Rutelli, quickly took note of this profile, and not by chance. The former by fully assuming the "reformist" character of the Union, exalting "good flexibility" and the merits of the enterprise. The latter by pointing out, in relation to the ambition of Rifondazione to be hegemonic within the alliance, the reality of the strength of the so-called radical Left - PRC, Greens, PDCI - which does not exceed 10 per cent of the electorate. Next, Prodi himself exerted his influence. Looking at the demands of the Confindustria [\[3\]](#) and the employers, he announced to the government his intention of "collaborating" if the priority on the next phase was to "clean up public finances". This willingness to cooperate was expressed by the Centre-left in chorus, by abandoning the call for new elections.

This attitude speaks volumes about their inclination (or lack of it) to kick out Berlusconi and his government under the impact of struggles, which remains essentially what needs to be done. The vote in the regional elections in fact leaves a government that is different, weakened but not defeated. The need to drive it from power remains unchanged, and is even more urgent because a weakened right-wing government can do even more damage.

We think that it is an urgent demand that cannot be put off and it is also an aim of new elections, as an instrument of democratic and social protection. We need to re-launch a united front of mobilisations around this slogan, starting with the renewal of collective bargaining agreements, the fight against insecurity of employment, against the education reforms, the fight for peace and for the withdrawal of troops from Iraq, the struggle to re-establish a decent Welfare State, against privatization and speculation.

We can use the extraordinary victory of the 3rd-4th April in this sense by immediately sending out some clear signals: that the regions where the Union is in the majority, and there are now fifteen of them, implement, for example, a boycott of Law 30 which encourages insecurity of employment, but also of the measures of "devolution" that the government want to apply, starting with the management of spending on health. The abolition of health tickets, where they have been introduced, could be the most immediate measure.

The "example" of Vendola

Against our arguments, the centrality of the victory of Nichi Vendola [4] in the Apulia region is presented as decisive proof of the correctness of the line and as an "example" for the future of the PRC. Certainly, Nichi's victory is important and deserves our support, especially now that he has to prove himself. From the results in Apulia, Rifondazione has to demonstrate that it is possible to modify the "law of the pendulum" and therefore to make significant changes in the life of the broad masses.

It goes without saying that, over and above internal objections and criticisms, we are going to commit ourselves to that, starting by building movements and struggles that contribute to this objective. But in reality, the underlying reasons for putting the accent on this result are the same ones that led us into opposition at the national congress and that maintain our differences.

[https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/Nichi_Vendola.jpg]

Nichi Vendola

In fact, the "Vendola example" is nothing but the determination to follow the road of reinforcing the political and cultural hegemony of the PRC and of the social movements, within the Union, starting from the rules and the rigid framework of this alliance. What is involved here is a profound change from the previous schema, which on the contrary made the alternative Left a hypothesis that was "external" to the actors of bipolarisation in Italy. In short, for a whole period, and in particular the period that was opened up by Genoa, Rifondazione did not conceal its aim of building a third force.

This project is being run down, while the forces that were accumulated by years of hard, unrelenting work and isolation, but also years that brought satisfaction from the point of view of our relations with social struggles, will now be entrusted to a higher authority, the Union.

Nichi is no longer the expression of opposition to the Centre-left and the Centre-right. He has become a possible and desirable face of the Centre-left itself. To make an example of him for the future means choosing to build up this alliance, putting it more in harmony with the expectations for radical change.

This is a gigantic illusion, whose results won't take long to show. In fact, with the missing votes of Rifondazione in the regional elections, they have already been shown. Can we really believe that Vendola is stronger after a vote that left Rifondazione with 5 per cent and the rest of the alliance with 45 per cent? Or do we think that we can bridge the gap by having recourse to primaries?

In reality, the question of primaries is also likely to be equivocal and contradictory. Their "sanctification" introduces a deformation of our conception of democracy and its intimate relationship with struggle. The primaries don't stand comparison with the mechanisms of council and/or participatory democracy, because the latter require the actual presence of social conflict and therefore of self-organisation, around a declared objective. Whereas the primaries represent rather a post facto confirmation of decisions that have already been taken, a kind of popular approval (which risks reinforcing populism) that does not contribute to developing participation, any more than it does in the United States.

So the case of Vendola comprises a highly contradictory reality: while on the one hand it shows the considerable possibilities that lie before the PRC - correctly seen as a party that is "different", combative and anti-capitalist - it reveals at the same time the road by which the moderate forces of the Union aim to absorb Rifondazione and to dilute the subversive potential of Nichi in the responsibilities of government.

The majority party

The negative opinion that we expressed at the congress of Rifondazione, confirmed by the results of the regional elections, comes up again in the analysis that has to be made of the internal functioning of the party and the proposed organization of the cohabitation between the different souls of the party. On this question, the congress marked an obvious break with the previous situation, by the approval by the majority of the Statutes, and the definition of an organizational framework that makes empty shells of the political leadership bodies and transfers power to executives constituted around the positions of the majority.

You could say jokingly that the 59 per cent of the vote obtained by the majority at the congress - the lowest percentage obtained by the secretariat of any party in Italy today - was transformed into 95 per cent of responsible positions in the party. This break with the past is very negative, because it offers the minorities the role of spectators within their own party.

On the negative effects of this change, we must quote what Rossana Rossanda wrote in a long article that appeared in the daily *Il Manifesto* (it can be consulted on the site: www.erre.info): "How can we support the idea that the residue of Stalinism should be liquidated with the same articles that the late Stalin and all the CPs of the world used against their oppositions? A party has to be able to act without hindrance, a party is not a discussion circle, we don't have any time to lose - former members of the PCI know this music by heart. But it is astonishing that Rina Gagliardi should write to me saying what Armando Cossutta 6 [5] used to say to me in his time, and which perhaps he would no longer say".

And again: "A majority can always decide, even when there are bodies where the whole base of the party is represented. But where it isn't represented, you can't (debate) with the part that isn't there. There aren't a hundred ways of running a political collective - which is furthermore isolated from the struggle - by also allowing the others, those who feel uncomfortable where they are, to adhere to it without suspicion. Gramsci was right to remark that a party represents in embryo a model of the future state."

Perspectives for the future

In spite of the negative judgments and opinions that we have expressed up to now - concerning, for example, the discriminations experienced by several minority candidates or the organizational solutions for running local federations and even branches - the battle to change course, to change the orientation of the party, continues. And it is being filled out by the tests that we will have to confront and that are waiting for us on the horizon.

In fact, we have already been through the first of these tests with the regional elections. We think that it confirms our positions. In the near future there are at least three events in the life of the party where the choices the congress made will have to prove their validity: the conference of the Communist Youth, the congress of the CGIL, the coming elections (which may be called early) and in the event of victory, the decisive test of government. We intend to be fully involved in all these tests, as well as the most important test: the pursuit of our activity within the social movements, working to strengthen them and reinforce their autonomy.

For that, the supporters of the fourth motion at the congress, "Another Rifondazione is possible" (the "Sinistra Critica" current) will continue to be active both in the life of the party - by taking on those responsibilities where the blinkered attitude of the majority does not prevent us from doing so - and in social struggles.

What interests us is not the self-proclamation of a "party within the party", the crystallisation as a current of a faction that would enter into relations with the rest of the party in a way that was separated off and conflictual. What interests us is rather to overcome the present crystallisations, to produce a qualitative leap in the present debate where the

project of an anti-capitalist Rifondazione is being affirmed with greater strength and greater substance, autonomous from the Union, firmly engaged in the activity of the social movements and much more democratic and participatory than was seen in the choices made at the congress.

So we will work with objectives in mind, aiming for results, as we did in the highly successful anti-war demonstration on March 19th, which was in practice boycotted by the majority of the party. We are going to work towards objectives by seeking to overcome the obstacles of the congress and by concentrating on what needs to be done, what results need to be achieved.

In the coming phase we can identify at least four priorities: winning the referendum on the repeal of Law 40 on medically aided procreation, giving fresh impetus to the anti-war movement in order to achieve the withdrawal of troops from Iraq, even by taking advantage of the government's fragility, inaugurating a real "season against insecurity of employment" that would culminate in the repeal of Law 30, without however going back to the Treu Law [6] (From this point of view we need a concrete initiative on the regional level, given the number of regions where Rifondazione will be part of the government). Furthermore, we have to begin thinking carefully about the state of the party, in order to overcome its most obvious limits and develop an implantation, at least partial, capable of rebuilding the "sentimental connection" with the people. For this link to be a reality, there have to be direct relations and not only via the media. That is the aim of the assembly of the Critical Left ("Sinistra Critica") on 23rd-24th April.

These ambitions are intertwined with those of the editors of our journal and with the political project that lies behind it, which has more distant origins. At the crossroads marked by the end of one cycle by the tests that await us, the time has come for us to take a few risks, to get rid of labels that are ideological, and indeed caricatural, and to measure up to those who support us by adhering to a strategic vision of change and of social revolution. The time has come to make a qualitative leap; besides, our attachment to an international project has always been marked by that. Make a qualitative leap; that is what we propose to do on the road that awaits us, in order to strengthen an anti-capitalist Left, a critical Left, a communist Left.

Appendix

Voting at the Congress and changes to internal democracy

The congress ended with PRC leader Bertinotti having a majority of 59.7 of the delegates. The current "Essere comunisti" of Claudio Grassi (Leninist- Togliattist) had 26 per cent, the current "Progetto Comunista" (Marco Ferrando and Franco Grisolia) and our own current, "Sinistra Critica" each got 6.5 per cent and the "Falce e Martello" (linked to the Grant-Woods international current) got 1.6 per cent. So together all the oppositions to the line on the government received 41 per cent and that was expressed in an alliance on all the controversial questions concerning internal democracy.

The congress approved, voted only by the majority of the party, profound change in the party statutes with the introduction of a new body, the executive, which in fact replaces the leadership (which remains an empty shell, without the National Secretary, without the leaders of the parliamentary groups, etc.) and which is constituted on the basis of responsibility for different tasks, and therefore has a strongly majority composition.

At the last National Political Committee, in any case, the oppositions voted against this body but they were

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represented with the "right of expression". So the Sinistra Critica current is represented proportionally in the leadership with two members (Salvatore Cannavo and Franco Turigliatto) and on the executive by Gigi Malabarba (leader of the parliamentary group in the Senate) and Flavia D'Angeli (who will take charge of the "Insecurity of employment" department).

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/salvatore.jpg>]

[1] The Olive Tree was the previous centre-left alliance headed by Romano Prodi, which held power before Berlusconi. The new alliance is known as the Union.]

The PRC is left as the only party of the Union that didn't increase its vote, which went down in comparison with the European elections. It actually fell, in particular in the South, which had seemed to represent the great novelty of recent years, to its percentages of the year 2000, that is, before the great season of the social movements, before Genoa. This was an obvious sign that the rapprochement with the alliance and its leader - the "Prodiotti" - had been excessive. [[DS (Left Democrats) is the continuation of the majority of the Italian Communist Party. Margherita ("Daisy") is a Christian Democratic current. The CGIL is the main union confederation, which was historically linked to the CP.

[2] A play on the names of Prodi and of PRC leader Fausto Bertinotti.

[3] The Confindustria is the Italian employers' organization.

[4] Nichi Vendola is the PRC candidate who won the presidency of the Apulia region.

[5] Armando Cossutta is the leader of the Party of Italian Communists (PDCI), which split from the PRC in the 1990s when the PRC abandoned its support for the previous centre-left government. At the time when he was a leader of the PCI, Cossutta had a reputation as a diehard Stalinist.

[6] The Treu Law was a labour law promulgated by the previous centre-left government.